MARIE RUTKOSKI

FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX
NEW YORK

Farrar Straus Giroux Books for Young Readers
An imprint of Macmillan Children's Publishing Group, LLC
120 Broadway, New York, NY, 10271

Printed in the United States of America
Designed by Beth Clark
First edition, 2020

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

mackids.com

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019940833
ISBN 9780374306380

This book is dedicated to my sons, Eliot and Téo

THERE WERE WARNING SIGNS in the Ward that day that anyone could have seen. The children must have seen the danger in their own games, in the crescent moons, roughly cut from tin, that they strung from fishing line on sticks and dangled to cast shadows beneath the pale sun. They knew, as I knew, that the festival meant the militia would be out in force, seeking to fill their quotas for arrests. They would find infractions enough in the Ward, whether from drinking or improper dress or any of the many offenses you can commit when you're Half Kith.

Maybe I should have been more careful from the moment I saw the bird from my little window in my little room in the tavern attic, so cold I had been going to bed fully dressed. Ethin—a pretty name for a city, and this city *was* pretty for the right sort of people—is usually warm, so warm that tiny purple indi flowers grow out of the cracks of crumbling walls. Thin green fingers dig deep into stone. A heavy scent thickens the hot air. But every now and then a wind blows from the west that freezes everyone's bones, Half Kith and High Kith and Middling alike. People

say teardrops of hail spangle the pink-sand beaches outside the city. They say the trees beyond the wall become jeweled by clear pearls of ice, and that the High Kith drink bitter hot chocolate at outdoor parties where their laughter is white lace in the chilled air.

I had never seen the shore. I didn't know if chocolate was something I would like. I had never even seen a tree.

I woke because of the way the bird sang. The song was sparkling, limpid: a string of glass beads flung onto a polished floor. I thought, *Not possible* and *Not here* and *That bird will soon die.* Maybe I should have guessed then how my day would end. But how could I? When I came close to the window and palmed away the feathered frost, when I dug my nails into the window frame weathered from the times when the damp got in, eating the wood, softening it, I could not have known. When I saw the spot of red flickering amid the brown and white rooftops, I could not have known, because I thought I knew myself. I thought I knew the things I could do, and what I would not. Here is what I believed:

I would do what was expected of me.

I could trust myself now.

Anyone I missed would not come back.

I would die if my crimes were discovered.

So you tell me what would make a good, quiet girl get herself in trouble, especially when she had so much to lose.

Tell me.

2

"ANYONE COULD CATCH IT."

"With the crush of people out there for the festival? It will never fly down."

"True. Someone will have to go up."

"To the rooftops, yes."

I wrapped the hem of my apron around the oven's hot handle and opened it. Heat breathed over me. Morah's and Annin's voices rose. You could hear the longing in their tones. It was the kind of impossible wish you treat as though it is precious. You make a home for it in your heart. You give it the downiest of beds for its rest. You feed it the choicest pieces, even when the meat it eats is your very soul.

What they wanted was not the Elysium bird, but what the bird could bring them.

"A child could do it," Annin said. "I've seen them clamber up the sides of buildings along the gutter pipes."

I could guess what she was thinking: that she was light enough to try it. I hate heights. They turn my stomach inside out like a glove. Even if

I'm standing on something firm, being high up makes me feel like nothing is solid, like nothing in the world can be relied upon—except the fact that I will fall. I looked at her shrewd expression and thought that I could never do what she was thinking. And I didn't like the thought of *her* scrambling over the rooftops, either.

Morah shook her dark head. "Someone would be waiting at the bottom when the thief came down with the bird, and pounce, and take it."

The fire at the back of the oven, which had been burning all night, glowed dark red. It sucked on the fresh draft of air and blushed orange. I scraped the ash into the hod. Then, one by one, I used the long-handled wooden paddle to slide domes of bread dough into the oven. They were each a cream-colored pillow, scored with a delicate pattern that would reveal itself as the loaf baked, no two the same. The loaves would show scenes of rainfall, fanciful castles, portraits of pretty faces, flowers, leaping animals. An artist, Annin sometimes called me. Little did she know.

I shut the oven door and dusted my floured hands. "It will freeze before anyone catches it." The Elysium bird had surely escaped from some High-Kith lady. It would not be ready for life outside a cage.

"Even dead," Morah said, "it would fetch a fine sum."

Annin looked stricken. She had unusual skin for a Herrath—paler than most, even milky, with freckles that dusted her cheeks and eyelids. There was a fragility to her features (fair eyelashes, flower-blue eyes, a small mouth with dainty upturned corners) that made her look far younger than me, though we were close in age.

"Pit the cherries," I told her. "I need them for the pies." The tavern was lucky for the bushel of ice cherries. Who knew how Raven had managed to get them. The black market, probably. She had connections with Middlings who were willing to trade such things for wares made in the Ward. It was not legal—just as Half Kith couldn't wear certain

kinds of clothes restricted to the upper kiths, we also couldn't eat certain foods. Half-Kith foods were plain and filling and the City Council saw to it that no one starved. But no food was tangy or sour or spiced or sweet.

The ice cherries wouldn't need sugar, they were so sweet on their own: pale golden globes with glossy skin that would melt away in the oven. I wanted to taste one. I would sneak just one in my mouth, let my teeth slide through the flesh to the unyielding pit, honeyed juice flooding over my tongue.

The kitchen seemed full of wants.

"The bird won't *die*," Annin said. "It is the gods' bird."

Morah sniffed. "There are no gods."

"If it died it would be *gone*," Annin said. "You couldn't do anything with it."

Morah and I exchanged a look as she wiped wet dishes dry. She was older than Annin and me, old enough already to have shoulder-high children. Her manner, too, suggested that some invisible child moved around her. Her gestures were always careful, her eyes sometimes darting warily to make certain everything around her was safe—that a fire did not burn too high, that knives lay out of a small person's reach. Once, I had glanced at her as she sat at the worktable, picking one-handed through a bowl of lentils to remove any leftover hulls. In her other arm, she cradled a baby. But when I glanced again, the baby was gone.

I knew better than to mention this. It had been my imagination. I had to be careful. Sometimes an idea took root inside of me—for example, that Morah would be a good mother. Then the idea would become too real. I would see it clearly, as if it *were* real. It would displace the truth: Morah had no children. She had said she never would.

She and I were similar in one way that Annin was different. Morah

and I were good at managing expectations—I by not having any and she by imagining the prize to be more attainable than it really was. Morah had probably decided that a dead Elysium bird would not be such a miracle as a living one. Therefore, it would not be impossible that *she* would be the one to have its valuable corpse.

"There are its feathers," she said. "Its meat."

And its hollow bones, which play a lilting melody when you blow through them.

I cut butter into flour. "The bird is out there. We are in here."

Annin opened the one slender window. Cold came in like water. Morah muttered in annoyance, but I said nothing. It hurt to look at Annin, at her hope. The shape of her stubborn chin reminded me of Helin.

Annin swept crumbs from the worktable into her palm. I didn't watch her go to the window. I couldn't. There was an ache in my throat. I saw things that weren't there. Things I wanted to forget.

She sprinkled the crumbs on the open window's sill.

"Just in case," she said.

3

THEY SAY THAT THE SONG of the Elysium bird makes you dream.

They say that these dreams remedy the past, take the sting out of memories, dust them up along the edges, blur them with soft pencils, the kind of pencils whose color you can smudge with a finger. The dreams make what's missing in your life seem unimportant, because what *is* there suddenly entices.

Imagine the stars hung closer: spikes of ice. Imagine the simple comfort of an ordinary blanket gone gorgeously soft. How could you ever slip the blanket off, when it feels like the fur of a mythical creature that can read your mind, and knew who you were before you were born?

Its song holds the grace of a mother's first smile.

A kind stranger brushing rain from your shoulder.

A kite flown on the Islim shore, sky peeking through its vented slits: little slices of blue so solid in color that you feel you could catch them and carry them home.

Feeling someone's arms around you grow heavy with sleep.

They say the bird was blessed by a god, though we can't remember which one.

That the sight of its red feathers will charm people.

In the Ward, where we must live the whole of our lives, never leaving, never allowed to leave, the promise of anything different was enough to bring everyone out into the streets. Turn them into hunters. Demolish friendships. I wanted to tell Annin to shut the window. Don't go outside. This is the sort of thing people will kill for.

But I wanted that bird, too.

4

I FINISHED BAKING THE PRINTED breads. Raven would bring them up quarter, out of the Ward and into the city proper, which I had never seen. Raven had inherited the privilege to sell her wares in the outer Wards of the city, beyond the walled Ward that marked the city's center like the stone of a fruit. Raven was born a Middling and so was allowed to come and go beyond the wall. Many Middlings traded with us. Some of them even stayed at the tavern as paying guests, but Raven was the only one I knew of who had chosen to *live* in our Ward. That choice gave her a complex status among the Half Kith. Some people respected her more. Others thought her crazy. But—although this was a secret I could never share—I knew she had come to live here out of goodness. She had come to help us.

I had asked Raven once what it was like to pass beyond the Ward, what the rest of the city looked like. She told me to brush her hair and keep my questions to myself.

"Why can't I know? If only to see it in my mind."

"You don't have the right to know."

"Why? Why must Half Kith stay in the Ward?"

"It is as it is," she said, which was what everyone said to such a question. The answer was like threadbare cloth worn so thin that you could see light and shadow through its fabric.

"I took you in," she said.

The hairbrush was metal, bristles stiff.

"Gave you a home."

Her hair was an early silver, thick and strong and easily knotted. I brushed gently.

"When you first came, you had to name everything, even the hinges on a door."

She had said this before.

"It was as though, if you didn't know something, if you couldn't catalogue every bit of the world, it would vanish."

True, I thought, and was ashamed of how weak I had been, how confused. I used to look at her hair and see black instead of its true gray, hair as black as mine, black as a raven's wing. When I was new to the tavern, I asked, Are you called Raven because of your hair? She had stared hard. What do you know of my name? Cowed, I said, Nothing. Yes, she told me. You know nothing. Then she gentled and said, Raven is a nickname. I asked, What is your real one? She lightly tapped the tip of my nose. She said, Raven is real enough.

"Isn't it better now, without the nightmares?" Raven said. "You had them even while awake. Your trances. You said the strangest things. You've grown out of it, thank the gods." She didn't believe in the gods any more than the rest of us did, but we referred to them out of empty habit. If you had asked a Half Kith why, she'd shrug and say, It is as it is. If you wondered why we had a festival for the god of the moon when we didn't believe in the gods, we'd get a little tight around the eyes. We'd think, Will this be taken from us, too, our one holiday of the year?

I pinned Raven's hair into a spiral—too elegant for the Ward, a hairstyle no Half Kith could wear.

"You don't need to know what the city is like," she told me. "It will do you no good to know."

She was a warm-hearted woman. She had opened her home to three orphans. Morah and Annin and I had spent our tender years in the Ward's orphanage, though separated enough by age that we had not known one another there. "Lost ones," Raven called us—kindly, for there were other, fitter words for what we were, like *unwanted*, or *bastard*, words that name a person who brings you shame. Morah had the coloring and features of what we called Old Herrath: black hair, gray eyes upturned at the corners, curled lashes, low-bridged nose, light brown skin. She looked High Kith, which meant she was born out of wedlock. Some noble-born woman must have brought her to the orphanage and left her in the ventilated, lidded bin outside its doors.

I looked High Kith, too.

I came to Raven when I was twelve. "Difficult," she called me then, though I followed all her rules. When I cried out at night, she came to my bed, stroked my brow, and told me that it was all right.

She cut my hair and said, Isn't this neat and clean, isn't it better? I said yes, though my long black hair had been my pride. Helin had envied it. It shines like paint, she had said. Raven told me to sweep the shorn hair and said, Now you'll be sure to stay out of trouble.

Girls in the Ward usually kept their hair long. Hair was the easiest thing to give up when the militia arrested you. They could choose any tithe they like. Blood was the most common tithe, drawn with a needle and syringe. People released from prison spoke of the blood tithe with relief. Blood loss made you feel like a phantom, but not forever. It was not so bad. Giving up your hair was even better. They took your hair if

they were feeling nice, and it was sewn into the natural hair of High-Kith ladies to make what they had seem fuller.

Men inside the wall kept their hair short out of pride. They wanted to show that they were not afraid of paying a higher price. This was a pride they could afford. The militia could take things from women they didn't usually take from men.

By cutting my hair, Raven took away my easiest tithe. I want to keep you safe, she said. Don't trust they will take something easy. Follow my advice, my lamb. Act as though you obey every law. Make the militia never doubt you, for now you know the truth: you can afford to lose nothing.

Raven was good to me in other ways, too. When she saw my first printed bread she did not scold me for being fanciful. She grew quiet and said, There's money in this . . . and more.

She gave me a set of pencils and asked to see what I could do.

I sketched her face.

This is better than good, she said. This is me. This is my very face in a mirror.

Can you imitate this? She signed her name.

I could.

Perfect, she said.

She taught me how to remove oil from her greased apron. When my blood first came and spotted the sheets and she caught me trying to launder them with hot water, she said, Cold water, my girl, not hot, and gave me a block of soap that made my sheets smell like indi flowers. That day she let me keep one soft, sugared biscuit that I had made. She cut and buttered it. As I ate this treat, so unexpected, given to me when I had been ready for punishment, she said, Would you like to learn how to remove stains from paper?

Ink stains? I asked.

Yes, she said.

The headmistress at the orphanage had taught me how to read and write. It was not a common skill for any of us to learn, but the headmistress saw something in me that made her set aside time, curl my fingers around a pencil, and be patient. I could copy each letter perfectly the first time after being shown. I never forgot a spelling. Sometimes, however, I might write a phrase that I regretted. She taught me to cross a line through it, or to blot it very darkly with ink, if I wanted to make sure that no one could read what I had written. I hadn't known there was a way to make ink vanish.

Vinegar, Raven said. Lemon juice.

It was magic, to see the ink disintegrate.

I thought: I wish.

How easy. Everything done became undone. If I didn't want to see something, I had the power to make it go away.

Show me more, I told Raven, and when she showed me all she knew, I asked for different kinds of paper, different kinds of ink. It took her a while to procure them. Such things are a luxury in the Ward. A Half Kith possessed paper and ink only to produce something worth selling beyond the wall, such as a printed book. Paper and ink were not for our own use. But Raven smiled when she gave them to me, and nodded with approval when I experimented with them in my room. I became very good at making ink vanish.

Nirrim, she said one day. What you are doing is a secret. You cannot tell anyone.

Who would I tell? I said. Raven had made clear to the Ward that I was under her protection, which meant that no one troubled me when I walked in the streets, but it also meant that few were friendly with me.

Ever, she said. This is our secret.

I agreed. I was twelve, then. It was my name day. My first name day

was perhaps a year after I had been left at the orphanage as a new infant, small and large eyed. I seemed no different from the other infants who arrived and grew and sometimes died. A fever. A fading. Thinning down to the bones for no reason I knew besides neglect. But a year of life meant stubbornness, a will that had to be acknowledged, so the headmistress decided I was likely to live and therefore should be named the word that had been pinned to my swaddling cloths when I was abandoned: Nirrim, a type of cloud that is rosy, lined with gold, and predicts good fortune.

For your name day, Raven said, I would like to teach you something new.

What is it? I said. I liked being good at what she asked me to do. It pleased her. It made me feel safe.

To be quiet, she said. We were alone in the kitchen, seated at the table, which was pale from age and scored by knives. I was sucking a sugar cube she had given me. I shifted the cube into my cheek so that I could speak.

I can be quiet, I said.

I know, my girl. She tucked a lock of my chin-length hair into my cap. She said, But you can become even better at it. You could become the best. And if you do, I can teach you other things.

What kind of things?

Ah, she said. I cannot tell you yet.

What do I need to do? I asked. The sweetness of the sugar drizzled down my throat. The sharp edges of the cube dissolved against my gums.

We will start with something small, she said.

All right.

She said, Put your hand on the floor, palm down.

I did. I had to get down on my hands and knees to do it the way

she wanted: palm fully flat, the fingers spread. The sugar cube had dissolved. My mouth was full of sweetness.

She got out of her chair, and I was confused. I thought that she would leave me in the kitchen, perhaps for hours on end, that solitude would be how she would teach me silence. But she did not leave. She positioned her chair so that the tip of one leg rested on the web between my thumb and index finger. It didn't hurt, but I saw right away how it soon would.

Now, my girl, not a sound.

She lowered her weight onto the chair.

5

ON THE DAY THE ELYSIUM BIRD came to the Ward, Raven sent me on an errand. She had me tuck a printed bread into a muslin drawstring bag that had been deftly embroidered by Annin to display the tavern's insignia: a lit oil lamp. Raven buttoned the top button of my coat, which was her coat and made with cloth finer than anything I owned, but its dark brown was discreet enough for a Half Kith to wear. "There will be a lot of nonsense in the streets," she said, "what with this wind and the festival and that godsforsaken bird. You keep your head."

"But Annin."

"Annin! She is made of dreams, that one."

"She wants the bird."

"She'd get herself killed going after it. You think I will let her out of my sight? I'll tie her up if I have to."

I nodded, but I felt a small sadness. I remembered Annin when she first came here. She was careless. She let food burn on the stove. She forgot to change the sheets of a paying guest, a Middling merchant. I once found Annin asleep in the kitchen, head pillowed on her arms at

the table, knife nearby, onion skins floating to the floor, sandal untied. I brushed the dark reddish hair away from her face. Soft round cheeks. A doll's face. She drooled a little: a wet shine on her mouth. I knelt beside her and tied her sandal.

"Bring me back something nice." Raven patted my cheek. She gave me a little push, and I was gone.

When an ice wind comes to the city, indi flowers freeze along the white walls. Purple enameled petals chatter in the wind. Then the cold snap passes. Petals melt and fall from their stems. New flowers grow, fluffy and thick. I love the flowers. They are so strong. Really, they are a weed, and destructive. The vines cannot easily be ripped out. They must be chopped. Over time, they can crack and crumble a wall. But I love them for that, too.

The Ward is a puzzle of skinny streets that turn an ice wind into pure malice. A wind will gust through tall buildings, kick sand in your eyes, freeze your fingers into claws. They say more murders happen during an ice wind. Maybe it's because of the cold, but I think it's because the cold is temporary. People get the sense that everything is, and that there are no consequences.

I passed members of the militia, usually in pairs, men stiff in their starched red uniforms, a stripe of dark blue across the chest to indicate their Middling kith. I kept my head down.

They could take me if they wanted.

They could always find something I had done wrong. They could smell my breath and accuse me of having eaten something sweet. They could look closely at my coat, which was almost too nice. They could say the center part in my hair was off-center, that its natural wave was because I must have had it in small, illegal braids. I had looked boldly

in their faces. My hands had been in my pockets. What did I have that I should not? Those sandals. That leather looked too good. They were sure of it.

Come with us, they would say.

We'll see to your tithe.

My chest always flooded with fear when I passed the militia. You are nothing, I told myself. No one.

Their glances slid from my face and left me, forgotten. Thank you, I thought. Yes, I thought. I am unimportant. Insignificant. A crumb to be brushed away.

Children ran past me, their breath pale streamers in the cold, their tin moons twinkling behind them.

The militia didn't stop me. They eyed the children. Then I saw the men's gaze float to the rooftops. They, too, wondered where the Elysium bird had gone.

The buildings of the Ward were brilliant with white paint. The Half-Kith men had given the walls a fresh coat of limewash, as was tradition every year on the moon festival. The tang of new paint sharpened the air. The Ward buildings were perhaps once beautiful. Raven said they were older than anything beyond the wall. Stone arches braced the stone walls at their height, bending over the narrow streets. The arches seemed to serve no purpose. I supposed they were architectural. Sometimes, though, I looked at them and saw canopies of sun-shimmering cloth draped over them, shading the walkways below.

But I would correct myself. There were no canopies. I didn't *see* them. I *imagined* them.

I emerged into an agora, one of the open squares. It bustled with people celebrating the largest full moon of the year, cooking salted fish over open fires, warming wind-dried hands. As always, they wore dull colors: brown and gray and muddied beige. The black-and-white

diamond marble beneath my feet was soap-smooth and uneven with age, interrupted by large, deliberate holes. It looked as if objects had been gouged out of the paved ground, though no one knew what.

The holes made me think of the vanishings. Sometimes people disappeared from the Ward. Half Kith entered the prison and never returned. Far worse were the night-snatchings, which happened for no reason anyone understood. I sung him to sleep, a mother said. Tears slipped off her face and onto a tavern table. She said, I should never have left his side. Her words dissolved as Raven stroked her shoulder. I saw the boy in my mind: soft, fat cheeks, thick lashes like little black fans. A reaching shadow fell over his face.

Is it a tithe? the mother whispered. But I did nothing wrong. I am so careful. What did I do wrong?

There was never any answer. I occasionally saw that woman in the Ward, though I always looked away. All of us in the Ward lived our lives around empty spaces, but she became the emptiness.

One of the holes in the agora was slick with ice. Children skidded on it and slipped and laughed at their game. I was struck by how children, at least when they are small, can make do with whatever they have, even if it is not much, without the burden of realizing they are compensating for what they lack.

I wonder, I once said to Morah as we passed through the agora together, how this place used to be.

Her expression turned strange. What do you mean, she said, how it used to be? The agora has always been like this.

Before I saw to Raven's errand, I had one of my own.

I stopped at the home of Sirah, who was too elderly to shuffle outdoors for the festival, even if it weren't so cold. As I'd feared,

her home had no fire and was freezing. Sirah lay under a mound of blankets. She opened her one eye. The other had been tithed from her when she was young. She had been arrested for wearing cosmetics on her eyelids.

She was lucky. They could have taken both eyes.

"Sleep," I said, and built a fire in the kitchen, but when I brought her a steaming cup of tea, she was wide awake.

"I have something for you." I produced a small loaf of bread that I had hidden in my deep coat pocket.

Her gray eye shone. "My sweet Nirrim," she said, which made me feel as warm as the tea, as warm as the fire. She said, "It will rain."

I smiled. "When?"

She squinted. The skin covering her missing eye was as wrinkled as a fig's. "Six days."

"Will someone have caught the bird by then?"

"Child, I only do the rain. No birds. Six days. It doesn't happen at night. I feel it in my bones."

She was never wrong. "I'll plan to stay inside, then, and bake another loaf of bread for you."

She smiled back at me, showing her missing teeth. I thought she'd lost them through age, not as a tithe, but I never knew for sure.

A vine of icy flowers hung over Aden's door. When he opened it, they chimed like a shopkeeper's quiet bell. He gave me a cocky smile and made a silent game of tugging at my coat sleeve to pull me indoors. This was in case the militia was watching us. They would see us not as criminals, but as lovers catching a moment for themselves before the night's festivities truly got underway. I smiled back, ready to kiss his offered cheek. He turned at the last moment and caught my lips with his.

"Aden!"

He pulled away. He was a full head taller. I didn't raise my eyes but kept my gaze on his tanned throat. His playfulness soured. If I looked up, I'd see his broad mouth thinned, light eyes narrowed. A notch always formed between his brows when he frowned. That would be there, too. He said, "As if you've never done it before."

It was true. We had kissed, and more, but I had put an end to that.

Sometimes I didn't understand things and felt stupid later. Like how his lovers' game to protect us from curious eyes hadn't been a game to him.

"Come inside," he said.

Normally, during an ice wind, it would be nearly as cold inside a Ward house as outside. Our houses weren't built for the cold, since it came so rarely. Aden dealt on the black market, which meant that his home had a few comforts others didn't. A brazier glowed with live coals. Orange light flared against the white, limewashed walls of the first room. Half Kith must keep the walls of their home white, just like they must always wear muted colors. Although some people in the Ward could carve sinuous chairs, shape exquisite sofas, craft tables with minute patterns of inlaid bone, such furnishings were sold to the upper kiths beyond the wall. Everything we owned must be plain.

I handed Aden the bread. He made a pleased sound to see its design: a raptor with talons outstretched. "You made this for me?"

Raven had chosen this masculine image, likely for the same reason I told Aden yes. We wanted to please him. We needed his skills.

It is important to make people feel appreciated, Raven said, and made certain to slip Aden a few coppers every now and then. She set money aside from the tavern's profits. We must do our part, she told me.

Maybe I should apprentice myself to the printer, I told her. I am good with paper and ink. I could earn a little.

But I give you everything you need, Raven said. I will always take care of you.

It was true. I was grateful. Although Morah, Annin, and I didn't earn money working for Raven, we never needed to.

I just wish I had money to contribute, too, I told her. For the documents. You shouldn't have to pay for everything.

She touched my cheek. Don't you worry your dear heart, she said.

"Do you have the heliographs?" I asked Aden.

"All business, I see. Little Nirrim, made of stone." He brought the bread close to his face and inhaled its fresh, sugared scent. My printed breads were soft inside, with an airy, melting texture.

The bread was a risky thing. Too sweet for people like us.

Aden set the loaf on a table that bore a bowl filled to its brim with seed. "Not you, too," I said. The seed was stolen, probably, from the upper Wards of the city, where ladies kept pet songbirds of all kinds. Aden had a Middling passport that allowed him outside the Ward's wall. The document had been forged by me.

But it would be a lie, I had said to Raven when she had suggested that I forge passports, which she would give to those who needed them most. I was anxious about the risk—to her as well as to me. And I didn't like lying. It was hard for me to tell what was real. Lies made it worse.

It is a midnight lie, she said.

A kind of lie told for someone else's sake, a lie that sits between goodness and wrong, just as midnight is the moment between night and morning.

Or a lie that is not technically false, like a misleading truth.

"I saw the bird fly away," I told Aden, which was true enough, but which I hoped would make him think the bird was gone.

"It's somewhere in the Ward, I know it." Aden's smile was back. He was—as Annin had reminded me many times—even more handsome

when he smiled. He made a room warmer. When the day dimmed, sunshine always seemed to linger around him like bright vapor. Lucky, women in the Ward called me. "Don't be so disapproving," he said. "Why shouldn't I hunt the bird as well as anyone else?"

"You can't *hunt* an Elysium bird." A pet Elysium is raised from an egg stolen from a nest in the sugarcane fields outside the city. They say its shell is a glossy crimson. They say that when the shell cracks, it weeps a fluid that, if swallowed, will add a happy year to your life. "The bird can't be caught."

"I will be the first, then, to catch one."

"Even if you did." I shook my head.

"No one would take it from me. They wouldn't dare. I'd like to see them try." He leaned back against the table, large hands bracing its edge. He was well grown for his eighteen years. Aden had just the kind of body the High Kith would approve of in our kind: one made to work, all muscle and sinew.

"It's your funeral," I said. "The heliographs, please."

He reached into a breast pocket and produced them: small, thin squares of tin, fanned out between his fingers like a miniature deck of silvery cards. There was the scent of lavender. Only the face on the top tin could be seen clearly. It was Raven's face. I wasn't sure why she had asked Aden to make a heliograph of herself. A Middling passport was already hers by birth. We had never tried to forge a High-Kith one. Even if we had the proper Council stamp—which we didn't—passing as High would be impossible without a great sum of money. Even one day's outfit of High clothes would cost more than I could imagine.

I took the tins from Aden and shuffled through them. They showed families with small children. An infant. The baby's parents. A girl with wide, startled eyes. I made the tins disappear into a secret lining in the

collar of my coat, where their stiffness, even if felt, would be taken for cardstock meant to make the collar rigid.

Aden had shown me how to capture someone's image with light and a bitumen-coated plate of tin, to wash the tin with lavender oil to make the image appear. He was good at it. His mother had been good, too, so good that when she decided to leave this city, and abandon Aden around the time when he was no longer a child yet not quite a man, she had thought that an excellent heliograph was all she needed to make her fake passport convincing. She was caught by the militia and sentenced to death. Aden never even received her bones to bury. When the City Council took your body, they took all of it.

Aden had made a heliograph of me. "We could go beyond the wall together," he had said, setting the small tin square in my palm, "and work in the Middling quarter." But I couldn't leave my home. I couldn't leave Raven, who needed me.

If I left the Ward, who would forge documents for others who wanted to leave? The ones who had seen the blank mother questing the Ward for her night-snatched son, and decided, Not me. Not my child.

"If I caught the bird," Aden said, "I would share it with you." His fingers brushed my cheek. They smelled of lavender. They touched my mouth.

A loneliness opened inside my chest. It was a kind of song that always sang the same thing.

He kissed me and I let him. Sometimes it can feel so good to give someone what they want that it is the next best thing to getting what you want. His hard body was warm as I leaned into him. His mouth was hungry at my neck, beneath the fringe of my chin-length hair. I pretended that his hunger was my hunger. I kissed him back, and the quiet inside me didn't feel so large anymore, so heavy.

I thought, This is not so bad.

I thought, I could be with him again.

I thought, He loves me.

But what I did surprised me. My hand reached around him and dipped into the bowl of seeds. I closed my fingers around a handful. Tiny and hard. I could feel their shine.

I kissed Aden back, and slipped the seeds into my coat pocket. For good measure, I took the embroidered bag, too.

6

YOU KNOW WHERE THIS IS going.

When I still lived in the orphanage, after Helin's death, I would spend hours at a window. One might have wondered what could keep my attention, since the view was only the brick of an opposing wall. I was looking not at the view but at my reflection. I pretended the girl I saw there was someone else. A friend. A sister. A High-Kith girl whose life I could only imagine, with silk slippers and pet foxes taken from the pink beaches and tamed, leashed with ribbons. Who could stack a castle of sugar cubes. Who slept in late. Who lived so tenderly it was as though she were housed inside a flower. This girl was afraid of nothing.

Sometimes the reflection seemed real.

I would grow frightened and stay away from the windows, from any mirrorlike surface, from spoons, from still water in a sink.

And then, though you would think I had learned better, after what had happened to Helin, I would return to the window. The girl in the glass would smile.

The wind whipped the edge of my coat as I walked home from Aden's. My mouth still tasted like his mouth. Things had gone too far.

I was the one who allowed that to happen.

And I was the one who thought, This will always be my life: kissing someone I don't love. Living in a city I will never leave.

And I was the one who saw the crimson bird perched at a gutter's edge.

But it wasn't me who stopped, sandy dirt scraping against the pavement under my sandals. It wasn't me who glanced around and saw—strangely, impossibly—no one. It wasn't me who felt a need grow inside my chest like a fruit and split its rind.

Nor was it me who set my hands and feet onto the metal struts that bound the gutter pipe to the building's wall. *I* didn't begin to climb.

It was the girl in the window's reflection.

So brave.

So foolish.

7

I GLANCED DOWN AT THE spinning pavement. The metal gutter pipe froze my fingers. I was robbed of breath. The bird above me trilled.

I forced myself up. I climbed past indi flowers twined around the gutter. I spied their roots in cracks that split the wall deep enough for me to dig my fingers into them. The cracks were sticky with fresh white paint. It grew colder as I climbed, the wind meaner. It tore off my cap. Hair spilled into my eyes, got into my mouth.

When I climbed up far enough to know—to know the fact deep in my body, in my trembling legs and dry throat—that if I fell I would die, I stopped. I hugged the pipe. The wind blew dust against the wall. My mind seemed to flip upside down. My sandals skidded along the pipe. Nausea rose up my throat and I had an image of vomiting out my insides, of my stomach coming out first, then my heart, my lungs. I imagined these organs blundering from my mouth and dropping one by one to the ground with soft thuds.

And that was stupid, so stupid. I couldn't let my imagination feel too real.

I forced my eyes open. I saw the pipe. I saw my bleeding fingers, tipped with white paint. I looked up into the sky. Gray lambswool clouds. It was getting dark.

And over my shoulder: a glimpse of the wall, solid and as thick as the length of a man from toe to top. I couldn't see beyond it.

Raven would wonder where I was.

There was nothing but silence above me. The bird had probably flown somewhere else.

But I thought: I don't know, not really, how large the Ward is compared to the rest of the city.

I thought: What harm would it do to see the High quarter beyond the wall? Just for a moment. Then I would come back down and be myself again.

I pushed myself up. My arms ached, my back ached, my right leg jittered like the needle of Annin's pedaled sewing machine. But I climbed.

Then I heard the bird again. Its song slipped fluidly inside me.

It occurred to me that the bird wanted me as much as I wanted it. That it knew I was coming, that it was watching, tiny, its crested head cocked, its tail plumes of pink and green and scarlet. In my mind I could see its short, inky beak. Its tiny emerald eyes. It sang to me.

I was confused, because I had never seen an Elysium bird up close. How could I imagine it in such great detail?

It didn't feel like my imagination.

It felt like memory.

I didn't want to glance up. But the song calmed my shaking body. It floated the hair out of my eyes and ran a finger up my neck, under my jaw, tilting my head up.

The bird circled over my head, red wings wide and crenellated. A feather fell. It pivoted in the air until its shaft stuck into a joining where the horizontal length of the gutter met the roof's edge.

Then the bird disappeared out of my line of sight, over the roof.

SOMETHING SEIZED MY FOOT. I jolted, and I would have come off the pipe entirely if not for my grip on the gutter's frets.

"Out of my way."

I glanced down. My heart got stuck in my throat. A militiaman was just below me, hand wrapped around my ankle. He shook my leg. "Please," I said. "Stop! I'll fall."

"The bird is flying away!" His face shone with sweat. "Get off, damn the gods!" He yanked at me. I slid, my hands coming off the fret.

My fingers snagged the indi flower vine wrapped around the gutter. It held my weight.

"You are blocking my way," he said, and when I glanced down into his face it was filled with grim determination and need. He *would* kill me, I realized.

Hands twisted in the indi vine, I begged, "Let me go."

He didn't release my ankle. "The bird is mine."

His final word echoed among the buildings, but in an otherworldly voice, higher than his own. It was the bird. *Mine*, it sang.

The roots of the indi vine gave a little, some of them tearing free of the wall, popping out of crevices. The gutter creaked.

Mine, the bird sang again, and it seemed to be singing to me.

I kicked the man's face.

He cried out. I felt him fall from me. The pipe, still in his grip, came off the wall.

I clung to the vine, which spun like rope from one anchored point. I heard the loud clank of the pipe and the thump of his body on the pavement.

He lay twisted below, legs splayed. I gripped the vine. Blood pooled beneath him. A veil of fear prickled over me.

The noise must have been heard. Other militiamen would come.

The alleyway rang with shocked silence. Then, in the distance, I heard cries.

Forget the bird, I told myself.

I had to hide.

9

I SCRAMBLED UP THE TWISTING vine and onto the roof. I wouldn't be seen from below, but I had to get as far away as possible. Fear coated me like paint. I ran across the rooftop, ducking around the cistern there to collect rain. Night had almost truly fallen, and the cistern was sheeted in thin black ice. I tore at the collar of my coat—Raven's coat.

Stitches ripped. The collar came off in my hand, the heliographs scattering at my feet. If I were caught, the heliographs could not be found. They would be traced to the people whose images they bore, even the children. The price for impersonating a member of a higher kith was death.

Shouts rose from below.

I punched through the ice in the cistern. I scooped up the heliographs and dumped them into the black water. Then I ran to the far edge of the roof.

I had always refused to consider things that could never happen.

What if you were on the Council? Annin sometimes asked me in the kitchen.

I wouldn't be.

What if you were High Kith? What would you do?

I'm not.

Don't you wonder, she would say, why things are the way they are?

It is as it is, I'd tell her, and find comfort in that saying. It pointed toward certainty. I might not like the world as it was, but at least it wouldn't change around me.

I didn't want to become someone I couldn't recognize.

Yet when I reached the edge of the rooftop, I became someone else. The reflection of that girl in the window. Another self. Someone who jumped across the narrow space.

I landed on the neighboring rooftop. I kept running, judging where best to bridge the gaps between roofs, hoping anyone below would be too distracted by the commotion in the streets to look up. The yellow moon, swollen to its full size, was rising. I might be seen, if someone thought to look.

But no one did.

When I had put enough distance between myself and the body, I slid down behind another cistern. My trousers were thin. My rear grew cold on the plastered stone and I shivered against the aged wood of the cistern, pulling the coat closer to my body. I should stay here, I thought, until the festival has ended. Maybe, soon before dawn, when everyone was asleep, I could clamber down another gutter pipe. Sweat chilled on my skin. I pushed my loose hair behind my ears. A lock of it was matted with white paint.

I could see, now, the whole city. The thick white ribbon of the wall wrapped in a snaking circle around me. Beyond it lay the upper quarters, their spires topped with silver and golden orbs. Dark, dense,

waving blankets confused me until eventually I realized they must be treetops. The upper Wards glittered with colored lights. There seemed to be a pattern: some areas of the city glowed with pink windows, and others with green, still others with blue: a code, perhaps, that differentiated one quarter from another. High up on the hill, rooftops were not flat as they were in the Ward, but sometimes shaped into pointed towers with bellied windows and the black stitching of wrought-iron balconies. One large building bore ghostly figures that ringed an enormous dome brilliant with ruby panes of glass lit from within. People, I thought at first, dipped in white paint.

Strange, impossible.

Statues, of course.

I felt suddenly tired and consumed by cold. I had killed that soldier. I had done something terrible that could never be undone, that only proved that no matter how hard I tried to be otherwise, I was someone who made mistakes. Who looked at statues and thought they were people. Who looked at a reflection and thought it was another girl instead of only the image of herself. Who saw no other way out of a situation than murder.

I could have asked him to let me climb, I thought, or I could have sworn to let him chase the bird when we reached the rooftops.

There is always another way.

My girl, I imagined Raven saying. Do you think you can keep what you have done hidden?

The militia will take you away. You will never come back.

How I would miss you.

A scrambling feeling rooted around inside me.

No one, Raven said in my mind, can know what you've done.

I looked at the statues. They were of the gods, surely, but no one really remembered them. Maybe that was a blessing.

My eyes closed.

Are you hungry? I remember Helin asking. She was a little younger than I was, six years old, perhaps, then, her hand soft. She held an apple, its shiny skin red and gold.

How did you get that?

She shrugged. It's for you.

I took the apple. Why are you giving this to me?

Will you be my friend?

I bit the apple. Then I passed it to her. Your turn, I said. You take a bite.

We ate the apple like that, passing it between us, until we got to the core, which we also ate, the seeds sliding down our throats, the stem crunched between our teeth, our fingers and mouths sticky and sweet.

I huddled inside Raven's coat. I slipped between seeing the city before me and remembering Helin. I almost wished I could forget her the way everyone had forgotten the gods.

Cold came over me, but I was warm inside with guilt. The feeling nuzzled against me. It pressed against my heart like a soft animal and slept in my lap.

10

A LIGHT PRICKLE ON MY wrist woke me. I startled out of sleep, shaking my wrist hard, sure that I had been seen, I had been caught, a soldier was slipping a manacle onto my wrist. But the prickle disappeared, air beat against my face, and what I saw was not uniformed men but the Elysium bird launching itself from my wrist. It hovered for a moment in front of me before sweeping away.

It landed a few feet from me. It scratched the plastered roof, oddly chickenlike for such a glamorous bird, wings tucked close to its body. Now that I was so close, I could see streaks of green on its belly, speckles of pink on its breast, the black thorn of its beak, the tips of white on its red wings. It sang.

"Shh," I said, which was foolish—what bird obeyed a person?—but it stopped midsong. I reached into my pocket for the seeds—Aden's seeds. *Mine*, I remembered the bird singing. It felt not like it belonged to me, but that it was telling me that I belonged to it.

I scattered the seeds across the roof.

It pecked its way toward me, head tipping left and right, tail dipping, luxuriant feathers drifting behind it like the train of an iridescent dress. It ate the seeds, husks splitting beneath its beak and dropping to the roof. The moon was high and bright. I wanted desperately for this bird to be mine no matter what it could do for me, no matter if the stories were real, if only so that I could see it in full light and know its patterns and colors, to know it so intimately that I would see its details even when I closed my eyes.

It flitted closer, then landed on my knee.

You can't catch an Elysium bird, I had told Aden. Had anyone ever heard of an Elysium behaving like this?

Maybe it was because it was trained and had been raised from its shell.

Maybe hunger had overwhelmed it.

Whatever reason it had decided not to fear me, I couldn't question the peace that spread from where it perched upon my knee, drifting down my leg and up into my stomach, stealing over my chest. I dipped my fist into the coat pocket again and offered an open handful of seed. It jumped to the heel of my hand, feathers curling over my wrist, caressing my upper arm. It ate. The beak gently jabbed the palm of my hand, a tender little needle.

What are you? I wondered as I studied it. What are you, really?

What am I, that you chose to come to me?

Its body was only slightly larger than my hand but its tail floated long, the tip of it almost to my elbow. It warbled: a bubbling sound. I stroked its head and it allowed this, leaning into my touch. When it burbled its low music again, I stroked its throat. Beneath its feathers was a light vibration, like a purr.

I realized then what anybody in the Ward should have realized.

I couldn't keep this bird.

It wasn't possible to hide such a secret. Everyone in the tavern would learn, and then it would be only a matter of time before the Ward did, and before people began to wonder whether the death of a soldier on the day the bird flew into the Ward had something to do with me. It would be only a matter of time before the militia learned who had the bird. Then they would come for me, if not for the crime of murder, then for the crime of stealing a High-Kith pet. When the Council could sentence you to years in prison for dressing like a High-Kith lady, what would it do to someone from the Ward who had kept an Elysium?

The bird nosed among the seeds, looking for its favorites, which were slender black ovals.

The only way to keep it, I thought, was to kill it.

If I were to wring its neck, I could sell the feathers. I could see whether the stories about its meat were true. Its hollow bones.

A dead Elysium bird held so much value. It could be parceled out secretly and slowly. *That*, perhaps, could be kept hidden when a living thing—with its song, its rustlings, its need for food and water, its excretions—could not.

The bird looked at me. *Mine*, it sang, and I was so startled that my hand sagged and the bird floated up, wings stuttering. But it settled back into my palm.

It would be easy to snap its fragile neck. I had just killed someone. The murder of a bird would be nothing by comparison. And there was so much to gain.

A treasure, Raven would say when I showed her the limp corpse, its feathers as bright as a bouquet. *My* treasure, she would call me.

Who knew what comforts we could bring into our home through the sale of the birds' parts?

Who knew how many Half Kith we could save, with extra money to buy what we needed to make passports?

But the bird nestled into my palm, its feathers a warm cloud, its happiness thrumming into my skin. I had never felt or seen anything so beautiful, and it was only then that I realized how starved I had been for beauty. Its liquid green eyes studied me.

A thought came so slowly that it reminded me of Annin building a tower out of playing cards: the precision and care, the light touch, the slight shake of her hand lowering a card into place.

The Elysium closed its eyes and sighed. It grew heavy with sleep.

I could keep the bird, I thought, if I left the Ward. If I forged a passport for myself. If I went beyond the wall, beyond the city.

Fear flooded me. I couldn't kill the bird. But I also couldn't leave behind everything I knew.

I slipped the embroidered bread bag from my pocket.

I clamped the sleeping bird's wings to its body, and thrust it into the sack.

When I was certain that no one was passing in the alley below, I climbed down a gutter pipe, the jerking, squawking bag swaying from my wrist by its drawstring.

Moonlight painted the street. The alley was a quiet, bright river.

I walked until I spotted a pair of soldiers. Dread pulsed inside me, but I couldn't keep the bird and I couldn't kill it. It must be returned. I had to hope that the militia would be so distracted by the Elysium that they wouldn't think to link me to the soldier's broken body—which, after all, would surely look like a mere accident, especially with the fallen gutter pipe.

"Here," I said to the soldiers, holding out the bag. I remembered Helin holding out the apple and asking to be my friend.

One of them, staring, took the jolting bag. "Is that the Elysium?"

The other soldier seized my arm.

"But I'm turning it in." Panic darted up my throat. "To be brought back to its owner."

The soldier dragged my other arm behind me.

"It's unharmed!" I said.

I was arrested anyway.