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THE SUNLIT LANDS SERIES

OUR LAST CHRISTMAS TOGETHER



MATT MIKALATOS

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A CHRISTMAS TALE FROM
THE SUNLIT LANDS

MATT MIKALATOS



wander
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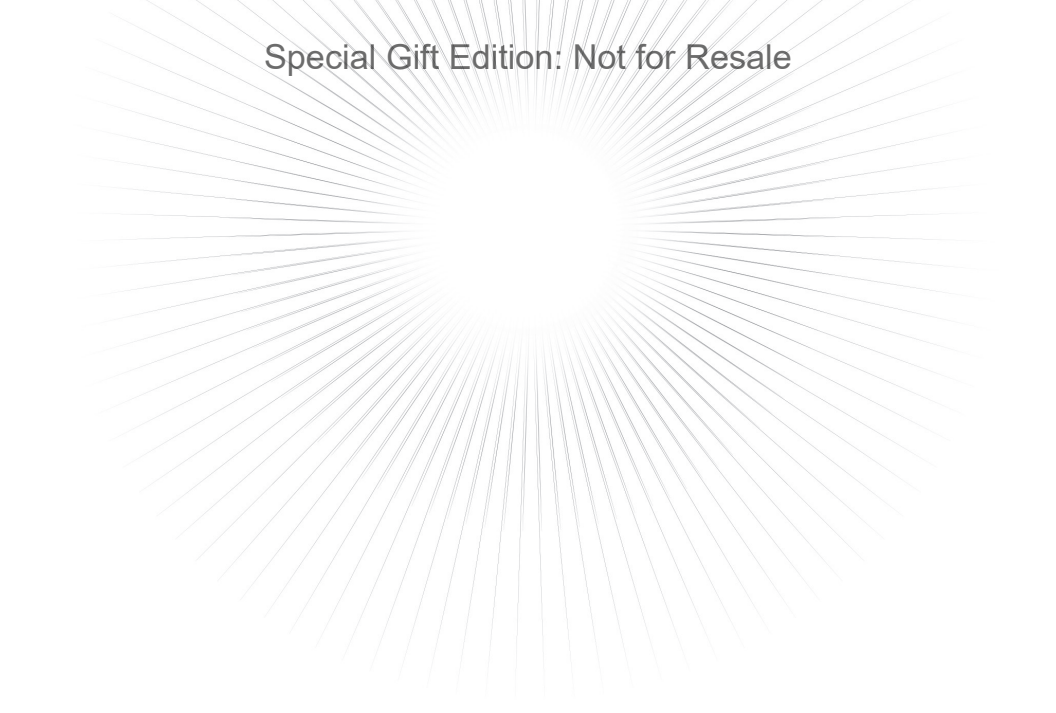
"Our Last Christmas Together" is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the story are drawn from the author's imagination.

Many humans celebrate a winter solstice holy day called, variously, Christmas, the Feast of Lights, the Festival of the Incarnation, Nativity, Yule, or Noël. It is, depending on the humans in question, a time of fasting or feasting, solemn reflection or joyous celebration, a time for thoughtful gift giving or excessive, lavish spending. This is all in celebration of either a peasant child born thousands of years ago, or, depending on the humans in question, a celebration of magical beings who bring gifts through magical means.

**HANALI, SON OF VIVI; A SPEECH GIVEN TO ELENIL NOBLES
TAKING HUMANS INTO THEIR HOUSEHOLDS**



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Merry Christmas!”

Madeline Oliver struggled to open her eyes. It took her a moment to remember exactly where she was, and why. She found herself in her own room—they called it a solar—in the eastern tower of Westwind, with her former roommate, Shula Bishara, sitting on the edge of the bed, smiling brightly, her curly black hair framing her face. “Christmas? I only left home a couple months ago. It was September then . . .”

“We do things differently in the Sunlit Lands.” Shula slapped Madeline’s knee through the quilt. “Or didn’t you notice the perpetual sunshine?”

The Sunlit Lands. A couple months ago Madeline had

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been dying from interstitial lung disease, and now she could breathe and sing and dance again, thanks to the magic of this place. A magical person named Hanali had offered her healing in exchange for one year of service here, in the Elenil capital city, where the sun never set and white towers flew red flags and singing fountains filled every public square. She lived in the tower of a castle called Westwind. Outside the walls of the city the evil Scim, creatures of darkness and shadow, railed against the light of the Elenil.

“I noticed,” she said, “I thought the Elenil had completely different holidays, like the Festival of the Turning. That’s coming up soon . . . they don’t celebrate Christmas, too, do they?”

Shula laughed. “No. But they let us humans celebrate. Or at least, all the humans who care about it. There’s a kid who’s in charge of deciding when Christmas arrives because the Elenil calendar is so crazy. Then we have a party with a big white elephant gift exchange, and we sing Christmas songs, and we tell stories. So get dressed! We have gifts to find.”



Jason Wu whistled merrily as he made his way through the city of Far Seeing, a hatchet in his hand and his golden-retriever-sized unicorn, Delightful Glitter Lady, trotting along beside him.

“Mr. Wu.” The voice which called his name sounded cold and maybe disappointed. He recognized it at once as

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the Elenil who had brought him and his classmate Madeline here: Hanali, son of Vivi. He stopped and turned toward the voice, slipping the hatchet behind his back more from force of habit than from any real desire to hide it. Then he remembered that he wasn't telling lies ever again, so he put the hatchet back in front, because hiding the hatchet felt like a little bit of a lie. But holding the axe in front felt weird, like he was going to start chopping people, so he put it over his shoulder like a lumberjack.

The Elenil waded through the crowd toward him. Hanali had a special gift for over-the-top fashion, and today he wore a pale-pink silk jacket over long, flowing, royal blue pants. The Elenil were painfully thin, and they clothed almost every available bit of skin, including their hands. All Jason could see of Hanali was his face, which blossomed like some kind of silvery flower over the high-necked collar of his shirt. "Mr. Wu," he said again.

"Mr. Son-of-Vivi," Jason said back. Weird that the Elenil didn't have last names.

Hanali's face soured. He opened his mouth, as if he was going to correct Jason's choice of surname for him, then seemed to think better of it. Instead he said, "Why, pray tell, are you traipsing through the center of Far Seeing with a hatchet in hand?"

"Traipsing?" Jason asked. "I'm not traipsing! This is my normal walk."

Hanali sighed. "Very well. Why are you walking through the center of Far Seeing with a hatchet?"

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Jason looked around the street. “Is this really the center of the city? I thought that was closer to the archon’s palace. This is sort of the northeast section—”

“Hatchet!” Hanali snapped. “Why do you have a hatchet?”

Jason took a step back, surprised by the outburst. Delightful Glitter Lady put herself between Jason and the Elenil, taking on a defensive position. Which was both delightfully adorable and, Jason hoped, terrifying. Even a dog-sized unicorn should be able to hurt someone with that horn. He’d left his embiggenator in the stable at Westwind, or he would be able to turn the dial and make Dee the size of a full-grown rhinoceros. Or bigger! As for why he had a hatchet, well, he thought that was obvious. “I was planning to chop something down.”

Hanali recoiled in horror. “Chop something down? In the city? My boy, you will do no such thing.”

“It’s Christmas,” Jason said. Hanali just stared at him.

Jason sighed. He usually thought Hanali was pretty smart, but sometimes he needed every little thing explained to him. “We need a Christmas tree.” He started walking again.

“Ah,” Hanali said, falling into step beside Jason. “These Christmas traditions continue to elude me. They are so varied among you humans. Why do you need this tree?”

“We put up an evergreen tree to remind us about eternal life. Then we put lights on it because . . . um. Because light has come into the darkness? I don’t know. Oh yeah, and a star on top because a star lit the way for some—shepherds, maybe?—to find out about the birth of Jesus. Then we put

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out milk and cookies for Santa Claus when he comes to bring gifts, except not where I live because Santa is lactose intolerant at our house.”

“I see,” Hanali said, though it was obvious he didn’t. “Then you will do a white hippopotamus gift exchange.”

“White elephant,” Jason said. The Elenil were terrible at identifying earth animals. In the last week he had heard Hanali refer to a horse as a “long-necked dog” and a rabbit as “the cat with the big ears.” Jason didn’t know why Hanali couldn’t call animals by the right names, but it always made him laugh.

“Why is it called white elephant?”

“I have no idea. Why do you expect me to know everything?”

Hanali raised an eyebrow. “You are a human. Who else would I ask about human culture?”

“Well, I don’t know what it means, except that it’s a weird anti-Christmas tradition we do around Christmas with our friends.”

“Anti-Christmas?”

“Yeah. Christmas is all about family and generous gift-giving, and then we have this game we play where you bring one terrible gift and then everyone fights over the couple of good gifts and tries not to get the worst ones. It’s weird and basically the opposite of the Christmas spirit in every way, but there you go.”

Hanali looked like he was considering this carefully. “So the best participants of Christmas would bring the best gifts?”

“It’s not a contest,” Jason said. “But yeah.”

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“It is a holy day for celebrating family and gifts.” Hanali raised an eyebrow, as if daring Jason to tell him that he’d gotten it wrong.

“Yeah. Also . . . hey, look there. I think I found our tree.”

There was a sort of park off to the side of the main street, with tall, beautiful trees of all types growing in it. The blood drained from Hanali’s face. “That is the Aluvorean consulate. I will have no part in this. I am leaving for my home, and you should do the same. You are often unwise, Mr. Wu, but that would be sheer folly.”

“Sheer folly is my middle name,” Jason said, and he trotted toward the trees.



The party would be held that night in the courtyard of Westwind. Ruth Mbewe, the eight-year-old girl who seemed to more or less run the castle, was overseeing a meal, and had sent Madeline and Shula to the market with a list of last-minute needed items. The market was a bustling riot of colors and strange people and odd creatures. It wasn’t a special day for the market—Christmas was only for humans—but there were still a lot of people there.

Madeline stepped out of the way of a woman riding what appeared to be some sort of ostrich, then moved to catch up with Shula, who was standing by a stall full of colorful fabric. She held up a bolt of purple cloth. “For Delightful Glitter Lady?”

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“She’d love it!” Madeline ran her hand over the material. “Could they make it into a blanket for her?” Jason and Dee had been sleeping in the stables, because the Knight of the Mirror allowed no magic in the castle proper. He didn’t allow full-sized unicorns in the castle either.

“I think so.” They talked to the shop owner, who told them to return in an hour or so to pick up the finished blanket. Madeline and Shula explored the market in comfortable silence. They had become friends quickly. Shula had been kidnapped by the Scim for a time, but they were together again, and that terrifying separation had only drawn them closer.

“You seem sad,” Madeline said. “You’re quieter than usual.”

Shula tried to smile but didn’t quite succeed. “This is only my second Christmas since my family—” She couldn’t finish the sentence. Madeline knew that Shula’s family had died in Syria. Shula had left Syria to come here to the Sunlit Lands after that. Every human kid in the Sunlit Lands had a tragic story: disease like Madeline, or violence like Ruth, or loss like Shula. And then there was Jason, who had come along with Madeline out of loyalty, but he was the exception rather than the rule.

Madeline put her arm through Shula’s. “I’m sorry.”

Shula patted her hand. “No one else’s families will be here, either. But I miss them.” A tear fell down her cheek.

“Holidays are hard,” Madeline said.

“They can be.” Shula wiped her face with the back of her hand.

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“Why don’t you stay at Westwind tonight after the party? I miss having you as a roommate. We’ll throw an after-party sleepover. Former roommates only.”

“I’d like that,” Shula said.

“In the meantime, maybe finding something terrible for the white elephant exchange will make us both feel better.”

Shula grinned. “Let’s buy Jason something terrible.”

“I have a better idea,” Madeline said. “I know a gift we can give him that will be a gift for us, too.”



Jason was precisely one hack into the tree trunk when he realized this would be harder than he’d thought. For one thing the trunk was easily three feet thick, and for another the tree was about twenty feet tall. He wasn’t sure how he was going to drag it back to Westwind. Not only that, but a green-skinned woman in nut-brown clothing had appeared beside him, her arms crossed in evident disapproval.

“I need a Christmas tree,” he said.

“This is a pine tree,” the woman replied. “We do not have Christmas trees.”

“Christmas trees are pine trees, though.”

“We do not have that variety.”

“I mean, pine trees are Christmas trees.”

“No. Not this one.”

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“You’re some sort of tree person, right? Are you a—what are they called—naiad?”

“Dryad. And no. This is not a Christmas tree, and I am not a dryad.”

“It’s not a Christmas tree *yet*, but it could be if we put on the lights and everything.”

She seemed to consider that. “You may put lights on it if you wish.”

“I have to cut it down first.”

“Then how will you put lights on it?”

“I’ll stand it up again,” Jason said. He really was getting tired of having to explain every little thing to these Sunlit Lands people.

The not-a-dryad shook her head. “And why do you do this?”

“To symbolize eternal life.”

“You cut down the tree so you can stand it up. You kill the tree to symbolize long life.”

Jason thought it through, then nodded his head. “Exactly.”

“This is not a Christmas tree,” she repeated. “Now move along, or I will call the guard.” She held out her hand. “And leave the hatchet here.”

“Aw, man.” Jason put the hatchet in her hand and trudged away from the woods. Delightful Glitter Lady, sensing his disappointment, leaned against his leg. “What am I going to do, Dee? Now I don’t have a Christmas tree, and I lost the knight’s hatchet. He’s going to kill me. If he can find a sharp object I haven’t already broken or lost.”

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A voice called his name—his Chinese name, not his English name. “Wu Song.”

It was Baileyya, a Kakri woman he had met more than once and who left him barely able to choke out a sentence most of the time. It wasn't just that she was at least a head taller than him, or her sand-colored skin, or the flashing silver light of her eyes—it was also the fact that she could take that hatchet and hurl it across a field and chop a specifically targeted piece of grass in half. He had never met anyone like her, and he would be perfectly happy to never meet another new person again so long as he got to hang out with her instead. “Baileyya,” he said. It was the only word he could manage to say.

“Why so sad?”

“There's a big party tonight, and the tree people won't let me cut down one of their trees.”

Baileyya grinned at him. “You tried to cut down an Aluvorean tree?”

“I only got one chop in before they took my hatchet.”

She laughed. “What sort of party is this that requires you to risk your life for a tree?”

“Ah, it's a Christmas party. Not like at home, though. I guess some kid is in charge of it, and he picks three people to tell a Christmas story, and there's a white elephant gift exchange.” He shrugged. “It's not even Christmas today as far as I know.”

Baileyya's eyes had lit up at the mention of the stories. In Kakri culture, stories were used as currency, and she had

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come to Far Seeing to make her fortune. “Human stories?” she asked.

“Did you want to go?” He asked it without thinking, and a wash of warm good feelings came over him as she gave an enthusiastic yes.

“What sort of gift is this white elephant?” she asked.

“You bring something to trade, that’s all.”

“What will you bring?”

“I saved up my pudding the last few days,” he said. Like everyone else, he had made a deal when he came to the Sunlit Lands. Madeline’s deal had been to get her breath back, and his had been a hospital pudding cup every morning for the rest of his life. Thankfully he had remembered to say chocolate, but he had forgotten things like making sure it was cold and including a spoon. But it was no big deal—he could use his fingers. Sure, it made Madeline nauseous to watch, but as he always told her, “Nature isn’t always pretty. This is the way human beings eat pudding in the absence of spoons.” Even when he ate without a spoon, other teens were jealous. There wasn’t any pudding in the Sunlit Lands except for his. They would like it as a gift. It would be one of those presents people fought over.

“Tell me about this tree you need,” Baileyya said. So he told her all about Christmas trees and Santa Claus and the flying deer and little toymakers. She was delighted by it all, and when he was done, she clapped him on the shoulder and said, “Wu Song. I have a solution to your

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tree problem.” She explained her idea, and he crowed with laughter.

“Genius!” he said. “Let’s go!”



Green and red banners hung from the windows of Westwind and decorated the stone walls of the courtyard. There were iron braziers with fires blazing, and even in the bright light of the Sunlit Lands they cast a merry glow. Ruth had set long tables and overseen providing traditional Christmas foods from her own home country—beef and goat, lamb and chicken, pounded yams, jollof rice, and a thick red stew. It wasn’t anything Madeline had ever eaten at Christmas, or any other time, but it smelled delicious and festive. They found Jason, his plate already piled high and his mouth full.

“Merry Christmas, Jason!”

“Merry Christmas!” he said, or at least they assumed that’s what he said around all the food in his mouth. Baileyya stood behind him, her plate even more full than his. They all exchanged greetings and settled onto some of the low chairs that had been set around the courtyard.

“Where’s Dee?” Madeline asked. “And Hanali? I thought he was coming.”

“They’ll be here eventually,” Jason said, exchanging a mysterious look with Baileyya.

A lot of the human kids from the city had gathered in the courtyard, and there was a general feeling of festive

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enjoyment. Even the Knight of the Mirror sat on a chair, a tall mirror angled toward him so only he could see its face. A few Elenil were there, too, mingling among the humans, and of course Baileyya, and even a few Maegrom, the little grey people who were said to live mostly underground. Madeline didn't see any Scim, but she knew there were some who lived in the city . . . either captured warriors who had been made into servants of the Elenil, or the occasional homeless child who haunted the alleys around the market.

Shula had told them that many people sent messenger birds to watch the streets around Westwind to bring reports of the arrival of Christmas. So when a flurry of birds came over the castle walls, carrying messages for the assembled humans, a cheer rose from the crowd. "He has arrived," Shula said. "Watch the gate."

A parade of humans came running across the drawbridge, shouting and laughing and singing, some of them carrying evergreen branches or candles or gifts wrapped in cloth. Then came a white pony, and on its back was a small blonde girl, her hair ratted and matted, and her feet bare. Behind her came a white horse, with red roses laced into its mane. On its back was a shirtless boy in dirty jeans, with a wooden mask covering his face.

"Aw, no," Jason said. "Not that kid. He's so creepy!"

"Do you know him?" Shula asked.

Madeline nodded. "He guarded the door that led to the Sunlit Lands for us. He and that girl, and three adults. It was strange."

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“Terrifying,” Jason said. “That kid is probably ten years old, but he’s the scariest thing in the entire Sunlit Lands.”

Baileya laughed. “A mask does not make him frightening. He is still a child.”

“A creepy child,” Jason murmured before shoveling more food into his mouth. He watched the masked boy with skeptical attention. It didn’t seem to spoil his appetite, though.

The boy took the wooden stage which stood near Westwind’s wall. A cheer rose from the crowd. He raised his bare arms and cried out in his high child’s voice, “Peace and joy to you all this Christmas!”

A roar of approval came from the crowd, and shouts of Merry Christmas, and Happy Christmas, and Feliz Navidad, Joyeux Noël, Krismasi Njema, and a hundred other well-wishes. Madeline was surprised by the excitement of the crowd. But then again, they were all far from home, far from their friends and families and loved ones, and nearly all of them had been here longer than she and Jason.

“See, he is but a child, and kind as well,” Baileya said.

The boy waited for silence to fall again, and then he said, “Where my family and I live—neither in the Sunlit Lands nor completely free of them—time moves strangely. I crossed into this place on Christmas Day—5,844 days ago. I have kept track each year, since so many arrive in the Sunlit Lands unsure what day it is, and I have become the guardian of Christmas in this place. Which means that, once again, Christmas has come to bless us, and we to bless one another.”

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Jason leaned toward Bailey. “That kid isn’t even a teenager and he just said he’s been here, what? Twelve years or something?”

“Sixteen,” Madeline said. The boy had said time worked strangely where he and his family lived, and she remembered how bizarre it had been there, with the path that seemed like it would never end, and the door in the air that opened from those weird woods into the Sunlit Lands. The magic bent and twisted things in strange ways here.

The boy spoke again. “Tonight—if we can call it night when the sun shines so brightly—we will hear three Christmas stories. I will choose the tellers of tales, and they will stand upon this stage and tell their stories. Then we will sing and dance and exchange gifts. We each celebrate a different way in our homelands, but here, this is the way we celebrate.”

“He could take off the mask,” Jason said. “Seriously. He’d be less creepy if he took off the mask.”

“Our first Christmas tale,” the boy said, “comes from one of the newest people to join us in the Sunlit Lands. Wu Song.”

Jason’s jaw fell open. “Hey! That’s crazy. There’s a kid here who has the same name as me.”

Bailey nudged him gently. “I believe he is speaking of you.”

“Wait, what? We barely celebrate Christmas in my family. I’m supposed to tell a story?”

The crowd was clapping and looking around for the storyteller, and Madeline and Shula and Bailey happily pointed

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to Jason, shouting that it was him, and Delightful Glitter Lady hopped around him with excitement.

“Okay, okay.” Jason stood up. “Let’s deck the halls.”



Jason stood on the stage and looked out at the people. He didn’t feel nervous or afraid. The attention of the crowd thrilled him. He didn’t like the kid with the mask, though. He stood on the far end of the stage until the masked kid sat down on a bale of hay in the front of the audience.

He hadn’t prepared a story. His parents had celebrated Christmas a little bit, but more out of obligation, to seem more American. They had come as adults from China and, well, they’d rather hand out red envelopes at New Year than fill socks with presents.

“Okay,” he said. “Here’s my story. Once there was this super sad reindeer who all the other reindeer hated, because he had a glowing nose. Which doesn’t make a lot of sense, because that would be awesome. But these were deer, and deer also eat grass, so what do they know. Anyway, the red-nosed deer made friends with this snowman and then Santa Claus asked them to guide his sleigh because he didn’t have headlights for some reason, which, again, when you have flying deer it doesn’t make much sense. I mean, how hard it is to get some magic lights? Or just buy some at the auto parts store? Anyway, the snowman came to life when he got this magic hat, so he, uh. I don’t remember. I think he drove

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the sleigh so Santa wouldn't be in danger if it crashed. Then the reindeer all loved the glowy-nosed deer because deer are super shallow and the deer's competence made him popular. And Santa told the snowman he could live at the North Pole where he would never melt and die. THE. END."

The expected applause was more of a dull silence. Bailey looked particularly disappointed, and she leaned over and said something to Shula, who shrugged. Madeline had a half smile on her face, but even she seemed perplexed. Two guys started clapping and shouting at the back of the audience—Jason's former roommates, David and Kekoa. "Yah, brah, great story!" Kekoa shouted, and he and David whistled and cheered.

Jason bowed deeply, laughing along with them, and when he stood up, the masked boy was directly in front of him. "Gah!" Jason fell backward trying to escape the creepy youth, but he hovered over Jason's face.

"That was not a good story," the boy said. "You are too self-conscious."

"You didn't give me much of a warning."

"I will lead everyone in a song. When we are done, you will tell another story. One about gifts or family or infants or hope or peace on earth. A Christmas story."

"If it means you'll get that mask out of my face, great, I'll do it."

The boy's eyelids drooped behind the bark mask. "I would take it off if I could, Wu Song. It has been too long since I have walked either the earth or the Sunlit Lands freely. I

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live in the in-between, and there is precious little joy or sorrow for one such as me.” He turned away and addressed the crowd, telling them that Jason would try again after a carol. They began to sing “Silent Night.”

Jason sat up, trying to think of a good story. He just didn’t know any of the Christmas stories well, but there was a story his mother used to tell him. It was about gifts, and it might be appropriate here, given how few of them were able to give the sort of gifts they might like while serving here with the Elenil.

When the song was done, Jason took the stage again. He took a deep breath. His friends watched with interest, and many others looked on with skepticism. “It’s not a Christmas story, exactly,” he said, “but it’s about a gift.

“Many years ago, there was an emperor in the Tang dynasty. All of his people had to send him gifts each year. A ruler in a far country called his servant, Mian Bogao, and gave him two beautiful swans. They were perfect. Their feathers were the white of an unwritten page, and their eyes were as bright as gems. The ruler placed them in a cage, and Mian Bogao set out on the journey to deliver the swans to the emperor.

“The journey was a long one: one thousand li. That’s like, over three hundred miles. Or five hundred kilometers. Mian Bogao had to walk it, too—he didn’t have a car or a wagon or a horse, just two swans and two feet. So on and on he walked. The sun broiled him as he trudged along, and he started to worry that he would have nothing to present to the emperor but two baked birds. The small tongues of the swans panted

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in the heat, and their white feathers became dirty and grey from the dust of the road.”

Jason paused. People seemed to be listening now. He took on the voice of Mian Bogao. *“What good is it for me to deliver these swans to the emperor if they are as grey as pigeons? Won’t he turn me back to my master, and won’t I be punished severely? And look . . . isn’t that a beautiful pond just ahead? Why shouldn’t I let the swans out to rest? Perhaps the cool waters will give them relief and wash the grime of the road from their feathers.”*

“So Mian Bogao set the cage beside the pond and opened the latch. He swung the tiny door open, and the swans flapped their wings in anticipation. Mian Bogao looked longingly on the sparkling water near the roadside and imagined the birds swimming and dunking themselves and getting clean and refreshed for the rest of their journey to the emperor, where they would spend their days gliding in the waters of the royal garden. The swans gathered themselves, stepped out of the cage, flapped their wings, and immediately flew as far away from Mian Bogao as they could, not stopping for food or drink until they were well out of the little man’s clutches.”

The audience gasped, and Jason grinned at them. “That’s exactly how Mian Bogao felt. He had every expectation that the emperor would execute him, and he debated doing the same thing as the swans. All he had left was an empty cage and a handful of white feathers. But Mian Bogao wasn’t the sort of guy who ran away from his problems, so he knew he

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would have to be on his way. But first he washed his face in the pond and drank a bit of the water.

“Carrying an empty cage made Mian Bogao feel completely worthless, so he left the cage near the edge of the pond, and instead took the best and brightest feather the swans had left behind and wrapped it in a small piece of white silk. Then he started walking.”

Baileya was leaning forward, her complete attention on Jason. He felt a hot blush of blood flow to his face. He didn't know if anyone in the audience could tell, but Baileya gave him a broad grin, which didn't help. He gathered himself and said, “When Mian Bogao arrived at the emperor's palace, he was amazed by the fancy towers and silk carpets and giant tables of food. When it was time for him to bring his gift to the emperor, he stood in line and watched the other emissaries walk forward with their gifts. Jewels and gold, life-sized jade elephants, and enormous handmade vases decorated with dragons. Each gift seemed more lavish and extravagant than the last, and the emperor accepted each with detached gratitude.

“When it came time for Mian Bogao to present his gift, he bowed low to the emperor and held his small silk package with both hands above his head. The emperor took it, curious, and Mian Bogao quoted him a short poem about what had happened. The emperor was charmed by the honesty of this messenger and, pleased with his gift, had the feather put in a place of honor in the palace.”

Someone, probably Kekoa, shouted, “What was the poem?”

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“I don’t remember the poem!”

“Make one up!”

“Oh, fine,” Jason said. “Hold on a second.” He did remember bits of it, but it was in Chinese. He took a deep breath and made his own:

*“Two beautiful swans like you’ve never seen,
But on the long walk they were hard to keep clean!
I stopped at a lake for a much-needed bath,
But they used their wings, leaving me to your wrath.
In lieu of those birds I’ll pay any price.
My respect is real though my gift is light.
I’d have brought two swans if it wasn’t for the weather.
Instead I walked a thousand li to bring you this feather.”*

Jason bowed, and everyone applauded. He held up his hands, and when everyone had stopped clapping, he said, “The emperor was so impressed with Mian Bogao’s honesty and thoughtfulness in presenting what little gift remained that he rewarded the servant heavily, and it became a saying around the court: *To walk a thousand li and present a swan feather; the gift is light but the friendship is solid.*”

The boy in the mask bounded onto the stage. Jason edged away, but the boy turned to the audience and said, “A wonderful story to remind us that the gifts which come from the heart are the best gifts, and that honesty and kindness and thoughtfulness mean much more than gold and diamonds. Thank you, Wu Song.” While the people cheered

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again, the boy stepped close to Jason and stared at him until Jason looked past the mask into his eyes. “Well told, Wu Song.”

Jason jumped off the stage and made his way to his friends, where Baileyya moved over to make room for him between her and Madeline. She complimented his story, which, coming from a Kakri woman, was a big compliment. Jason noticed she was sitting a bit closer to him than she had been before he told his story, and he didn’t mind, not one bit.



Madeline jabbed Jason in the ribs with her elbow. “Great job! That was surprising. I had never heard that before.”

“My mom used to tell it to me,” Jason said. “Usually right before my birthday. My sister called it *preparing us for thoughtful gifts*.” He smiled.

Hanali was pushing his way toward them through the crowd. Madeline waved at him. “Over here, Hanali!”

“He’s not supposed to be here yet,” Jason said, and he jumped up and made his way to the Elenil, talked to him for a minute, then came back and sat down. “After the third story,” Jason said. “I told him like five times.”

Madeline was about to ask him what he meant when the boy in the mask announced the second storyteller. “Shula Bishara!”

Jason and Madeline both laughed. “Shula!”

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She smiled at them. “Don’t worry, I have the perfect story for tonight.” She stood with confidence and moved to the stage.



My name is Shula Bishara, and I’m from Syria. Not many of us celebrate Christmas there. It’s a special season, not just for our family but for our whole community. On Christmas Eve we lock the gates of our homes as a reminder of the many years when it wasn’t safe for us to celebrate Christmas. The youngest child reads the story of the Nativity, and then one of our fathers lights a fire. We all gather around and watch the flames, and the elders tell us what the flames say about the year to come. We sing songs and gather together around the bonfire, and when it gets low enough we jump over it and make wishes.

But on Christmas morning, there are no presents for us! I know, surprising. Because Christmas day is just the beginning of our wait for the coming of a child who will save the whole world, the Christ child. So for twelve whole days—what some of you might call the twelve days of Christmas—we get ready for him to appear. And the day he arrives, January 6, we call that day Epiphany. That’s the day Syrian children get their gifts! But they aren’t delivered by a saint or reindeer. That’s the story I want to tell you tonight.

Once, many years ago, there was a young camel named Udru . . . the smallest and youngest of all the camels in the

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land. He lived with his mother and father and the whole herd. They were the camels who belonged to good old Gushnasaph, the wise and kind man who made sure they were cared for. Gushnasaph was wealthy and wise, and he studied the earth and the world around him to increase his wisdom.

One day Gushnasaph came to all the camels with his two closest friends, Larvandang and Hormisdas. The camels rarely saw them all together, and Udru could feel the excitement from the other camels. He pushed forward through the long legs of his relatives to get a better look as Gushnasaph explained to the camels' keepers what was to happen. "We have seen a star," Gushnasaph said. "No doubt you have seen it too."

Udru had seen it. A bright star, blazing in the heavens.

"A star for the birth of a king," Larvandang said.

"A star from God," Hormisdas said.

"A star from the one who has been sent to save the world from death," Gushnasaph said. "The one we have been promised since the first generation of people upon the earth. So we three have decided to go and find him, that we might show his worth by bringing him gifts and also our allegiance and service.

"We will need every camel and every horse for the journey. It will be far and difficult, but we believe it will be worth it to see the great king who will bring peace to the world."

Great excitement went through the whole herd at these words. Or more correctly, the caravan, for the camels had already made up their minds to travel. Udru's mother

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explained this to him. “When we travel, we are a caravan. It will be a long journey. Perhaps you should stay here with the sheep. You are so very young.”

“No, no, I want to meet the king!” Udru said.

For the next few days they made ready. The three wise friends wasted no time in preparing. Three horses, black as night, would be their steeds, and they prepared the camels to carry the gifts they meant to take to the newborn king. Every camel would be needed, for they would carry gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh, and not only that but clothes for the journey, food, and tents and pavilions and servants and more.

There was much excitement among the camels. They had never seen the three men so excited, and they had heard them speak again and again of the importance of the star, and the even greater importance of the child.

Udru could carry very little, and some of the other camels teased him about it. But Gushnasaph noticed and bent down to say, “Little Udru, I have an important thing for you to carry. It is my gift for the king, a container of myrrh. Guard it closely, for it is of great worth.”

Udru could not help his excitement, and he ran and jumped through the caravan telling all the other camels of this great honor. The older camels thought this was an insult to them, for many of them carried nothing more than provisions or tents. But this was all forgotten as they prepared for the long journey. The wise men said they would travel more than 2,000 kilometers.

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Udru did not know how long a journey that might be, for he had never gone far beyond their own territory. He did not know how soon his feet would hurt, and how badly his back would ache under the weight of the myrrh. He asked an older camel, “Should it hurt so badly to walk in the caravan?”

“No,” the camel said gruffly. “Give me your myrrh and turn back if you are so tired.”

“I won’t!” Udru said. “I want to see the king.”

The journey was many weeks, and the little camel grew desperately weary. Such a long trip was not meant for a small camel like Udru. He asked his mother, “How much farther must we go?”

Another camel jostled her aside and said, “Give up if you are too weak to keep walking.”

“No!” Udru said, “For I want to see the child God has chosen.”

Many days later, Udru struggled to keep up with the caravan as they crossed the desert. They had stopped to drink the day before, but Udru’s humps were small, and he was so thirsty he could barely walk. The older camels saw him struggling and said, “You will hurt yourself, Udru—do not try to go on. Let the wise men leave you with a shepherd, and we will come back for you.”

“I will not stay behind,” Udru said. “I want to see the child who will save the world from death.”

But on the final day of the journey, Udru was so weak he stumbled. The other camels, distressed, tried to convince him to turn back or rest, but he would not. So it was that

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they came to a small town, and as they paraded down the street, they came to a small house. And above that house burnt a bright star, the brightest in the sky, and the last to come to it was Udru.

As they came to the door, Gushnasaph leaned low to take the myrrh from Udru's back, but the little camel would not let the man take it. He had come to see the king, and now he would see him. It was good he was the smallest camel, for he went right in through the door and found the little human sitting in his mother's lap. The child smiled at him, and that is when Udru collapsed on the ground and fainted.

When Udru awoke, it was to find the little child beside him, patting his head. "The king! But you are so small," Udru said, for it was one thing to know the king was a child and quite another to see it. The boy smiled.

"Yes," the child said in the language of the camels. "For great things can start out small. As for you, Udru, I have a gift for you. From this day forward you shall live forever. In years to come you shall make many journeys and bring much joy and many gifts to the children who seek me, just as you have done for me."

So it is that in Syria on January 5, all the Christian children set their shoes on the porch so that they will be ready for a journey, and they fill their shoes with hay so Udru will have food, and they put water on their porches so that Udru won't become faint as he makes his rounds. At every home where the children are seeking the Christ child, Udru eats the hay and leaves candy and gifts in the children's shoes.

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That is how we celebrate Christmas in my homeland. We know that the journey may be long and that we may become tired, but the reward at the end is worth the pain along the way. A blessed and peaceful Christmas to you all, and may you all find the true king at your journey's end.



Jason gave Shula's story a standing ovation, clapping so hard his hands hurt. He loved that little camel, and a sudden idea came to him. First he would need to find Hanali. Shula came back to her seat, many people thanking her for her story as she made her way past them, and the boy with the mask said there would be a short break to eat more food, and then the final story of the night would be told.

"Did you make that story up?" Jason asked.

"Weren't you listening? It's a story from Syria," Shula said. "I've known some version of that story since I was a child."

"I love it," Jason said.

Hanali appeared beside them, as if he had sensed Jason's sudden desire to find him. "The child in your story, Shula, does he grow up to become the old man who brings presents?"

Jason put his hands on his hips. "Who, Santa Claus?"

"I can never remember his name. He has so many. Saint Nicholas. Sinterklaas. Kris Kringle. Father Christmas."

Jason laughed at the Elenil, pleased to finally have proof he was smarter than the magical man. "The baby is Jesus." Hanali stared blankly at him. Jason looked at Madeline, who

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just had a little smile on her face. He spun to look at Shula. She didn't say anything. "The baby *is* Jesus. Right?"

Shula laughed. "Yes, Jason."

"Ha! I thought so," he said. "Okay. Hanali and I have some things to get ready for the end of the night now."

"Wait," Madeline said. "Shula and I have gifts to give you first."

Jason perked up. "Really?"

"Yup," Shula said, and she held out a folded package of cloth.

Jason unfolded it. It was a large purple blanket. "Hey! Is this for Dee?"

"Yes, and this is for you," Madeline said, and she handed him a second, much smaller cloth, but this one was wrapped around something. He opened it to find a small wooden spoon.

"For my pudding!" he shouted. He felt a wash of emotions come over him. It was a thoughtful gift, even though it was small, and showed how well Madeline knew him. "Thank you. But I thought it was supposed to be white elephant tonight?"

"We wanted to get something just for you," Madeline said.

"I wanted to wait and put it in your shoes." Shula laughed.

Baileya came up to them with a new plate of food in her hand. The boy with the mask was beside her. Jason gave an involuntary yelp.

"I have not had pudding in many years," the boy said.

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“Uh-huh,” Jason said. “Yeah, well, it’s hard to get around here.”

“True,” the boy said. He turned his wooden mask toward Madeline. “You will share the last Christmas story.”

“Me? It seems strange that it’s all me and my friends.”

“Not so strange,” the boy said, and he disappeared into the crowd.

Jason glared at Baileyya. “Come on. He’s weird, right?”

Baileyya only smiled at him and took another bite of her yams.

Hanali touched Jason’s elbow. “I have need of you for the final preparations.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll be back. Mads, I’ll listen to your story from right outside the gate. Hanali and I are working on a little surprise.”

Baileyya knew about the surprise, of course, but she made no move to join them. Jason kept looking back at her, even while following Hanali. One of the messenger birds had landed near her, and she was speaking to it. He wondered what message she could possibly be sending and to whom.

“Are you ready?” Hanali asked.

“I have one more thing I want to add,” Jason said. “But you’re going to have to go get something for me.”

“The preparations are getting out of control,” Hanali said. “I have already agreed to—”

Jason put up his hand to silence him. “Hey. If things don’t feel out of control at some point, it’s probably not a holiday.”

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Madeline stood on the stage. She couldn't believe she was here, after all this. Jason hadn't come back yet, but he'd said he would be listening from beyond the castle gate. She hoped he could hear her. He was the closest thing she had to family here in the Sunlit Lands, and Shula was getting there.

"I was fourteen the year my grandfather died. My dad's dad. The first thing you have to know is that my mom and dad have always been sort of strange with me. Kind of like I remind them of something painful. I don't know what it could be. But like if I spend too much time with them, if they get too close to me, they sort of pull away. My grandfather, though, he wasn't like that at all. He used to tell me stories. Wonderful stories about magic and faraway kingdoms and unicorns and cursed swords. He was the first one to read my favorite book to me, a book called *The Gryphon under the Stairs*.

"So when my dad told me that Grandpa was sick—that he might not even make it to Christmas—I cried and cried and didn't think I was going to be able to stop. He had just been with us the year before. He always came for Christmas, and there was always a new book and a new story, and he made it feel like our family was close for the week he was with us. Dad would stay home from work, even.

"But it was July, and the doctors said . . . well, they said it was possible but not to count on it. Grandpa said for sure he wouldn't be able to come to our house. We talked on the

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phone, and he said, ‘Madeline, my Madeline, forgive me.’ He had a way of sounding like he was reading poetry when he talked, and he always called me by my full name. Never Maddie or Mads. He said he liked the rhythm of it, the feel of my full name.

“I told my dad this was not okay. If Grandpa wasn’t going to be there with us, then we had to go to him. My dad . . . he’s a good person—my mom, too—but I don’t think he knew what to do. So I called his work and told them what was happening. I didn’t tell my dad I had done that. Then I went into my room and packed a bag, and I went into the garage, and I got down three boxes of Christmas decorations, and I put them behind the car. I called my grandfather and told him we were coming, and then I informed my parents. My dad made a weak attempt to remind me it was still July, not Christmas, but I completely shut him down and told him I’d pack his bag if he didn’t. My parents didn’t know what to do, I think, and so they packed their own bags and soon we were on the road.

“It was a long drive. Portland to Chicago. I don’t know why I didn’t tell my parents to buy a plane ticket. I don’t know why they didn’t suggest it. So for three days—three long days—we were in the car together, and it had this strange feel. Like for these three days we were traveling toward Christmas, and nothing else. My parents didn’t seem distant. I didn’t even think that much about what was happening with Grandpa. It was like, of course he would be there for Christmas. Where else would he be? He had always been there before, every year

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I could remember. I made my parents listen to Christmas music and Christmas stories the whole way to get them in the mood. Thirty-two hours of driving, and I had brought six Christmas albums. Halfway through day two my dad had a Christmas breakdown in a rest stop and told me he couldn't do it anymore, but then my mom started singing 'The Twelve Days of Christmas' and shouting 'five golden rings,' and he gave in and got his second wind.

"Grandpa still lived in the same old condo he had when I was a kid. I hadn't been there in years, because he always came to us. He had always been thin, but now I wondered how he could even walk. His legs were like pencils. He tried to cover it up by wearing layers, but he didn't look well, and he got tired so easily.

"He had decorated the condo. Or his neighbors had, I guess. There was a tree and lights in the sitting room and little Santa Claus figurines in the kitchen and one of those Christmas villages set up over the fake fireplace, along with one stocking for me and another for my parents to share.

"He hugged me when I came in and held me for a long time. So long I started to feel nervous, and his arms were so bony it reminded me of what was coming. I was so hot from being in the car, and sweaty and tired. He pushed me away to arm's length, and he said, 'It's Christmas Eve! You better get cleaned up.'

"And we did. We took showers and put on winter clothes, and grandpa turned down the AC, and we pretended it was winter. He put Christmas music on the stereo and after

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dinner he said there was a Christmas cartoon on. He had bought the Charlie Brown Christmas cartoon, which he said had always been Dad's favorite when he was young.

"Then there was hot chocolate with mini marshmallows and candy canes to mix it with. Mom started to cry then, but Grandpa swooped in and said, 'Ah, ah, ah, no crying tonight or Santa won't fill your stockings,' and he hurried her and Dad off to his room, and me to the guest room. I could hear him moving around downstairs, and it didn't seem right that we were up in our rooms, going to sleep, when he was awake and would be gone soon. So I crept down the stairs. All the lights were off except the light beside his reading chair, and he was humming 'O Holy Night' and dropping candy in our stockings, and it all seemed so normal, and he was so happy that I went to bed and told myself it really was Christmas, that nothing was ever going to change.

"In the morning we ate cinnamon rolls and sat around the table while we all looked through our stockings. Grandpa didn't know we had one for him in the car, and I had snuck it in while mom was getting breakfast ready, and he was so surprised and delighted by each thing in it . . . which was mostly stuff we had bought for snacks in the car because I had forced us to leave home so fast. Chocolate and some oranges, a snack-sized bag of chips he liked. But I also put in a photo keychain I had that had a picture of me and Mom and Dad on it, and when he came to that he stopped and didn't say anything for a long time. It was from a year or two before, when we had gone to the beach. Mom and Dad

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were on either side of me, both making ridiculous faces, and I was standing on one foot and sticking my tongue out and looking like I was about to fall over. I don't know who took it, because it's pretty rare there's a picture of all of us together. But Grandpa just put that in his palm and closed his hand over it and then stared at it like he could see the picture through his hand, and after a minute of that he slipped it into the chest pocket of his shirt and patted it, like it was going straight into his heart.

"Then there were presents. He had prepared, of course, during our three-day drive, but we hadn't really. He gave my mom a nice set of watercolor paints. She seemed surprised he remembered that she used to paint once upon a time. Dad got an old, worn leather diary. It was Grandpa's, and he said it was time it did something other than hide under his bed.

"I got a framed photograph of Grandma. One he had always kept by his bed ever since I could remember. She had died when I was really young, and I didn't remember her much. He brought that picture when he came to stay with us, even—he traveled with it. When I was little, he told me it was like my favorite stuffed animals. He just needed her near him to sleep.

"I started wrapping it back up. 'I can't take this,' I said. 'Grandpa, you need it. I can't take it.' But he insisted. I looked to Dad for help, but he was staring down at that diary, as if that had made it real somehow what was happening here. There were other presents, too, but there's only one more I remember clearly. It was the last gift he gave me.

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It was about the size of a shoebox, and there were two presents in it. One was just a slip of paper and written on it was, ‘All of my books I leave to my dear, dear Madeline Oliver, who knows what it means to love other worlds. Never forget me, dear Madeline, and I hope you will enjoy walking the same ink-blotted hills I have trod.’ My eyes blurred, and my throat got tight. My hand shook as I moved the note aside and reached for the final Christmas gift my grandfather would ever give me. Beneath the note was another picture, in the same sort of frame as Grandma’s. It was a picture of him from years ago, and a younger me was sitting in his lap.

“I really started crying then, and I wrapped my arms around him and pushed my face against his thin chest and cried and cried while he stroked my hair and whispered to me. The thing that broke my heart most was that I had never had a picture of him in my room before this, because I didn’t need to remember him. I always saw him soon enough, so why would I need his picture?”

Madeline paused, and looked out on the audience. They were all without their families tonight. Some were crying as they listened; others stared away into the distance. “That night, after my parents were asleep, I crept downstairs again to find Grandpa sitting in his reading chair, his reading glasses perched on his nose. He glanced up when I came across the room and said, ‘I couldn’t sleep.’

“‘Me neither,’ I said.

“‘I hope you don’t mind my reading one of your books,’

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he said, and held up some book that had been published before I was born. One of many in the library he had just gifted me.

“Not at all,” I said, and I sat down on the floor by his feet and put my head on his knee, and he put his hand on my head, and after a minute he started to read to me. I don’t know what passage it was, though I remember the book . . . *East of Eden*, one of his favorites. I just tried to remember everything I could about his voice. The way it sounded. How warm the tone of his voice. The way he chuckled to himself when he found something funny, or the occasional commentary he would make on the text. But mostly the warmth that came from his body just because he was alive and we were near each other and I knew, I knew, this would probably be the last time he read to me.

“He stopped reading after a while, and I brought him a glass of water. He looked frail, like some bad weather could crumple him into nothing. ‘Is this our last Christmas together, Grandpa?’ I asked him. And he said, ‘Oh, my darling girl. Every Christmas is our last Christmas together. Every Christmas together is our first. The people in this world, they come and go, and when Christmas rolls around, there are always new ones who have come and old ones who have gone. Don’t compare the years—enjoy the one you’re in. This year it’s you and me and your parents, and maybe in a few months it will just be the three of you. If it’s our last Christmas together, then let’s work hard to be kind to each

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other, to put up with those little differences we have, and to enjoy each other.’

“Then he kissed me on the top of the head and squeezed my shoulder, and asked me to help him walk up the stairs. The next morning he said Christmas was over, and I helped him take down the decorations, and at midnight he marched into my room and told me it was New Year’s, and he gave me some noisemakers, and we woke up my parents. The day after that it was our birthdays, the entire day cut into fourths so we each had a special part of it, and we sang to each other and baked four cakes and ate way too much, and we played games and laughed, and Grandpa told stories I had heard a hundred times before, and the day after that we packed our things and said good-bye.

“Two months later he was in the hospital, and Dad flew back, but I didn’t go. I put his photo up next to my bed, with Grandma beside him so he wouldn’t get lonely.

“That was our last Christmas together. But if Grandpa were here, he would get up on this stage and tell you that this is *our* last Christmas together too. Our first, yes, but also our last. So we should work hard to enjoy it, and be patient with each other, and celebrate this time together. Who knows where we will all be in another year, or who we will be with?

“So peace on earth and good news to all. Let’s celebrate our last Christmas together with joy and good cheer. Merry Christmas!”

And all the people gathered in the courtyard echoed it

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back to her, a warm wave of blessing and well wishes: “Merry Christmas!”



That was Jason’s cue. He turned the knob on the embiggenator, and as soon as Delightful Glitter Lady was her regular size, he jumped onto her back, yelled at Hanali to follow him, and marched into the courtyard.



Madeline had barely wiped the tears from her eyes when she started laughing so hard she thought she would burst. Jason entered the courtyard riding Delightful Glitter Lady. She had branches stuck to her head to look like antlers, which looked very strange rising up on either side of her horn, and Jason wore the red stocking cap and suit of Saint Nicholas.

Close behind him came Hanali, dressed in a dark green outfit that flared out a solid two feet as it came near his feet. As he came closer, she noticed the star-shaped hat and the glittering colored circles on his coat. He was, without a doubt, dressed as a Christmas tree, and he was smiling broadly.

“Ho, ho, ho!” Jason shouted. “Merry Christmas to all. Ho, ho, ho!”

Just behind Hanali came a tiny camel, with a pack of gifts thrown over its back.

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“Gifts for all,” Hanali called. “Come get your gifts from this capybara.”

As the humans crowded around, Christmas Tree Hanali reached into the bag and handed out small stones to each one. They looked at them, perplexed, and Hanali shooed them along. “Make way for the others,” he said.

Madeline held the smooth stone in her hand. “Hanali, what is it?”

“Oh, just a bit of magic. It works for today only. But it will let you see what your family is doing right now. Just warm it in your hand, then look at the surface. You will see.”



Jason slipped away, finding the boy with the mask. “Hey,” he said. “Nice party.”

“Thank you.”

He couldn’t stand it anymore, and he couldn’t keep talking to the creepy kid, so he just thrust the puddings he had collected at him. “Go on.”

The boy took the puddings, and even through the mask Jason could tell he was thrilled and deeply touched. “But these are for your white elephant exchange.”

Jason rolled his eyes. “That’s like the anti-Christmas Christmas thing. And besides, this is definitely our last Christmas together if I can help it. You might as well enjoy some pudding.”

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Jason escaped into the crowd before the boy could say anything more.



Shula sat holding her magic stone in her hand. Madeline sat beside her. “What does it show you?” she asked.

Her friend smiled sadly. “Nothing. My family is gone, Madeline. What does yours show?”

“Oh, my dad at work, my mom in the garden.” She put her arm around Shula. “Look at the stone again.”

“It only shows family,” Shula said.

“Look again,” Madeline insisted, hoping she was right. Shula cupped the stone in her hand and warmed it. She lifted it up, and she and Madeline could see themselves, as if in a mirror.

“We’re like sisters. You’re family to me, now,” Madeline said. And then she couldn’t talk anymore because Shula had thrown her arms around her.

It wasn’t long before Jason wedged himself into the group hug, and Shula gasped when she saw him appear on her family stone as well. “Jason adopts people quickly,” Madeline said, laughing.

“You found a tiny camel!” Shula said to him.

“It wasn’t easy, either. As soon as I heard your story, I ran into the city to find one. The Elenil weren’t much help. They offered me a zebra, a tiny giraffe, a platypus, and a cat. A cat! But I thought it would make your Christmas a little better.”

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“It did,” she said. “Thank you.”

Baileya came over and put her hand on Jason’s shoulder. “I have brought you a Merry Christmas present,” she said. “The story you shared was a great gift to us all, and I wanted to give you a gift as well. I spoke to a messenger bird while you were preparing.”

Jason looked at her quizzically. “Oh yeah?”

She held up her hand, revealing a single white feather. “It is light, but my respect is real.”

Jason grinned. “It’s wonderful,” he said.

“The messenger bird did not think so,” Baileya said.

Madeline took a deep, full breath—something she couldn’t have done if not for the magic of this place. She laughed again at the sight of Hanali giving out gifts while dressed as a Christmas tree. How did Jason convince people to do these ridiculous things? She looked at her friends and thought of her grandfather’s words. This was their last Christmas together, but it was also their first. She missed her grandfather, and she missed her parents, but she was enjoying this.

“If it hadn’t been for the magic of the Sunlit Lands,” she said, “this could have been my last Christmas ever.”

Jason wrapped an arm around her. “And what if it had been?”

“It would have been a great one.”

Then the carols started, and they sang together, and Jason gave all the children rides on Delightful Glitter Lady, and there was dancing, and they shared favorite Christmas

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MATT MIKALATOS

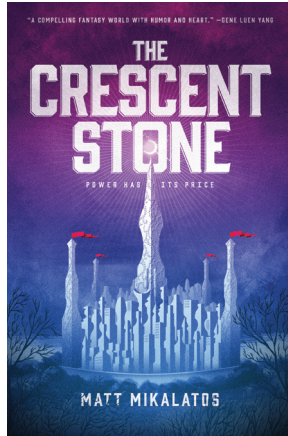
memories and made new ones. They stayed up late into the night, until the Knight of the Mirror declared the day done and one last song was sung, and they made their reluctant farewells and last wishes of happy holidays and Merry Christmas. They said good-bye to Jason and Delightful Glitter Lady at the stables, and Baileyya waved to them all merrily as she left through the castle gates. Madeline and Shula climbed the tower stairs to Madeline's solar, and they laughed late into the night as they told each other stories of Christmases past.

And in the morning Madeline woke to find Shula sleeping innocently, and candy and tiny gifts in her shoes.

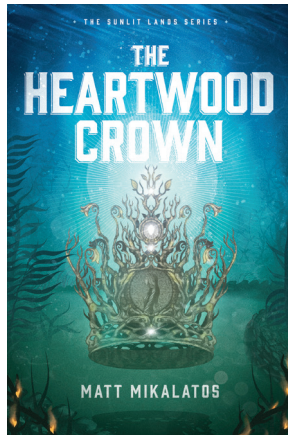
THE END

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