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*
The twists keep coming in *The Crescent Stone*, a fabulous young adult fantasy with a great cast of characters. I particularly loved Jason, whose humor, logic, and honesty will make readers eager to follow him into a sequel. I found the Sunlit Lands a fantastically engaging place to visit and grew ever more delighted as I discovered more about each culture, their knotted histories, and how the magic worked. Fantasy fans will devour it and ask for seconds.

**JILL WILLIAMSON**, Christy Award–winning author of *By Darkness Hid* and *Captives*

From C. S. Lewis to J. K. Rowling, the secret magical place that lives alongside our own mundane world has a rich history in fantasy literature, and *The Crescent Stone* is a delightful tale that is a more-than-worthy continuation of that tradition. Matt Mikalatos weaves a rich tapestry that is equal parts wonder, thoughtfulness, and excitement, while being that most wonderful of things—a joyful and fun story. From the first page, you can’t help but root for Madeline as she stumbles about trying to navigate a future that is uncertain and fraught with pain. The beauty of Madeline as a character is that her journey is both all too familiar and yet entirely contemporary—the magical land that is her salvation is so much more. I don’t know where this series will go. All I know is that I don’t ever want it to end.

**JAKE KERR**, author of the Tommy Black series and a nominee for the Nebula Award, the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award, and the storySouth Million Writers Award

*The Crescent Stone* inspires thought on matters of compassion and privilege in a breathtaking and fun fantasy setting. This is a book that will leave readers empowered—not by magic, but by the potential within their own hearts.

**BETH CATO**, author of *The Clockwork Dagger*
PRAISE FROM READERS

Jason’s personality throughout the whole book brought a smile to my face the entire time.

[The book is about] injustice. The rich taking advantage of the poor. The powerful taking advantage of the weak. How desperate people will do desperate things for their loved ones. That all of our actions affect others around us. Change starts within.

I thought the story itself was very compelling and left me with the excitement of wanting to get to and through the next chapter so I could see what would happen next. . . . I thoroughly enjoyed reading the story and the cultural commentary that was throughout the book.

I love the parallel world aspect of this book. It was unexpected and kept the discussion of privilege and race a fresh perspective.

Overall, I loved the book. I thought the characters and the alternate universe were interesting. I loved the struggles of each character and the surprises within the Sunlit Lands.
Lewis wrote Narnia as a fun story that provided thinly veiled allegory and life lessons. Mikalatos does the same thing here for today’s generation. Tackling issues that divide the most rational of adults, Mikalatos shows all these issues with honesty, a story that keeps you engaged, and characters that keep you smiling.

*The Crescent Stone* is a rare book that shows incredible depth that is matched only by its fun and whimsy.

One of the most engaging stories I have ever read. Nonstop fun meets a conversation-starting masterpiece.
THE SUNLIT LANDS

No one ever talks about this island

Safe (more or less)

Court of Far Seeing

Pastisia

Necromancers - Hard Pass

Tolmin Pass

Kakri Territories


Ginian Sea

Wasted Lands

Gross

Shark People?! No thanks

Trees? Uh-probably fine?

Yuck! Lizards

The Southern Court

Aluvorea
THE SUNLIT LANDS

BOOK ONE
THE CRESCE NT STONE

MATT MIKALATOS
To Shasta
ARCHON THENODY—the chief magistrate; supreme ruler of the Elenil

BAILEYA—Kakri warrior who has come to Far Seeing to make her fortune; daughter of Willow, granddaughter of Abronia

BASILEUS PRINEL—one of the Elenil magistrates; in charge of celebrations, rituals, and communal events

BLACK SKULLS—elite fighting force of the Scim; there are three known members

BREAK BONES—a Scim warrior imprisoned by the Elenil

BRIGHT PRISM—a “civilized” Scim man who works in the archon’s palace

CROOKED BACK—spokesperson of the Scim army

DARIUS WALKER—American human; Madeline’s ex-boyfriend

DAVID GLENN—American human in service to the Elenil

DAY SONG—a “civilized” Scim man who serves Gilenyia

DELIGHTFUL GLITTER LADY (DEE, DGL)—a unicorn

DIEGO FERNÁNDEZ—Colombian human in service to the Elenil; has the power of flight

EVERNU—gallant white stag who works alongside Rondelo

FERA—Scim woman; wife of Inrif and mother of Yenil

FERNANDA ISABELA FLORES DE CASTILLA—Lady of Westwind; human woman; older than most humans in the Sunlit Lands

GARDEN LADY—mysterious old woman who has taken an interest in Madeline
GILENYIA—an influential Elenil lady; Hanali’s cousin; has the power of healing

HANALI—Elenil recruiter who invites Madeline to the Sunlit Lands

INRIF—Scim man; husband of Fera and father of Yenil

JASON WU (WU SONG)—American human who follows Madeline into the Sunlit Lands

JASPER—American human in the service of the Elenil; in charge of the armory

JENNY WU—Jason’s sister

KEKOA KAHANANUI—American human in service to the Elenil

KNIGHT OF THE MIRROR—human in his mid-forties; fights the Scim without magic

MADELINE OLIVER—American human in the service of the Elenil

MAGISTRATES—the rulers of the Elenil. There are nine of them, including the archon.

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

MALGWYN—half fish, half woman; harbinger of chaos and suffering; lives in the dark waterways surrounding the Sunlit Lands

MALIK—Darius’s cousin

MOTHER CROW—a Kakri matriarch

MR. GARCÍA—the gardener at Madeline’s home on Earth

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

MUD—Scim child who lives on the streets of the Court of Far Seeing

NEW DAWN—a “civilized” Scim woman who works for Gilenyia

NIGHT’S BREATH—a Scim warrior

POLEMARCH TIRIUS—one of the Elenil magistrates; the commander of the Elenil army

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

RAYO—the Knight of the Mirror’s silver stallion

RESCA—Hanali’s mother

RICARDO SÁNCHEZ—American human in service to the Elenil; healed by Gilenyia

RONDELO—Elenil “captain of the guard” in the Court of Far Seeing
RUTH MBWE—Zambian eight-year-old who lives in the Knight of the Mirror’s household

SHULA BISHARA—Syrian human in the service of the Elenil; has the power to burst into flame

SOCAR—a member of the city guard; Elenil

SOFÍA—the housekeeper in Madeline’s home on Earth

SUN’S DANCE—a “civilized” Scim man; advisor to the Elenil magistrates

THUY NGUYEN—Vietnamese human guard in Westwind

VIVI—father of Hanali, son of Gelintel

YENIL—a young Scim girl; daughter of Inrif and Fera
There must be something better,
I know it in my heart.

FROM THE GRYPHON UNDER THE STAIRS
BY MARY PATRICIA WALL
1

THE GARDEN LADY

*The king’s gardener spoke the secret language of all growing things. She knew the songs of the morning flowers and spoke the poems of the weeds. She spent long afternoons in conversation with the trees.*

FROM "THE TRIUMPH OF THE PEASANT KING," A SCIM LEGEND

The bench stood twenty feet away. Such a short distance. Such an impossible one. Madeline clung to the trellis of ivy that bordered her mother’s garden path as she tried to force air into her ruined lungs. Every gasp felt like pushing sludge through broken glass.

It was late morning on a Sunday, and she’d taken her inhaler an hour before—a quick, sharp breath of cold that disappeared much too quickly. She should have been in bed, flat on her back—not sitting, not standing, much less walking. But if the doctors were to be believed, it was one of the last spring Sundays she would ever see. Her chest and back hurt from the coughing.

The sunlight caressed her face. She couldn’t stand at the trellis forever, and the return path to the house was longer. A few steps set off the coughing
again. She pushed her fist hard into her ribs. She had dislocated them coughing three days ago, and they still didn’t feel right. Three steps brought her to the maple tree which crowded the path. Her vision dimmed, and her knees softened. She slid down the trunk, and when the coughing fit passed she dropped her head against the rough bark.

A hummingbird spun into the air beside her, its shining green body hanging to the right of her face. It chirped three times, then zipped to her left, its small, dark eyes studying her before disappearing toward the pineapple sage. The citrusy fragrance of the roses hung heavy across this part of the path. She took little half breaths, and it felt close to natural. The bees hummed as they visited the flowers. A squirrel hung off a sunflower by its hind legs, plucking seeds out of the wide circle of the flower’s face with its forepaws. This garden never quite seemed to follow the seasons . . . sunflowers blooming in spring instead of summer, roses year-round, frogs singing in the evenings no matter the weather. It was an oasis of near-magic in their suburban lot. Madeline used to build fairy houses along the “shore” of the fountain when she was a kid, using bark, leaves, and flowers to make tiny homes for make-believe friends.

Her mother had never cared for those little homes. She had planned the garden, a full acre of wandering paths, stone bridges, and small fountains. It was eclectic and a bit overgrown in places. Mr. García had done the planting and did the upkeep, too. Mom liked it a bit unkempt, and he worked to give it the impression of slight wildness. It didn’t look manicured, but there weren’t weeds, either. The fairy houses, Mom had said, looked like someone had forgotten to clean up after doing yard work.

Everything in its place, Mom always said.

Then again, Mom also wanted her house to “look lived in.” That meant strange habits like telling their housekeeper, Sofía, that she couldn’t immediately put an abandoned glass in the dishwasher. Once Madeline had come home and smelled fresh cookies, only to discover it was an air freshener her mother had bought from a Realtor. “To make it smell like home,” Mom had said, seemingly oblivious to the reality that she was, indeed, home, and that actually baking cookies would have been simpler.

A few more steps, Madeline decided, but halfway to the bench a racking army of coughs marched across her chest. She touched her lips, then
wiped the blood in the grass. With her eyes closed and the little half breaths coming again, she counted to twelve. When the jagged feeling in her chest passed, she lay flat and watched the clouds drifting in some high, distant wind. Air moved so easily for everyone but her.

It may have been a mistake, sneaking into the garden without telling anyone, with no way to call for help. She had chosen the perfect moment. Mom and Sofía had gone upstairs, something about washing the curtains. Dad was at the golf course, or work, or both. Her phone sat inside, turned off. The constant texts from Darius were making her feel guilty, but she had made a decision, and it was final. He couldn’t waste his life waiting for her. There wasn’t a cure. He needed to live his life. She needed to live what remained of hers.

Birds chirped in the maple. The warmer air made it easier to breathe. Going outside in the winter had been nearly impossible. And the sun felt nice. She closed her eyes. The tree shaded her face, but her hands and feet baked in the sunshine. Last week the doctor had said, “If there are things you want to do, you should do them.” He was trying to be encouraging, she knew that, but it sounded too much like “enjoy your last spring.” Her mom didn’t think she should sit out in the backyard because “she might catch cold,” as if that would change anything now.

And here Madeline was on her back, stranded and straining to breathe. So much for doing whatever she wanted.

The hummingbird wheeled overhead. It zipped back and forth over her, then shot off again, chirping incessantly.

“I see her, I see her.”

Madeline struggled to prop herself onto her elbow, looking for the source of the unfamiliar voice. It sounded like the voice of an old woman, but there was no wavering in it, no sense of weakness. It sounded, in fact, almost musical . . . as if the woman had been a professional singer once upon a time and the music had never left her. Still, she was trespassing in their backyard. A small thrill of adrenaline coursed through Madeline.

A woman made her way toward Madeline, hunched low, as if carrying a heavy load on her back. She wore a broad hat with pale violet flowers along the brim, and her grey hair stuck out like the straws of an overworked broom. Her patched and dirty skirt trailed the ground, and she carried a
canvas sack. Madeline couldn’t imagine how she’d gotten in through the hedge that ran around the garden.

Another coughing fit overcame Madeline. Her vision blurred at the edges, and she pressed hard against her chest.

“Don’t get up, dear, rest yourself. It’s the hummingbird who’s in such a hurry, but I saw you, don’t worry, I already saw.”

“Does my mom know you’re . . .” Madeline couldn’t finish the question.

“Of course not,” the old woman said. She settled next to Madeline with a great deal of groaning. She looked at the house, her eyes sparkling, a smile tugging at the edges of her lips. Her face was weathered and wrinkled, but her eyes shone like black stones in a clear river.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Madeline said. “My mom won’t . . .” She stopped to catch her breath. “She won’t like it.”

The old woman nodded thoughtfully, then smoothed her skirt. “Mothers rarely do, dear. Now, to business.” She reached into her sack and pulled out a small white button, crusted in dirt, then a recently unearthed bottle cap and a small roll of twine. “I would like to borrow these.”

“Borrow them?” Madeline pushed her hand against her chest again, trying to get a deeper breath. “I don’t understand.”

“They are yours,” the woman said. She raised her hand. “Don’t deny it. I found them in your garden. The birds brought me the twine, and the squirrel mentioned the button, but I dug it out with my own hands. The bottle cap—well, I’ve had my eye on that for several seasons.”

Madeline tried to call her mother, but she couldn’t shout loud enough. She coughed and coughed, and the old woman put a fleshy arm around her shoulders. “My mom,” Madeline managed between coughs.

“I won’t cheat you,” the woman said. “I only want to borrow them. In exchange, I’ll give you three favors and one piece of advice.” The hummingbird zipped in front of them again and chirped twice. The old woman made a shooing motion. “I know what time it is, go on with you.”

Maybe the old woman would go if Madeline gave her what she wanted, and it was only a few pieces of trash from the backyard. “Take them,” Madeline said.

The woman beamed at her and collected the bits of junk, scooping them
into her bag. “Thank you, dear. Thank you, thank you—and that’s three thanks for three items, so all has been done proper.”

Madeline wheezed a you’re welcome. She took a shallow breath. “Could you . . . Do you think you could ask someone to come out for me?”

The old woman looked to the house again, and her face crumpled. “Not for the wide world, dear.”

“For one of my favors?” She took the woman’s hand. “I can’t breathe.”

“The flowers sent word of that, they did. That’s why I came. But have they come to you? Have they offered you a bargain?”

Madeline gasped for breath. What was wrong with this woman—couldn’t she see that Madeline couldn’t breathe? The old woman stared at her with a steady gaze, waiting for an answer. Hoping the woman might help after she answered, Madeline shook her head. “Who? The flowers?”

“No, of course they haven’t. Not yet. I can’t get involved until then. Not much.”

Madeline lay back, coughing. The bright green leaves were waving in the branches. Clouds scudded in from the west, much too fast, covering the sun. She shivered and thought she could see the cloud of her breath when she exhaled. But it was too warm for that on this spring day. “Call my mother,” she said. “Or Sofía.”

The old woman’s face appeared over her. “No favors yet, my sweet seedling. But I can give you the advice now.”

Madeline closed her eyes. “Okay.”

The old woman squeezed her hand and whispered in her ear. But Madeline could scarcely hear her over her own racking cough, and when she could breathe enough to roll on her side, the sun was shining brightly again, and the old woman was stepping into the hedge, like a rabbit running into a thicket of thorns. She was gone.

Her mother’s cry of horror came from the direction of the house, and feet pounded along the garden path toward the shady space beneath the maple.
Madeline used to sing. In fact, she was lead soprano in the school choir last year, her junior year. She used to dance—ballet, contemporary, hip-hop, swing. She used to drive down the road with her friends, all of them shouting over one another, laughing at each other. She used to run track, her specialty being the marathon runs, where she could pace herself and feel her legs moving like pistons, her arms like pendulums, her whole body like the gears of a clock, ticking off the seconds to the finish line with precision. She had gone to State last year. She used to drive herself to school. She used to walk upstairs to her bedroom without stopping to catch her breath, clinging to the banister like a sea star suction cupped to a black rock.

She used to be able to breathe.

“I arranged your ride to school today,” Mom said, her voice making it clear this was a final decision. Madeline had used a similar tone of voice
when her parents tried to get her to stop going to class. Stay home, they said. You’re too sick, they said. But when she did stay home, her parents didn’t. Dad had work, Mom had activities, and Madeline ended up in bed, hacking her lungs out, sweating through her sheets, lonely and miserable.

Her mom took a cup of steaming coffee from Sofia and leaned against the kitchen counter, brushing an invisible speck of lint from her ice-blue athletic top.

“I thought you would take me,” Madeline said. She had taken her inhaler fifteen minutes before, and for the next thirty minutes or so she should be able to breathe with relative ease. It was like pushing water in and out of her lungs, but at least the air moved. Sofia had made pancakes this morning, Madeline’s favorite. Madeline had barely touched them. Like it or not, she wasn’t well, and the thought of trying to rally the energy to pretend she was while her friends drove her to school, blaring music and trying to cheer her up . . . She didn’t want that today. A silent, uncomfortable ride with her mom would be better.

“I have badminton this morning.” Of course. Mom wore her pleated white badminton skirt, her platinum hair pushed back just so with a white headband.

“I can set up my own rides, then. It’s not far for Ruby.”

Her mother raised her eyebrows. “It’s fifteen minutes out of her way. I texted Darius.”

“Mom!”

“It’s not right, the way you’ve been avoiding him.”

“Why the sudden concern for Darius?”

Mom tapped her nails against her mug, taking another sip before saying, “You dated the boy for over a year and then dropped him without an explanation. He deserves better than that.”

“Without an explanation? Who told you that?”

“People talk, Madeline. Your friends were worried, and they mentioned it to me. Poor boy. He was always good for you. You should spend more time with him.”

“You don’t even like him.”

Mom shook her head. “Not true.”

“Oh yeah, then why the big sit-down in the living room before prom?”
Mom’s lips pressed together, making fine lines branch along her mouth. She always did that when she was done with a conversation. “He’ll be here in ten minutes.” She blew on her coffee and shook her head. “I’ll see you after school.”

As her mother walked from the room, Madeline shouted, “Dad’s exact words were, ‘He won’t provide for you the way you’re accustomed to.’ If that was meant to convey approval, I missed it.” She hadn’t raised her voice like that in a while, and it cracked, followed by a deep-chested cough. She put her hands flat on the counter and tried to relax.

Sofía put a hot mug in front of Madeline. Steam infused with lemon and honey wafted to her. Sofía’s gentle hand brushed her shoulder. “For your breathing,” she said, and then she was off, cleaning the breakfast dishes.

“Thank you,” Madeline muttered. Sofía had a way of smoothing everything over in this house. The drink was warm and soothing, and Madeline told herself it worked, but reflecting on the conversation with her mom made her angry. There was no way one of her friends had told her mom anything about the breakup. Most of her friends barely checked on her now. It was hard to be friends with the dying girl. Oh, they responded to texts. Most of them did, anyway. But she couldn’t imagine any of them sitting down with her mom to talk about Madeline’s dating life. Or lack thereof. What did her mom know about Darius, anyway? Next to nothing. Madeline had dated him for over a year, and her mom hadn’t shown a moment’s interest. Now she was setting up a car pool with him? Whatever she was up to, it was infuriating.

Madeline’s backpack was by the door. Probably also Sofía’s doing. Everyone treated her like an invalid, which she basically was, but it still made her angry. Her mom made her angry. Embracing reality made her angry. She should stay home—that was reality. She shouldn’t wander in the garden alone—that was reality. She shouldn’t have a boyfriend—that was reality. It wasn’t fair to Darius to ask him to walk this road with her, wasn’t fair to keep him tied to her, like an anchor. Breaking up with him had been an act of love, a way to set him free from her illness, and now her mom was trying to undo that.

She waited by the door so Darius wouldn’t have an excuse to come in. His beat-up black Mustang pulled into the driveway, and he jumped out
to come get her at the door. He moved like an ice skater, the ground roll-
ing away beneath him like a moving walkway. Today he wore jeans and a
button-down shirt, with his letterman’s jacket tossed over it. She knew the
buttoned shirt was for her. She had told him on their first date that wearing
something other than a T-shirt might show he was at least a little bit excited.

She had met Darius in track. He was beautiful, with dark skin and an
angular face. He kept his hair short—she could tell he had probably shaved
it the night before—and when he smiled it was like the sun rising. That
wasn’t the reason she had started dating him, though. It was because of the
day she’d turned her ankle during track and he had noticed and turned
back for her. She’d told him to keep running, it was no big deal, she was
alright. He’d told her they were a team and he needed a breather anyway.
He’d walked beside her, gotten her back to the coach, stayed there while
they put on the ice, made sure she was okay, and checked in with her the
next day. After that, he was checking in on her every day. It started with
the ankle, but from there he wanted to know how she was doing in class,
with her parents, her friends, with life in general, and pretty soon they were
texting, calling, laughing, deep into each other’s lives. She asked him about
his cousin Malik, who was away at college. Darius helped her think through
how to respond to her parents when they were being difficult.

And when her breathing trouble started, and her mom took her to the
doctor, Darius offered to come. Madeline’s mom said no, that it wasn’t
right for “a stranger” to come to a doctor’s appointment, and anyway, it was
probably just a little infection. But when she and her mom came out into
the hospital parking lot after the appointment, Darius was leaning against
his car, reading a book, his cell phone in hand. He grinned and put the
phone to his ear. *Call me.*

Saying good-bye had been hard. It was the right thing to do, but it was
impossible, and now here he was, on her front porch, beaming. He reached
for her backpack.

Madeline flinched away. “I’m not broken.” She winced. She hadn’t
meant to come across like that, but seeing him here . . . There was a gravity
there, a desire to come back together, and she couldn’t allow that. It would
be too hard on him, too painful for her.

“I know,” he said, and bowed with a flourish. “But I . . . am a gentleman.”
She smiled despite herself. She debated for a moment, then unslung her bag and let him carry it. “How’s your breathing?” he asked, once they were settled in the Mustang and he was backing toward the road.

“Terrible. How did Mom get your number?”

He shrugged. “How does your mom always get whatever she wants? Called the principal maybe.” He tapped his hands against the driver’s wheel. “Listen, has your mom told you she’s been calling me the last month or so?”

“What?! No!”

He raised a hand. “Don’t be mad, she’s just worried. Ever since you . . . uh . . . Since we broke up.” He glanced at her, then back to the road. “Worried that you’ve given up.”

Madeline watched the neighborhood spin past. Her parents had made it clear they didn’t like Darius. What they hadn’t made clear was why. Dad said he wouldn’t make enough money, but that was years away, and what did he know? She and Darius were getting the same education, after all. He had grades nearly as good as hers, and if she wasn’t in honors classes, his GPA might even be higher than hers. She didn’t know if it was because they were both seventeen, or because Darius was black, or because he was at her private high school on a scholarship, but something about him didn’t meet Mom and Dad’s approval. And now Mom was texting him to check up on her? She gritted her teeth. Mom would hear about this when she got home. And “worried that she had given up”? She hadn’t given up—she was embracing reality. That was part of the stages of terminal disease, right? She had gone through denial. Through anger (well, maybe not all the way through). Now she was approaching acceptance. There was nothing more to be done. No more treatments, no miracle cures. She was walking a path her parents couldn’t go down, not really. She was alone, and no one else needed to suffer this with her: not her parents, not her friends, and certainly not Darius.

She turned his radio up and kept it loud until they got to school. Darius, without even asking, pulled up alongside her classroom instead of parking in the lot. So she wouldn’t have to walk so far, of course. She didn’t know how to explain to him how infuriating she found his thoughtfulness. Especially when she was already mad at him. She knew it wasn’t his
fault—everything made her angry—and she knew he wouldn’t understand if she tried to explain.

The car chugged to a stop, and the radio fell silent. Darius stared out the windshield. She knew that look. He was gathering his thoughts, trying to find words. She put her hand on the door handle, but despite herself, she paused. She missed hearing his voice. Missed talking about life, about things that mattered. “Maddie,” he said. She melted a little at that. She had missed hearing the way he said her name. “I got you something.”

He held a package wrapped in brown paper. He’d never been great at wrapping gifts, and this one was no exception: too much paper crookedly cut, with tape all over it and an attempt at a bow made with twine. It was obviously a book. She couldn’t take a gift, though. It wasn’t fair to him. Or to her, really. “Darius—”

“I bought it before we broke up, but it just got here. Shipped from England.” She didn’t say anything. “I know you’re going to love this, and I want you to have it.” He held it out. When she took it, their fingers brushed against each other.

Madeline pulled the tape loose and slid the book out. “Darius. I can’t believe this.”

It was a copy of her favorite book, *The Gryphon under the Stairs* by Mary Patricia Wall. It was the first of the Tales of Meselia, a series of children’s fantasy novels. The final novel had never come out, so it wasn’t as popular as other series, and not as easy to find, but Madeline loved it best. Darius had never read the Meselia books until she got sick. He had come to her house, sat on the floor while she curled on the couch, and read aloud the whole series, a couple chapters at a time. It had taken months to get to the end. She had loved seeing the books through his eyes, listening to him talk about them, hearing his thoughts and questions and insights.


She ran her hand over the cover. It had been released in 1974, and the picture on the front was of a gryphon crouched under a stairway, two children standing to the sides, stepping back in surprise. Ivy grew up around the outside of the picture, and the whole illustration had the look of a wood-block print.

Her anger drained away. She couldn’t believe it. She had always wanted
a first edition, though she had never mentioned it to anyone, not even Darius. Holding it in her hand now, feeling the texture of the cover, the weight of the book, seemed almost miraculous . . . like maybe things that were impossible could happen. She didn’t know what to say. She settled for “Darius, thank you so much.” Then, before the emotion choked off her words, she asked, “Where did you find this?”

He grinned. “I started calling bookshops in the UK. Little places that didn’t put their books online.”

She flipped open the book, shocked by the crispness of the pages. “It looks like no one has ever read this copy,” she said. “Like it’s untouched by human hands.”

“Nah,” Darius said. “Look at the title page.”

She looked from him to the book, then back at him. It couldn’t be. She turned the first page, a blank one, and there it was. The name Mary Patricia Wall was written in a neat, curved script in black ink, just beneath her typeset name. Mary Patricia Wall had held this book in her hands, had put her fingers on these pages to keep them open.

Tears cascaded down her face, and she couldn’t keep away from Darius anymore, couldn’t pretend, even for his own good, that she didn’t want to be with him. She let his gravity pull her in, leaning into his embrace, and he didn’t say anything, didn’t ask for anything, just wrapped his arms around her and let her cry. She cried for his thoughtfulness, for thankfulness to have someone who knew her so well, for fear of what was to come. She cried because she was angry and sad and afraid and loved and so, so tired. There was no way out, no solution to her illness, but at least there was this, a moment of loving human touch, a gift from someone who knew her well.

The warning bell for first period rang.

The crying set off a minor coughing fit. She sat up, bracing herself on the dashboard. Darius put a comforting hand on her shoulder. When it passed, she wiped her eyes with her sleeve and slipped the book into her backpack.

“‘There must be something better, I know it in my heart,’” Darius said, quoting a line from the book. The main characters, siblings Lily and Samuel, are standing at the space beneath the stairs, and the wall has fallen away, and there is a swirling of color in the space. The gryphon has
disappeared into it, and beckons Lily and Samuel to follow. “And the only impossible thing is that I would leave you.”

Madeline wiped her eyes again, then replied with Samuel’s words, “If we’re together, I won’t be afraid.”

Lily’s next line was, “Then take my hand, Samuel, and let us see what beautiful things await,” but before Darius could say it, Madeline took his hand and squeezed, and before she could stop herself or think about what it meant or what the consequences might be, she leaned toward him and kissed his cheek.

She pulled away, the heat from Darius’s hand familiar and comfortable. She looked into those dark-brown eyes, so deep they were nearly black. It was like looking into the night sky if all the stars blinked at once. It had been weeks since she had looked at him like this, and she wanted him to reach out, to touch her cheek.

Instead, he opened his door and came to get her. He walked her to class, her backpack on his shoulder, his hand on the small of her back, ready to catch her if she fell. Did she look as weak as that?

“If you need to go home early, text me,” he said. His words were so gently delivered that she didn’t get angry at the suggestion she couldn’t make it through the day.

“You’re going to be late for class,” she said.

He grinned. “Impossible.” Then he ran toward his classroom in that loping, long-legged stride of his, leaping like a deer over a planter, so full of life and joy and breath.

“You’re car,” she gasp-shouted.

He changed directions immediately, sprinting, a sheepish look on his face. “I might be late to class!” he yelled back, just as the bell rang again.
Humans! Ye shall live upon another earth,  
a people of science and dust.  
FROM “THE ORDERING OF THE WORLD,” AN ELENIL STORY

After what had happened to his sister, Jason Wu had made a decision. He would never keep quiet about what he saw again, and he would never lie. No matter the cost, he would speak up and speak truth.

Sure, he’d gotten detention over the whole Principal Krugel fiasco, but his toupee was on backward. Maybe Jason shouldn’t have mentioned it in front of the football team. He almost certainly should not have repeated it over the school intercom. He could still hear the principal’s shrill voice shouting, “JASON WU!” from his office. That could have been the end of it, but when Jason refused to apologize or retract his statement, the principal had taken to the intercom to explain he did not wear a toupee.

That didn’t excuse what Jason had done next. He saw that now.

Seeing Principal Krugel in front of the whole school at the football rally
the next day, his ridiculous fake hair sitting on top of his head like a shag carpet, had driven Jason right to the edge of madness. Then Darius Walker had shouted to Jason, “Krugel’s hair looks real to me! What are you going to do?”

Jason had said, “Pull his toupee off,” meaning it as a joke.
But then he thought, *I promised never to tell a lie.*

Taking off the man’s toupee wouldn’t be good.
But if he didn’t, he was a liar. Again.
It was a moral conundrum.

Anyway, it had earned Jason detention and earned Principal Krugel the nickname Principal Cue Ball.

He had received a second detention when the principal called his parents, put them on speakerphone, and made Jason explain what he had done. When the principal said there had been a mini riot at the assembly, Jason's mom asked if it was true. Of course Dad didn’t say anything. He hadn’t spoken—well, hadn’t spoken to Jason—since things had happened with Jenny. Before he could stop himself, Jason said, “Yes, everyone was wigging out.” Even that didn’t get Dad to speak up. It had, on the other hand, turned Principal Krugel’s face a shade of red Jason had never seen before, so it wasn’t a complete loss.

So he wasn’t trying to be insensitive when his chemistry partner, Madeline Oliver, came in to class looking like someone had given her a swirly. “You look terrible,” he said. “Your mascara is running everywhere. Your eyes are red.” All true.

Madeline choked out a sarcastic thanks, then started coughing. She coughed a lot. He knew she was sick. She didn’t talk about it, ever. Everyone at school acted like it was a big secret, but he noticed that meant they couldn’t take care of her, either. Couldn’t ask how she was doing, couldn’t make sure she was taking care of herself. That’s why he’d asked to be her chem partner. She didn’t know that—she had been at the doctor the day they picked partners. Besides, she was better at chemistry than he was. So they were watching out for each other, in a way. That’s what partners do.

“You sound terrible too. Should you even be in class?” Jason spun a pencil in one hand, twirling it like a baton.

“I can’t skip school all the time.” She slammed her bag down and slid onto a stool, leaning against the counter.
“You already skip half the time,” Jason said. “You’re the worst lab partner I’ve had. Besides, it’s a sub today. We’re probably doing some idiotic worksheet.”

“You just described half of high school,” Madeline said. “Who are you to say I look terrible, anyway? Your clothes look like they’re on day three of being picked up from your floor.”

“Day four,” Jason said. He hadn’t combed his hair, either, and he knew it went five directions at once. Only one of his shoes was tied. The other one he had overknotted yesterday and couldn’t get it undone. He had actually worn his left shoe to bed last night. He watched Madeline coughing and digging through her backpack for her textbook. She really shouldn’t be here. She didn’t even notice the substitute call her name.

“Here,” he said.

The substitute looked at Jason over the top of his glasses. “Your name is Madeline Oliver?”

“Nah, it’s my partner, but she’s busy coughing up a lung. She needs to go to the office.”

The sub regarded Madeline skeptically. He had a big nose and a wreath of brown hair that stuck up on the sides. He looked like an angry koala bear. “It’s not my first time as a substitute,” he said.

“I’m fine,” Madeline said, still coughing.

“Try not to distract the class,” he said, and continued calling roll.

Jason spun on his stool. He knew what was coming. He leaned over and whispered to Madeline, “He’s going to read my Chinese name, I can feel it. And he’s gonna say it wrong. I hate this guy already. Maybe you should take your inhaler.”

“Already took it,” she said, gasping for air between words.

He opened her purse—she tried to stop him, and yes, he knew you shouldn’t dig in a girl’s purse—and pulled out her inhaler. He shook it three times and handed it to her. She took a deep puff, her eyes shut. She leaned on the counter, panting.

“Song Wuh,” the substitute said.

“Jason,” he called. “It’s Jason.”

“Says Song Wuh here.”

Jason sighed. Should he correct the guy? He got so tired of correcting
people when they said his name wrong. “With Jason in parentheses, right? And it’s pronounced *woo*, and the *o* in Song is long, like in *hope*. Wu Song, that’s how you say it—family name first. It’s not that hard. Seriously.”

The substitute wrote something on his paper. “Ah. Jason. Yes, the principal mentioned you.”

The principal *mentioned* him? It made him sound like some sort of troublemaker. One little incident with a man’s fake hair and you’re branded for life. Was it in his personal record? Would it follow him to college? *Make sure this boy never gets near a toupee—he will take it and run around the gym, waving it like a hairy flag.* Oh yeah. He had done that, too. He hadn’t run it up the flagpole, though. That had been someone else.

“Is my name so hard?” Jason asked Madeline. “Wu Song is famous, too. Killed a man-eating tiger with his bare hands. Doesn’t seem like it’s asking too much to get my name right, especially when I’m named after a famous guy.”

“Your life is hard,” Madeline gasped. She had her phone out and was texting someone.

“It’s like mispronouncing Robin Hood.”

“Jason.” Her body listed to one side, like a sinking ship. She grasped at the counter, trying to keep herself upright. Jason grabbed her sleeve, pulling her toward him, pulling her upright, and then she was slipping, falling. Her arm slid out of her jacket, and she half rolled, half fell onto the floor, her head knocking against the polished cement.

Jason jumped off his stool, knocking it over with a clang. He threw Madeline’s stool out of the way and knelt over her. He asked if she was okay, but she didn’t answer.

“Mr. Substitute,” Jason shouted. “Call an ambulance.”

“You two stop messing around.”

“She’s actually sick,” Jason shouted, and other kids in the class chimed in, telling the sub it was true, that she had some lung sickness or something.

“I’ll call the office,” he said, but he was still standing there, staring.

Madeline’s eyes rolled back into her head, and her skin went pale. Jason put his hand on her face. Cold and clammy. She wasn’t breathing. A knot of panic sat in his chest, small and cold as her skin. For a second he was looking at Jenny’s face, still and pale, but he shoved the image out of his
mind, hard. He needed to think about right now. He tilted Madeline’s head back and got ready to do chest compressions.

One of the other kids said, “Dude, you’re not going to—”

“Shut up,” Jason said, and started chest compressions.

He pinched her nose shut, sealed his mouth over hers, and breathed two quick breaths into her mouth. Her chest rose, she coughed, and she started to breathe again.

“Her color is coming back,” one of the kids said.

The substitute stood there at the end of the row, the stack of worksheets in his hand. His mouth was open, and his glasses had slid down his nose. He cleared his throat. “Calm down, class. We’ll—”


This was taking too long. The sub was in shock or something. Jason pointed at a kid in the row in front of him. “You. Kid with the braces. Call 911. Tell them we’re headed to the hospital.”

He leaned over Madeline. “It’s gonna be okay. Keep breathing.” He slipped one hand under her neck, grabbed the belt loop on her jeans with the other, and lifted.

The classroom door slammed open, and Darius stood on the other side, panting. “What happened? She just texted me.”

“Help me get her to the car,” Jason said.

The security guard in the parking lot said something to them, but Jason rushed past. Darius shouted an explanation, and then he helped sling Madeline into Jason’s sports car and put her seat belt on.

“Where are you taking her?”

“She can’t breathe, Darius, where do you think? The hospital. Get in the car or step back.” Why were people such idiots during times of pressure? The car settled under Darius’s weight as he got in the back. “Drive,” he said.

Jason peeled out of the parking lot and screeched onto the road.

“Red light!” Darius yelled.

Jason punched it through the intersection.

“An accident won’t get us there faster,” Darius said.

“This isn’t driver’s ed,” Jason said. “I know what I’m doing.” He glanced
at Madeline. She was coughing up blood now. There’s no way he was going to stay quiet, no way he was going to wait for an ambulance. No way. “Hang in there, partner.”

She coughed until she fainted. Jason laid on the horn and sped toward the hospital.
And he placed a tower in the center of the Sunlit Lands and called it Far Seeing.
FROM “THE ORDERING OF THE WORLD,” AN ELENIL STORY

It felt like someone had put cinder blocks on her chest. Transparent tubes snaked into her nostrils. A red plastic band clung to her wrist. Sensors were stuck to her chest, an IV line dripped into her left arm, and a clip on the finger of her right hand monitored oxygen levels. Her lips were dried and cracked.

The hospital again. More and more of her life found its way here. Appointments, tests, paperwork, treatments. Meetings to talk about tests and treatments. The harsh lights, the antiseptic smell that came even through her oxygen tube, the incessant beeping and nurses checking in and noise. She hated finding herself here. Hated that she couldn’t make it through one day of school, hated the reminder yet again that she should just stay home like a good girl, hidden away and waiting, alone, for the end to come.
Darius was in a chair beside the bed. Jason was sitting in a windowsill to Darius’s left, half an arm’s length away. Even with only two visitors, the room felt crowded.

Darius touched her hand gently. “You’re awake.”
Madeline looked at her hospital gown. “How—?”
“They cut off your clothes,” Jason said. “Don’t worry, they kicked us out until you were dressed.”
“Are my parents here?”
“Not yet,” Jason said. “The hospital called.”
“I texted your mom,” Darius said.

Jason was chomping on an apple. “When I said you looked terrible, I didn’t realize how low the scale goes, you know? You looked pretty good earlier, all things considered.”

Darius punched him in the arm.
“What was that for?”
Madeline asked, “What did the doctor say?”
Darius’s brow furrowed. “You don’t remember?”
“Was I awake?”
“You told them we could stay,” Jason said. “And that it was okay for us to hear, um, your diagnosis.”

Madeline blushed. She hadn’t really told the other kids at school what was going on. Darius knew the basics. Jason, weirdly, seemed to have figured it out, but they never talked about it. She didn’t want to talk about it at school, didn’t want to answer the endless questions. What’s interstitial lung disease? Is it common in teens? Will it kill you?

Scarring in the lungs. Not really. Probably, yes.

Madeline’s scarring was advancing. Every hour, every minute, it progressed through her lungs, like an army gaining a few yards each day. Where the lungs scarred, they didn’t process oxygen. Eventually she’d run out of usable lung tissue, and she’d asphyxiate. It was only a question of how long. All the doctors’ appointments and medications and oxygen tanks were to prolong her life, not save it. She was on the list for a lung transplant, high on the list, actually—no previous illness, a fatal disease that wasn’t responding to treatment, she was young. But every time a donation came up, something got in the way. The tissue went bad. Another donor somehow
jumped in line. Her application was mysteriously deleted. It was like an unseen hand kept intervening, frustrating any chance of her getting better. And now she was getting so weak, the doctor wasn’t sure she’d survive the surgery. She cleared her throat, which felt raspy and raw.

“Could I get a drink?” Madeline asked. “Maybe some ice chips.”

“I’m on it,” Jason said, stepping away from the window.

Darius said, “Could you bring her something soft to eat, too, like some applesauce?” Jason nodded and scooted out of the room.

The oxygen tubes in her nose rubbed, and her arm felt stiff and uncomfortable where the IV entered. Darius leaned in close and squeezed her hand.

A blinding light hit her full in the face. Her first thought was that it was the kind of light they put in an operating room, the bright white light surgeons use, but it wasn’t in one place, it seemed to come from all over. Her second thought was that she was passing out or something, but she knew what that felt like, had experienced the light-headed, rolling blackness more than once, and this wasn’t that.

Then the light started to burn, and she could feel it searing her skin. It seemed to be coming from the end of the bed, so she turned away, but even with her eyes shut, that white light pierced her eyes, as if her eyelids weren’t even there.

The light disappeared as quickly as it had come, leaving the room dim and Madeline shivering in the sudden cold. Darius’s hand still held hers, but it was rigid, though still warm. He was leaning toward Madeline but not moving or blinking. She slipped her hand away from his, and he didn’t move, didn’t so much as breathe.

“Darius?” What was happening? Was this a hallucination brought on by lack of oxygen? She felt coherent, but her brain couldn’t process what she was seeing. Her own heart ratcheted up, beating faster. She took a deep breath, ready to call for help, and instead gave an involuntary shout when she looked toward the door.

At the foot of her bed stood a tall, slender man. He had the palest skin she had ever seen, almost the color of platinum, with a bluish undertone. His silver-white hair was fine and long, falling to his shoulders. He wore a brocade jacket with pale-pink roses worked into the silk and veins of gold
shooting through the design. Stiff lace blossomed from his sleeves, nearly covering his gloved hands, and more lace covered his neck, where a white cravat was tied with perfect grace. He inclined his head to her.

“It is customary you should bow,” the man said. “But there will be time to learn such pleasantries. I am called Hanali, and I have come as a representative of the Sunlit Lands.”

Madeline tried to speak but found herself choking instead. It was like a dream, but in a dream she wouldn’t be in so much pain, would she? Darius still hadn’t moved. She managed to get a breath and said, “What did you do to him?”

The slim man looked at Darius as if seeing him for the first time. “Ah. Your friend is unaware of our conversation. After our business concludes, he will continue about his day.”

Something about the strange man reminded her of the lady in the garden. Madeline didn’t know if these were hallucinations or fever dreams or real, but the woman had gone away when Madeline gave her what she wanted. Maybe the same would be true for this strange man. “What do you want?” she asked.

“More importantly, child, what do you want?”

Annoyance flared up in Madeline. She gestured to the tubes coming out of her body. “Nothing you can give me.”

Hanali reached into Darius’s jacket pocket, slid out his cell phone, and dangled it in front of Darius’s face. With a flourish he released the phone, and it stayed there, unmoving, floating in the air. “Which is easier? To stop time or heal lungs?” Hanali asked.

Jason walked through the door. “Stop time? Huh. Is that what happened?” He had a cup of ice in one hand, and his arms were full of pudding cups. “The nurses stopped talking all at once. I thought it was performance art.”

“Starless night,” Hanali said. The way he said it, it sounded like a curse. “How are you unaffected by my spell?”

Jason dumped all the pudding cups on Madeline’s bed and handed her the cup of ice. He shrugged. “The world is full of mysteries. Why are you cosplaying at a hospital?”

Hanali gaped at him. “You can see and hear me and move about.”
Jason tore open a pudding. “I forgot spoons.”
“This has never happened in my lifetime.”
“Wait!” Jason dug around in his pockets. “Here they are!” He held one out to Madeline. She shook her head, popping an ice chip in her mouth and sucking it.

Hanali’s eyes narrowed. “Did an old woman speak to you? Did a stranger approach you in a garden?”

Madeline’s ears perked up. He knew her, then, the Garden Lady. Had she spoken to Jason, too?

Jason shoveled some pudding into his mouth. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, dude.”

“Remarkable.” Hanali turned reluctantly away from Jason. He tugged on the frilled cuffs of his sleeves, straightening them. “I am here, Madeline Oliver, to offer a bargain. In exchange for one human year of service to the Elenil, lords of the Sunlit Lands, we will cast a magic spell that will heal your lungs. You will be able to dance and run and sing again.”

Madeline’s chest ached. She didn’t understand everything the strange man was saying, but she had caught the basics. A year of work in exchange for healing. “I won’t last a year,” she said. She glanced at Jason. He had paused, another spoonful halfway to his mouth. “The doctor said three months. Maybe a little more.”

“We would, of course, give you the magic as soon as our terms were agreed upon. You can have your breath returned to you this very day. You will come to the Sunlit Lands, and in one human year we will return you to this place, permanently healed.”

Jason said, “Wait, why are you going to school if you only have three months to live?”

“My friends are there,” Madeline said. And then, to Hanali, “Explain this again. You want me to serve . . . the Alelni?”

“Elenil. They are the lords of the Sunlit Lands.”

“Hawai’i, I’m guessing,” Jason said.

The strange man scowled. “The Sunlit Lands are not part of Earth—they are another world. Smaller than Earth, but full of magic. No doubt you’ve read of such places. Faerie lands.”

Faerie lands. Something about the way he said it set off all the associa-
tions in her mind, all the places she knew and loved: Meselia in the books of Mary Patricia Wall. Narnia. Hogwarts. Earthsea. How many times had she pushed her hand against the back wall of a wardrobe or stood in front of a painting wishing she could jump into it? How often had she wished for a magic ring or button, a hidden passageway, a garden gate grown over in ivy that would transport her to some magical land? She thought of the hobbit Samwise Gamgee and his aching desire to meet the Elves, and she, too, felt a piercing longing to walk among a strange and beautiful people. She thought of Lily and Samuel standing at the portal beneath their stairs, watching the color-swirled space where the gryphon had gone. They had been afraid and just scarcely believing. She remembered Lily’s words in *The Gryphon under the Stairs.* “There must be something better, I know it in my heart,” Madeline whispered, and for the first time in many months she felt a flutter of hope. Every book she had read in her entire childhood, every book she still cherished, had prepared her to believe in a moment like this.

Jason spoke up, his mouth still full of pudding. “Sounds like Harry Potter–land. Which means more school. If you want to learn magic, it apparently involves a lot of school.”

“It is more like Mount Penglai,” Hanali said. “Or Tír na nÓg.”

Madeline tried to mask her excitement. She wanted to leap up and take Hanali’s hand and do whatever was necessary to go to these Sunlit Lands, but she needed more information. “Why do the Elenil need people like me?”

Hanali smiled, and his teeth were white as seashells. “The Elenil scour the world for people in need—people without food, or in the midst of a crisis, or dying. If the magic of the Elenil can help, we make an exchange. Some small token of their lives in exchange for a bit of magic. Your world has precious little magic, so our help is keenly felt.”

“Sounds too good to be true,” Jason said, opening a second pudding cup. Madeline shushed him. “What is it like? The Sunlit Lands?”

A smile spread over Hanali’s face. “In the heart of the Sunlit Lands lies the capital city of the Elenil. The Court of Far Seeing is bright and beautiful. All things fair and wonderful are there. There is music in the city squares and art upon the streets. No one is hungry, and the white towers fly crimson flags in the warm breeze from the Ginian Sea. Above the city
stands the Crescent Stone, bright beacon of our magic, a reminder of the good things available to those who inhabit the blessed city.”

“If this place is so great,” Jason said, “why do you need us? You need janitors or something?”

Hanali glared at Jason. He yanked on the lace at his cuffs, pulling them down over his hands. “A corrupted people called the Scim live to our south. They call themselves servants of darkness, of shadow, and they wish to tear down the Court of Far Seeing. We are in need of your help in this conflict.”

Madeline coughed for a minute, holding up a finger to pause the conversation. “So . . . what exactly is the agreement? What do I have to do?”

“You agree to serve the Elenil in our war against the Scim for one human year. In exchange we will heal you. You must leave your friends and family behind. You will not be able to say good-bye or explain your absence.”

Another coughing fit overcame her. When a coughing attack came, she couldn’t think about her mother or father, her friends, Darius, school, the way she liked to wake in the morning and lean her head on her windowsill, listening to the birds in the garden. She could only think about the way her chest constricted and squeezed every molecule of oxygen out of her body, of the blackness that pressed in against her eyes, and the burning pain that burst through her every cell. She knew how her life would end . . . like this, a million minuscule knives in her chest. One day, she would inhale, pull as hard as she could with her ruined lungs, and there would be nothing. Just thrashing and panic and death. There would be no peaceful final smile, no gentle bedside farewells. Wouldn’t this deal be better than that? No good-byes, but she wasn’t going to get good-byes when she coughed herself to death, either, not really. And she’d be back in a year. Panting after the coughing fit, she tried to wheeze out an answer, but Jason spoke up first.

“No offense,” he said, “but this is one of those candy-and-strangers situations.”

“No offense,” he said, “but this is one of those candy-and-strangers situations.”

“Not having candy and not being able to breathe are quite different,” Hanali said.

Jason said, “You’re recruiting desperate people who won’t ask questions. What’s your angle?”

Hanali’s smile remained on his face, but his eyes bored into Jason. His
words came out clipped and perfectly enunciated. “A human year of assisting in the war against the Scim in exchange for healthy lungs for the rest of her life. The conditions are plain.”

Jason sat at the foot of Madeline’s bed, putting himself between her and Hanali. “It’s a bad idea, Madeline. You could die in the war. You won’t be able to say good-bye to your friends and family. Also, I don’t trust this guy.”

Madeline shook her head. Jason didn’t understand. She didn’t expect him to. How could he know what it was like to stand on the precipice of death, never knowing if this was the last time you’d pull a breath? Sometimes she was terrified she’d go faster than the doctor said, but if she was being honest, there were also days when she was afraid she’d last longer than the doctor said. She couldn’t take this pain, this slow descent. If there was a way out of this sickness, what price would be too much? “What’s the worst that could happen, Jason?”

“You could be eaten by a dragon.” He looked at Hanali. “Are there dragons?”

Hanali raised an eyebrow. “Dragons?”

“Giant lizards that breathe fire? They have wings. Hoard gold. Eat people.”

“No, we do not have ‘dragons’ in the Sunlit Lands.”

Jason shrugged and looked back at Madeline. “You could get gored to death by a unicorn.”

She almost laughed at that. “Better than suffocating.”

“It’s a high price,” Jason said, and for a moment she saw his genuine concern. No bravado, no jokes, just a sweet, almost brotherly desire to protect her. He seemed to think that she didn’t understand the cost, but it was Jason who didn’t understand. She knew the cost. She had been paying it every day since her diagnosis. She was on a journey of saying good-bye, of leaving everything behind. Jason didn’t understand that Hanali wasn’t asking for anything that wouldn’t be taken from her anyway. But he was offering a chance—maybe it was a gamble, maybe it was a bad deal in some way she couldn’t see, but it was a chance at least, which was more than she had now—a chance at life. No one else was offering her that.

“I’ll be able to breathe the entire year?”

Hanali nodded gravely. “So long as you follow the agreement, yes. With
the exception of the Festival of the Turning—an Elenil festival day without magic. Other than that, you will breathe freely.”

“So long as I follow the agreement,” Madeline repeated. “How does it work? What do I have to sign?”

Hanali pulled a thin bracelet from his jacket. It had a tiny, clouded jewel set in it and intricate patterns etched into the silver. “No signature. Only slip this onto your left wrist, and we shall be on our way. The power of the Crescent Stone will seal our bargain.”

She turned the bracelet over in her hands. It was lighter than she expected, and delicate. Was she hallucinating? The whole thing was so surreal. But if it was real—and it did seem real—she could be healed. She’d have to leave her life behind for a year, but that was worth it, right? She imagined Darius waking from this strange moment of frozen time to find her gone. Her parents. Her father would sue the hospital into the Stone Age. Her mom would weep and scream and yell and never be the same.

She wished Darius could move. He still sat beside her, frozen and unseeing. She wanted to talk it through with him, ask his opinion. In these last couple years, even before they were dating, he had been there for her so many times, had talked about everything with her. She had been trying to say good-bye, trying to make some distance, but now she wanted to hear his steady, reasoned voice weigh the pros and cons. He would understand, she thought, the excitement of this magical land. He had often said, “If only there was magic, if only there was some way out of this . . .”

So maybe Jason was right. She should think about it. Consider it. For a few minutes at least. She shouldn’t just take this deal and jump headfirst into some world, some war, she didn’t understand.

“I want to think about it,” she said, choking it out before another bout of painful coughing.

Hanali shook his head. “Do not contemplate too long,” he said. “There are others who are suffering, and we can take our offer to them should you reject it.”

“If I decide to . . . to come to the Sunlit Lands, how do I let you know?”

Hanali looked at her carefully. “The Sunlit Lands exist alongside your
Earth. Not below or above, but beside. Parallel. You have but to leave this life behind and follow the narrow road that opens before you.”

“Second star to the right,” Madeline said, her coughing growing worse. “And straight on till . . . till morning.”

The stranger crossed his arms, plucking at the lace at his wrists. He reached out and took the bracelet, tucking it into some concealed pocket in his sleeve. “Send your strange friend to find me should you change your mind.”

“Yeah, yeah, we got it,” Jason said. “Now you heard the lady, get out of here. I’m allergic to all that lace.”

“Beware,” Hanali said. “When time crashes in on you again, you will be reminded of your weakness. The shock of reentering normal time can cause great stress on the human body.”

Hanali spun and walked from the room, and the world came to life again. Darius’s phone clattered to the floor and he shouted in surprise, looking down in confusion to find Madeline’s hand no longer entwined with his.

Madeline’s breath left her completely, and her heart rate spiked. She fought to stay conscious. The machines attached to her blared shrill alarms. “Maddie?”

It’s okay, she tried to say. It’s going to be okay. But she couldn’t speak, couldn’t draw a breath. Her eyes met Jason’s.

“She’s turning blue,” Darius said, pushing Jason back. “Give her room.” A doctor hurried in, close behind the nurse. “You kids get out,” the doctor said. “Right now.”

“We don’t have time to argue,” the nurse said, speaking over their objections. “If you want us to save your friend, get out now.”

“Jason,” she managed to wheeze. “Bracelet.” She didn’t have any choice, did she? She didn’t have time to think this out, to weigh the consequences. She was drowning. Hanali hadn’t offered her a choice, he had offered her a life vest.

She needed the bracelet. There was no guarantee the doctors could do anything for her in this moment. Tears squeezed out of her eyes, her hands clutched the bedsheets, her back arched up as her body cast about desperately, trying to find breath. Jason paused in the doorway and looked back...
at her. Had he heard her? Why wasn’t he running to get Hanali? Did he understand how serious this was? She tried to lift her hand, tried to show him her wrist, but then a nurse shut the door, and there was only the shriek of the alarms and the struggle to breathe.