

+ THE SUNLIT LANDS SERIES +

# THE HEARTWOOD CROWN



MATT MIKALATOS

# PRAISE FOR *THE HEARTWOOD CROWN*

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Rich and vivid worldbuilding, a diverse cast of characters, heartbreaking sacrifice, and a flying cat—*The Heartwood Crown* packs all that and more into a modern take on portal fantasy. It captures the fun and wonder of fantasy while unapologetically critiquing some of [the genre’s] outdated tropes.

**ALEX SHVARTSMAN**, editor of *Future Science Fiction Digest* and award-winning author of “Explaining Cthulhu to Grandma”

I loved it! A great follow up to *The Crescent Stone*—not an easy feat considering how high a bar that book set! Magic, hard truths, and impossible decisions. Wit, snark, and love. You need to read these books.

**M. E. GARBER**, speculative-fiction writer

Is it cliché to say you’re in for a massive treat? I don’t care if it is. ’Cause you are. You were worried book two wouldn’t keep up with the first in the Sunlit Land series? Fear not, friends. Matt Mikalatos has again nailed it. Compelling characters, a scintillating story world, and twists that will leave you guessing. Did I mention the Narnian flavoring? Buy it!

**JAMES L. RUBART**, five-time Christy Award-winning author

# PRAISE FOR *THE CRESCENT STONE*

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For Narnia fans who enjoy heavy snark, this is a must read.

**KIRKUS**



Matt Mikalatos has built a compelling fantasy world with humor and heart.

**GENE LUEN YANG**, creator of *American Born Chinese* and *Boxers & Saints*



Matt Mikalatos has penned a tale straight out of today's headlines that will tug at your heartstrings. *The Crescent Stone* is a compelling story that will get under your skin and worm its way into your heart.

**TOSCA LEE**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Iscariot* and *The Legend of Sheba*



*The Crescent Stone* hooked me from the first page! With the rich characterization of John Green and the magical escapism of Narnia, this book is a must read for all fantasy fans!

**LORIE LANGDON**, author of *Olivia Twist* and the Doon series



This is what sets Mikalatos's epic world apart from so many other fantasy realms: the characters feel real, their lives are genuine and complicated, and their choices are far from binary. Mikalatos's creativity and originality are on full display in this epic tale for adults and young readers alike.

**SHAWN SMUCKER**, author of *The Day the Angels Fell*



*The Crescent Stone* blends . . . glitter unicorns, powerful healing tattoos, and an engaging cast of characters into a funny and thoughtful story that examines the true costs of magic and privilege.

**TINA CONNOLLY**, author of *Seriously Wicked*

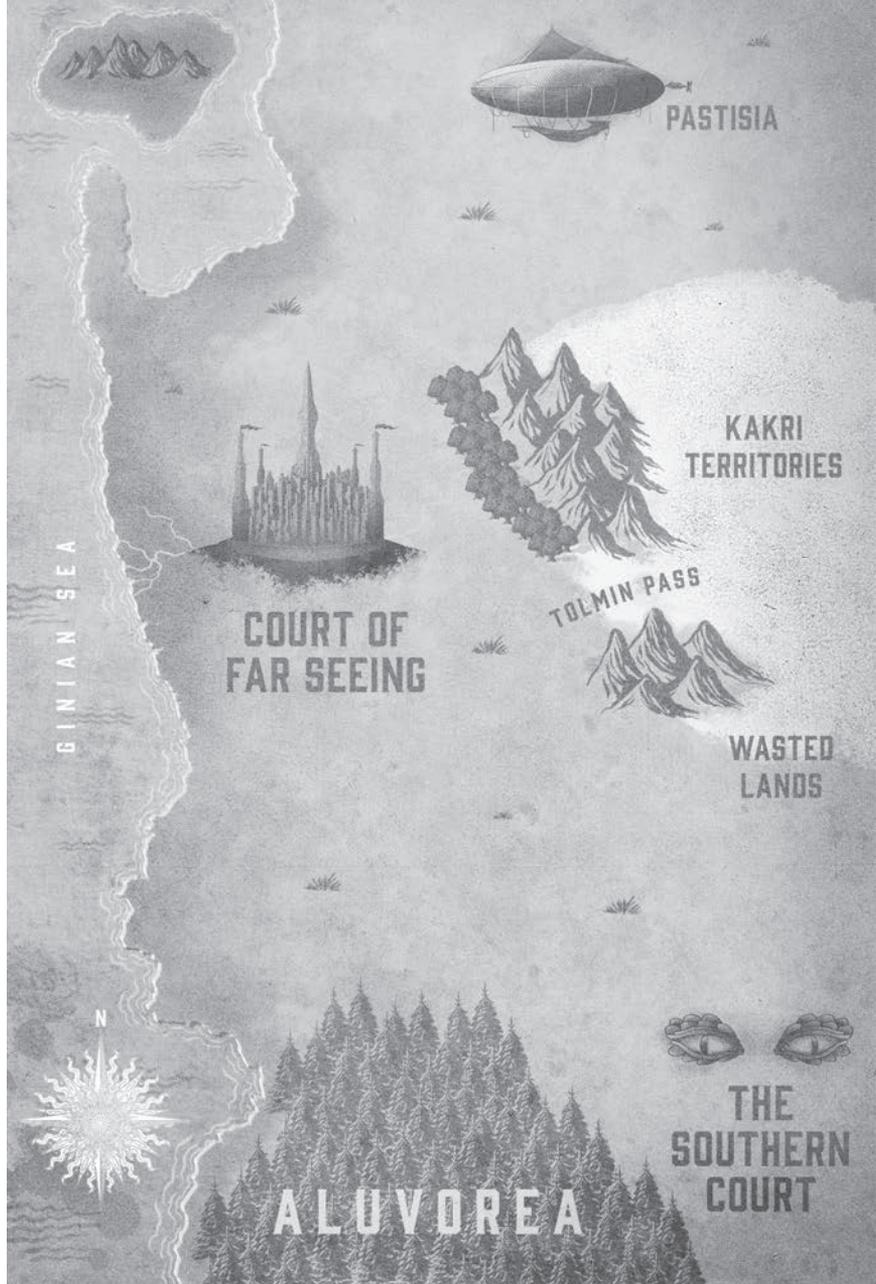
## ALSO IN THE SUNLIT LANDS SERIES

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*The Crescent Stone*

“Our Last Christmas Together:  
A Sunlit Lands Christmas Tale”

# THE SUNLIT LANDS



GINIAN SEA

PASTISIA

KAKRI TERRITORIES

COURT OF FAR SEEING

TOLMIN PASS

WASTED LANDS

THE SOUTHERN COURT

ALUVOREA

UUDHUM KOB

# ALUVOREA



HANAL SAID  
NO DRAGONS  
BUT →

ALLAE

ARAKAM

ANNAGINI VASAGI

ANUKOP

MAP NOT  
TO SCALE  
OR TREE  
WOULD BE  
HUGE!

AYARA ARDHA

INYULAP  
ANYAR

A CURSED RIVER? OF COURSE!

KASKA SHRAM

CARNIVOROUS  
FOREST - WHY??

BRING  
YOUR OWN  
MARSH  
MALLOWS

RASKAN

WITH MY LUCK  
THERE WILL BE A  
SWAMP MONSTER  
HERE →

PATRA  
KOJA





# THE SUNLIT LANDS

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BOOK TWO





**THE  
HEARTWOOD  
CROWN**

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**MATT MIKALATOS**



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*The Heartwood Crown* is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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*To Jermayne Chapman, who has been a generous  
friend and a wise guide along the way*

# JASON'S NOTES ON THE PEOPLES AND PLACES OF THE SUNLIT LANDS

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## PEOPLES

**ALUVOREANS**—Plant people. They have green or blue skin. Don't make jokes about weed killer. They do not like this.

**ELENIL**—I don't think they're jerks on purpose. It's just that they really like everything a certain way. And that way involves them being in charge and also dressing up in silly clothes. Loves: costume parties, prophecies, fancy food, haberdashery, making deals. Hates: high fives, irreverent jokes at their expense, the destabilization of their source of power, impertinent questions about the underlying philosophy of the magical economy, suspenders.

**KAKRI**—They love stories and live in the desert and are great warriors, and they are tall and tan skinned and have shining silver eyes, et cetera, but the most important thing is that Bailey is a Kakri, and she is the most beautiful, amazing, intelligent, kind, terrifying, and wonderful person I have ever met. Also, she can't read English, so I can say whatever I want about her here. (Insert heart emoji, insert smiley face with heart eyes, XOXOXOXO.) PS, reminder: do not teach Bailey to read.

**MAEGROM**—These little dudes have grey skin and have a whole underground kingdom. I don't know much about them, so I just make up stories about them. My favorite is called "Maegrom, PI." It's about a Maegrom named Thomas who solves mysteries in the Sunlit Lands. His best friend is a mole named Higgins. I want to get to know the Maegrom better, but honestly, at this point I think I'll be disappointed because they won't live up to my fantasy version.

**PASTISIANS**—Necromancers. I've said it before, and I'll say it again: HARD PASS. If you talk to the dead, don't talk to me.

**SCIM**—I think they're cute, and I don't care what anyone else says. In fact, as soon as I'm done here, I'm going to go give Break Bones a great big hug.

**SOUTHERN COURT**—You know that friend who tells you jokes and then he's the only one who laughs? Yeah, that's these guys. Also, they are lizard shape-shifters.

**ZHANIN**—I'm told Zhanin translates to "shark people," and c'mon, that's all we really need to know, right? Bailey was telling me, "These people are dangerous, for they kill all who threaten the balance of magic," and I was like, "Hey, as soon as you said 'shark people,' I knew to stay away from them."

## PLACES

**ALUVOREA**—The great forest where the Aluvoreans live. Why am I writing this stuff down? I should be able to remember this.

**COURT OF FAR SEEING**—The fabulous city-state of the Elenil. Slightly less fabulous since me and Madeline and our friends busted it up by wrecking their magic and chopping off their leader's hand. Now they're trying to kill me, but I'm like, whoa, have you ever heard of forgiveness? You'll be happier if you try it, believe me.

**GINIAN SEA**—I hear it's nice this time of year. Maybe everyone should go hang out on the beach together for a week. Then there would be less fighting. Maybe the Elenil and the Scim could solve all their problems with a big volleyball tournament or something. The Zhanin live here, and they could be the referees or eat the losing team or whatever.

**KAKRI TERRITORIES**—It's pretty nice here if you like deserts and lots of wild animals that are smarter than Earth animals and trying to kill you. Oh yeah, and the Kakri people, who are also nice when they are not trying to kill you. Other than that, great place, highly recommended, five stars.

**PASTISIA**—They have death blimps. Bailey says not to call them that, but I know a death blimp when I see one.

**THE SOUTHERN COURT**—Imagine that one table of weird kids in the cafeteria who are nice and everything, but they are always laughing at jokes that make no sense whatsoever. Now imagine they are shape-shifting lizard people.

**UNDERGROUND MAEGROM CITY**—Not that I've been there, but I picture a big cavern with houses carved out of the rock. There are torches, probably, and the houses

are warmed by magma flows. And maybe someone has painted a big yellow sun on the ceiling of the cavern. Just as a way to cheer up the other Maegrom, you know?

**WASTED LANDS**—Imagine the dumpsters at Disneyland and you know what the Wasted Lands are—the Happiest Place on Earth has to get rid of all its waste somehow. They try to keep it locked up and hidden away, but it's only going to work so long. The Scim live here. It's not great.

**WESTWIND**—This is the name of the Knight of the Mirror's castle, which is located on the EAST side of Far Seeing. When I was staying there, I would ask the knight once a day, "Hey, why is it called WESTwind when it's on the EAST side of the city?" And every day he would ignore me, but I could tell my daily question was getting to him and that one day I would ask and he would gently place his hand on my shoulder and explain it all to me. Only then would I be worthy to take my rightful place . . . as TOUR GUIDE TO THE SUNLIT LANDS.

**ZOLTARNOG**—The hidden wizards' island in the northern Ginian Sea. It is said that the wild magics of the Sunlit Lands will be tamed by the wizards of Zoltarnog—ha ha ha ha, I just made that one up and you totally fell for it, didn't you? ADMIT IT!

# CAST OF CHARACTERS

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**AMIRA**—Shula's younger sister

**ARAKAM**—a prophetic dragon who lives in Aluvorea

**ARCHON THENODY**—the chief magistrate; supreme ruler of the Elenil; crippled since being wounded by the Sword of Years

**BAILEYA**—a Kakri warrior; Jason's fiancée; daughter of Willow, granddaughter of Abronia

**BEZAED**—a Kakri warrior; one of Bailey's brothers

**BLACK SKULLS**—the elite fighting force of the Scim; there are three known members, one of whom is Darius

**BOULOS**—Shula's older brother

**BREAK BONES**—a Scim warrior once imprisoned by the Elenil, now Jason's ally

**DARIUS WALKER**—an American human allied with the Scim; Madeline's ex-boyfriend; a Black Skull

**DAVID GLENN**—an American human who was sent to Aluvorea by the Knight of the Mirror

**DELIGHTFUL GLITTER LADY (DEE, DGL)**—Jason's unicorn; can change size

**DIWDRAP**—a faerie

**ECLIPSE**—a Scim child

**EVERNU**—a gallant white stag who works alongside Rondelo

**FATHER ANTHONY**—a Catholic priest

**GARDEN LADY**—a mysterious old woman who has taken an interest in Madeline

**GILENYIA**—an influential Elenil lady; Hanali's cousin; has the power of healing

**HANALI**—an Elenil recruiter who invited Madeline to the Sunlit Lands

**JASON WU [WU SONG]**—an American human who followed Madeline into the Sunlit Lands; always tells the truth

**JENNY WU**—Jason's sister

**KEKOA KAHANANUI**—an American human who was sent to the Zhanin by the Knight of the Mirror

**KNIGHT OF THE MIRROR**—a human in his midforties; eschews magic; onetime guardian of the five Scim artifacts

**KYLE OLIVER**—Madeline's father

**LAMISAP**—an Aluvorean woman

**LIN**—an Aluvorean woman

**MADELINE OLIVER**—an American human formerly in the service of the Elenil

**MAJESTIC ONE**—the Elenil name for the magician who founded the Sunlit Lands

**MALIK**—Darius's cousin

**MORIARTY**—a brucok (gigantic bird from the Kakri territories)

**MOTHER CROW**—a Kakri matriarch

**MRS. RAYMOND**—an English human woman who runs the Transition House for humans in the Sunlit Lands; fifty years old

**MRS. ROUHANA**—a Syrian woman who used to clean for the Bisharas

**MUD**—the Scim leader of the anti-Elenil resistance

**NIGHTFALL**—a Scim child

**NIGHT'S BREATH**—a Scim warrior

**OREG**—a Maegrom tinker and rebel

**PATRA KOJA**—the antlered spirit of an Aluvorean marsh

**PEASANT KING**—the figure from Scim legend who founded the Sunlit Lands

**REMI**—the Guardian of the Wind

**RONDELO**—the Elenil captain of the guard in the Court of Far Seeing

**RUTH MBEWE**—a Zambian eight-year-old; the Knight of the Mirror's ward;  
accompanied Kekoa to the land of the Zhanin

**SHADOW**—a Scim child

**SHULA BISHARA**—a Syrian human; friend to Madeline; has the power to burst  
into flame

**SOCHAR**—an Elenil guard

**SOFÍA**—the housekeeper in Madeline's home on Earth

**THASTLE**—a faerie

**VIVI**—the father of Hanali, son of Gelintel

**WALLACE**—a sentient tunnel

**WENDY OLIVER**—Madeline's mother

**WILFRED**—yet another sentient tunnel

**YENIL**—a young orphaned Scim girl; adopted by Madeline and Shula



# PART 1

---

*If we're together, I won't be afraid.*

**FROM THE GRYPHON UNDER THE STAIRS  
BY MARY PATRICIA WALL**



PROLOGUE

# THE VOLUNTEERS

**P**repare yourself for the pain, and then breathe in. Hold it as long as you can, relax, and let the breath escape. Prepare yourself for the pain. Breathe in, let it out. Do it again. Again. Ask yourself how long you can keep doing this. Prepare yourself for the pain. Breathe in.

Madeline could scarcely sleep anymore. The once-automatic process of breathing now required her full attention, each inhalation an act of courage. When she'd left for the Sunlit Lands, she'd expected that she would come home stronger, healed, and would go back to school as a new person. Instead she'd come back broken, unable to get to school at all. Which, maybe, was for the best. The thought of going to chemistry class and seeing an empty chair where Jason should be, or not having Darius drive her to school or meet her after class, filled her with a sadness that tightened like a vise around her chest.

So she stayed home, tried to convince herself to get out of bed each day, to walk around the house, to play a game with Yenil, to sit with Shula and sip tea. She had outgrown school, anyway. Algebra wasn't much use when you were on a slow slide toward the grave. Madeline shuddered. Some days she felt at peace with the idea of dying, even wished for death

to come faster so the pain could finally be over. Other days panic gripped her, and she wanted to burst out of the house, break through a window if she had to, and run. Some animal instinct was convinced that if she could move fast enough, go far enough, she would escape her disease. On those days she gripped the arms of the easy chair and willed herself to relax, told herself the story of what was happening, where she was headed, assured herself that it was terrible, yes, but it was also okay. Okay to be sad, okay to be scared, okay to be dying.

The garden looked grey and lonely most days, and Madeline turned more and more often to her memories, eyes closed, sifting through all the beautiful things she had seen and done and wishing there were more to come. But she knew better. There was more life behind than ahead. She hadn't expected to grieve her own loss, but many days that's what she felt. Grief. Sorrow for the future that was no longer ahead of her, sadness for the people she would leave behind. So she would try to focus on today, this moment, to be present in the present, not living in the past or worrying about the losses piled up in front of her. She had to be realistic. There were things to be done with the time that remained.

She made preparations. Not as quickly as she would like, but she could accomplish so little in any one day. She had registered Yenil for school. Madeline's mother had insisted on paying for private school, saying Yenil's experience would be better there. They had no birth certificate, Social Security number, or green card, and Madeline wasn't even sure of Yenil's age. But it had been less trouble than she had expected. The principal had made comments, but the woman at the desk had told Madeline it was no problem, that this happened from time to time.

Shula thought Yenil was about seven, and that seemed right to Madeline. So this week she would enter second grade. It would be difficult. She had just begun learning to read. She looked different than the other kids. She had long, black hair, brown skin that seemed to have an almost chalky grey undertone, and a mess of silver scars that covered her arms and hands—the scars that matched Madeline's own. But it had been almost six months, and the little girl so often burst with joy and happiness that Madeline could almost forget Yenil had lost her parents, murdered by the Elenil in the Wasted Lands.

Then, three days ago, something strange had happened in the garden. Madeline had been in her chair by the window, taking in the manicured but lonely expanse of it: the pond, the fountain, the winding white path, the maple where she had met the Garden Lady, the bench her mother had placed near there, the little faerie villages that Yenil built along the shore of the pond, the hedge that enclosed it all. Then she'd seen it. Beside the path stood a tall stalk of flowers, purple bells crowded onto a single strand of green.

It stood at least four feet tall and was blooming out of season. Not only that, but it was a plant her mother had never seen in the garden and hadn't planted. Foxglove, her mother said. A plant that only flowers in its second year. It should not have been there, should not bloom in the fall. Sofia went out into the garden and cut it, and put it in the vase on the kitchen counter. "A volunteer," she said, with a note of disbelief in her voice.

Madeline's mother frowned, first at the flower and then at Sofia. "One of the neighbors must have planted some. Or a bird dropped the seed in our yard. It feels wrong, having this flower in this season."

The next morning, Madeline made her way to the back window, stopping to breathe when needed, taking small and careful steps. Six more stalks of foxglove stood, heavy with purple bells, near the maple tree. Sofia, astonished, brought them in and put them in the same vase.

Then, last night, Madeline had a dream. She stood in the kitchen, near the vase of foxgloves, and heard a ringing, clear and clean, like a tiny silver bell struck with a tiny silver hammer. One of the flowers shook, and Madeline held her hand beneath the opening of the bell (how did she know to do this?), and a faerie fell out of the plant, landing in the palm of her hand. The faerie was tiny and weak, curled in upon itself. It had clothes made from bits of leaves and acorns. It wore a small twist of wood on its forehead, a tiny crown. It was breathing but did not turn to look at her. Its mouth moved, but no sound came out.

Then, more ringing. A second bell. A third. Then all the bells, all at once, a hundred flowers ringing, and she knew each was a faerie arriving, entering her house through the flowers. All of them trying to say something, all of them failing, each of them wearing a crown. A green glow suffused the kitchen, and a sharp pain came from Madeline's arm. The seed

burned there, small and bright as a star. She put her hand over it, but the light shone through her fingers.

She woke gasping for air in the darkness of her bedroom and stumbled to the kitchen. She reached for the vase, but in her haste she knocked it to the floor, where the crystal shattered with a sound not unlike a thousand bells. She felt the cold wash of asphyxia moving through her, knew she would faint if she was not careful, and slid to the floor among the shattered glass and broken flower stems.

She could not avoid the pressing certainty that the flowers were a communication from the Sunlit Lands, that they were reaching out again. She wanted to be left in peace, left out of their wars and conflicts and injustices. She had nothing left to give. Her strength was gone, her breath, her hope, and she resented the Sunlit Lands intruding again, asking for her help. She was the one who needed help. A small part of her wanted to answer the summons, and that made her angry, because she was not able to do so. She turned her anger toward the Sunlit Lands. They knew this about her, knew she had left them with no intention of returning. She wanted them to leave her alone, leave Shula alone, leave Yenil alone.

She labored for breath, and when she was able, she gathered the foxgloves and pushed them deep into the trash can. She didn't have the strength to clean up all the glass. She dragged herself to the living room and slept beneath the garden window.

When she awoke, someone had cleaned up the glass and mopped up the water.

A hundred foxgloves grew in the garden.

She prepared herself for the ache in her chest and breathed.

# 1

## HUNTERS

*Where fear is planted, hate will grow.*

AN ALUVOREAN SAYING



Jason Wu had wedged himself into what he suspected might be a closet. It had never occurred to him that people who lived in a fantasy world would need a place to store their clothes, but of course they did. This particular closet was narrow and located in a dilapidated three-story house that had once been a mansion. There were holes in the roof, mold on the walls, missing stairs on the long, winding stairways. There were tapestries on some of the walls showing ancient battles between the Scim and the Elenil, among other things, and the hallways were lit with softly glowing stones in metal settings. Doors to certain rooms were missing, and others were locked. He had managed to find this closet, though, with its door still intact and unlocked, so he could slip inside and pull it quietly shut, certain his pursuers would not find him here, not given the size of this house.

Delightful Glitter Lady, Jason's kitten-sized rhinoceros, scabbled

impatiently on the floor beside him. Jason scooped her up and held her against his chest, trying to keep her quiet. He could hear the thundering footsteps of his pursuers outside. Dee let out a low whine, and the footsteps paused. “Dee,” Jason whispered, doing his best to make it clear she needed to be silent.

“I heard him,” a voice called. By now he recognized the distinctive sound of a Scim. He could tell by the guttural voice that the Scim had put on his war skin, a defensive magic all Scim had that allowed them to have thicker skin, heavier muscles, and a terrifying appearance.

Dee whined again. Jason pulled her tighter against him.

Outside the closet, all sound ceased.

Jason held his breath.

“In here?” another voice asked.

“I think so. I heard the unicorn.” The people of the Sunlit Lands thought Dee was a unicorn. They were a little sketchy on zoological categories. Unfortunately for Jason, their tracking skills were fully developed.

A third voice asked, “Have you checked the closet?”

“Hold,” said another voice, one Jason knew well. It was deeper, more resonant, than the others. Jason could practically feel it vibrating the house. It was the voice of Break Bones, the Scim warrior who had sworn to murder Jason and then kept incessantly reminding Jason about it. “I must be allowed to kill him. But each of you may say first what you wish to do with him when the door is opened.”

“I will stab him in the liver,” said the first voice, and cackles of laughter came from the others.

“I will break his arms,” said another.

Jason shivered.

“I will crush him with my hammer,” said the third.

Jason pushed as far back against the wall as he could, feeling with one hand for a crack, a hole, a way out. But there was nothing. He was trapped.

The door flew open, and three Scim shoved and pushed, all of them trying to get in the door at once. Dee let out a delighted squeak and struggled to get out of Jason’s arms.

The Scim piled on top of him, laughing and cheering as they pinned him to the floor and tickled him mercilessly. Jason begged for them to

stop, and after thirty seconds or so, Break Bones called the Scim children off. They bounced out of the closet, Delightful Glitter Lady gamboling at their feet.

“Six minutes,” Break Bones said. “It is the best you have done so far.”

“Is Bailey back yet?” Jason asked. Bailey was a Kakri woman, a powerful warrior from a desert tribe to the north. She also happened to be Jason’s fiancée, ever since he had accidentally proposed to her nearly six weeks before. The last several weeks, since they had made this broken-down mansion their base of operations, Bailey had taken to going on long patrols of the area.

Break Bones held out a wide hand and helped Jason to his feet. “She is safe, Wu Song. No one is trying to kill her.”

“She’d be safe even if people *were* trying to kill her.” You shouldn’t mess with Bailey.

“Everyone’s trying to kill *you*, Wu Song,” one of the children said.

“Not you, I hope,” Jason said, wrapping an arm around the nearest kid’s neck and wrestling him to the ground. Soon all three kids were grappling with him. These little monsters had been his almost constant companions since he, Bailey, and Break Bones had moved in here. Nightfall was the oldest, maybe ten or so, and he was delighted by Jason’s refusal to ever tell a lie. He liked to ask Jason’s opinion on awkward subjects in front of the adult Scim. Then came Eclipse, an eight-year-old girl who most often won these games of Hunter and Prey. Shadow, the youngest, was a boy of around six, with a nasty habit of biting.

“Enough,” Break Bones said. Jason and the kids stopped wrestling. “What did Wu Song do wrong?” Break Bones asked the Scim children.

“He got found!” Shadow shouted.

“He hid somewhere obvious,” Eclipse said.

“He made every person in the Sunlit Lands want to murder him.” Nightfall grinned.

“Hey!” Jason said, but it was true. The Elenil wanted to kill him for his role in crippling their leader, the archon (not to mention the extensive damage that Jason and his friends had caused to the archon’s palace, the literal pinnacle of Elenil architecture). The Scim wanted to kill him because one of their nobles had died so he could live. The Kakri were trying to kill him

as part of his engagement process to Baileyya. (It was a long story, but her whole family had a year to try to kill him before they got married.) There was even some group of people he had never met, called the Zhanin, who were upset because Jason had supposedly messed up the balance of magic or something. Still, it's not like *everyone* was trying to kill him. Those necromancers in the north didn't even know who he was . . . he hoped. And the creepy shape-shifters in the south had invited him to come to their land anytime. And the . . . well, he couldn't remember all the different people in the Sunlit Lands, but so far as he knew, only four groups were trying to kill him.

"Eclipse is correct," Break Bones said. "In a closet or under a bed—this is the first place most people will look. If you are being hunted, such places are to be shunned." He looked at Jason with pity. "For the Scim, at least. Humans are not known for their cunning in battle or survival."

"Hey!" Jason said again.

"Shadow," Break Bones said, "you are the prey now."

Shadow leapt to his feet and looked around shiftily.

"Run," Break Bones said, and the boy sped from the room. Break Bones gathered the two remaining Scim children and Jason in the center of the room. "This time you will hunt as individuals, not in a pack. Eclipse, you will take the ground floor. Nightfall, the second. Wu Song, the third floor and above."

"Why are we doing this again?" Jason asked.

"To help you survive," Break Bones said.

Oh. Fine. But it's not like Jason would be hunting anyone. If anything, he would be the one hiding, just like he was hiding now in this old house. It had belonged, once, to the family of Night's Breath, the Scim prince who had died so Jason could be healed of a mortal wound. Jason had come here hoping to make peace with that—and with Night's Breath's family. But as soon as Jason had arrived, Night's Breath's wife and children had left. The Scim prince's elderly mother still lived here, but she had made it clear she remained only to guard the house . . . from him. The children who remained were Night's Breath's nephews and niece. The kids had taken to Jason immediately, but the old woman showed no interest in him. Jason had to admit it hurt his feelings in a weird way. He was here, far from his

own family, and when he tried to connect to this woman, she shut him out. She even turned her head away any time he entered a room. Not that it surprised him. He was terrible at family stuff. His own parents hated him and wanted nothing to do with him, so why should a family that wasn't even human be any different?

Meanwhile, Jason and Baileyya had friends in danger, but Baileyya wouldn't agree to travel to help them. Their friend Kekoa had sent multiple messenger birds asking for assistance, but Baileyya said, "It is too dangerous at this time. One of my brothers is seeking our trail. Twice I have led him away. He is cunning and swift, and should he find us, I do not doubt he would succeed in killing you, Wu Song." Baileyya's brother was named Bezaed, and Baileyya spoke of him with reverence. He had killed one of their sister's suitors, and that was a Kakri man. He would make short work of Jason. At this point in the conversation, Jason had almost tried to explain to her about their accidental engagement. He had told her a personal story, not realizing the Kakri got engaged by sharing a story one had never told anyone else. Jason and Baileyya were a month and a half into their yearlong engagement now, and he didn't want to break up with her. But he didn't want their engagement to be based on a misunderstanding, either. Plus, it was weird to be seventeen and engaged to a terrifying warrior maiden from a fantasy world. She wasn't even human—at least, her golden skin and shining silver eyes argued for something not quite human.

"Wu Song," Break Bones said.

"Hmm?"

"It is time to hunt," the Scim said, shaking his shoulder gently. "The other children have already begun."

Jason glared at him. "The *other* children?"

Break Bones grinned, his yellow, tusk-like teeth protruding from his mouth. "Prove me wrong. Be the first to find Shadow."

"I will," Jason said forcefully. He strode out of the room and immediately had no idea what to do. Finding a half-pint Scim in a dilapidated mess like this place would be a challenge.

Delightful Glitter Lady romped down the hallway. Jason followed her into what must have once been a ballroom. Or maybe something else, because Jason thought a ballroom would be on the ground floor, but this

room was large, and there were many gigantic pieces of furniture covered with moldering cloths. The floor was tiled in blue and white, creating mosaics of the moon in various phases, but the tiles had been pried up in a bunch of places, revealing the wooden boards beneath.

Dee sniffed twice, then sneezed, almost knocking herself over. Jason had been keeping her at kitten size because he didn't trust the floors in this place. He worried she could fall through a rotten board in her larger sizes.

"I know you're in here, Shadow," Jason said. He could hear the uncertainty in his own voice. He shivered. Anything could be under these sheets. He yanked one off, letting it fall to the ground. It revealed a sort of low sofa with no arms. He pulled another sheet to discover a pair of chairs. He would have to uncover them all, he knew, because Shadow was exactly the kind of kid to hide under a moldy sheet if he thought it would give him even a minute's advantage in a game like this. There were at least thirty sheets. Jason sighed and got to work.

About ten sheets in, Dee made a high-pitched whine. "What is it, girl?"

She snorted and shuffled toward the back of the room. Jason smiled. She smelled Shadow. He bent down low and whispered, "Where's Shadow, girl? Do you smell him?"

Dee made a quiet, distressed honking, looking at another large sheet-covered item near the wall.

"In there?" Jason walked to the sheet. It had to be a cabinet or something like that. It was taller than Jason by several feet and nearly square in shape. He yanked on the sheet, and a cloud of moldy dust rained onto him. He sneezed, grumbling to himself, and tried to shake it off. He studied the wardrobe that had been revealed. It was made of some dark wood and looked ancient. A star had been carved into the front of it and painted silver. A slight shuffle came from inside. Shadow was exactly the kind of kid who would hide in a closet immediately after being told not to hide in closets.

Dee turned in a tiny circle, whining.

"What's the problem, girl?" Jason put his hand on the door. The kids liked to say all the terrible things they would do when they found him, delighting in making it sound as terrifyingly gory as possible. Since Jason didn't tell lies, his threats sounded lame in comparison. "When I find

Shadow, I am going to gloat about how I found him so fast and say that I'm better at Hunter and Prey!"

Jason flung the door open.

Shadow was inside.

A golden arm was thrown across the little Scim's neck. A young man with flashing silver eyes and loose, flowing clothes stood behind him. A knife point pressed against Shadow's cheek. Shadow struggled, and the man constricted his arms, pinning the Scim child.

"Be very quiet, Wu Song," the man said. "I have no desire to hurt this child. But if you call for help, I will." Jason opened his mouth, but the stranger's knife point pressed in, and a bead of blood appeared on Shadow's cheek. "I will take his eye if you scream."

"That is what a real threat should sound like, Wu Song," Shadow said. He had that defiant, almost nonchalant look he would get in his eyes right before he bit one of his siblings. Showing fear was not encouraged among the Scim.

"Well," Jason said, very quietly, "I did find you pretty fast. I am better at Hunter and Prey. Obviously."

The man's eyes flicked toward the room's entrance and then back to Jason. "There is room in here for one more," he said.

"Um," Jason said, "maybe if we were closer friends."

The man pushed on the knife again, and Shadow's eyes widened. Jason's hands clenched. He wasn't a warrior. He was terrible at Hunter and Prey. He needed to be protected, and he was useless with any weapon. But he wasn't about to let someone threaten a child and get away with it. He opened the second door of the wardrobe and stepped into it, Dee scrambling at his feet.

"Close the doors," the man said.

When the doors were closed, the stranger's silver eyes shone out with a powerful light. The man spoke, his voice steady and low. "My name is Bezaed. My mother is called Willow, and my grandmother, Abronia. I am here, brother, to kill you before you can marry my sister Baileyya."