

+ THE SUNLIT LANDS SERIES +

# THE STORY KING



MATT MIKALATOS

# PRAISE FOR THE SUNLIT LANDS SERIES

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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*

# ALSO IN THE SUNLIT LANDS SERIES

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## **NOVELS**

*The Crescent Stone*

*The Heartwood Crown*

## **SHORT STORIES**

“Our Last Christmas Together”

“Jason Wu and the Kidnapped Stories”

# THE SUNLIT LANDS

NO ONE EVER  
TALKS ABOUT  
THIS ISLAND



PASTISIA  
NECROMANCERS.  
HARD PASS

SAFE  
(MORE OR LESS)



COURT OF  
FAR SEEING



NOPE.  
NOPE!  
KAKRI  
TERRITORIES  
NOPE!!

TOLMIN PASS



WASTED  
LANDS  
GROSS

SHARK PEOPLE?!  
NO THANKS

TREES? VIL-PROBABLY  
FINE?

YUCK!  
LIZARDS



THE  
SOUTHERN  
COURT

GINIAN SEA

N

ALUVOREA

# COSMOLOGICAL MAP

OF THE SUNLIT LANDS



BILLY

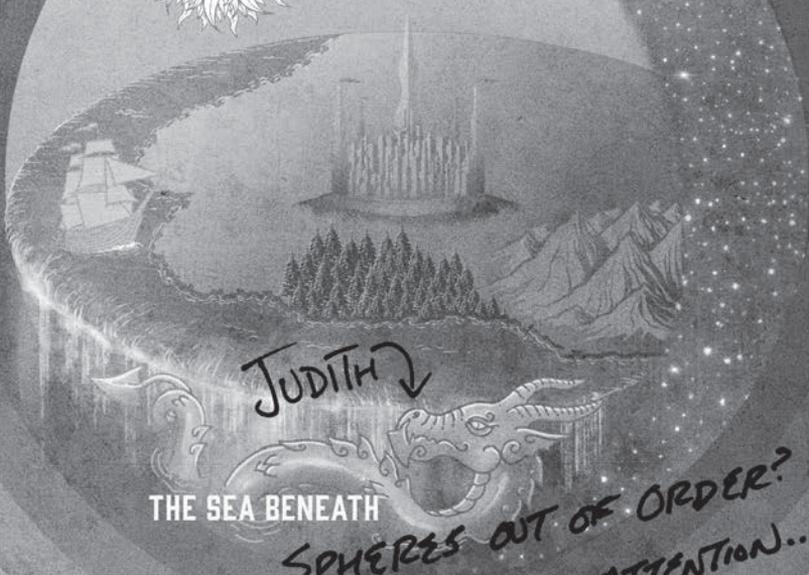


APPA



SUN SPHERE

STAR SPHERE



JUDITH

THE SEA BENEATH

MOON SPHERE

SPHERES OUT OF ORDER?  
I WASNT PAYING ATTENTION...

PLANETARY SPHERES

CELESTIAL SPHERE



FRANCESCA (?)



"MR. FREEDOM"

THE EAGLE





**THE SUNLIT LANDS**

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**BOOK THREE**





THE  
STORY  
KING

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MATT MIKALATOS



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

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*To JR. and Amanda Forasteros,  
who teach the world about hospitality, friendship, and love.  
They are heroes in every story told about them.*

# CAST OF CHARACTERS

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**AMIRA**—Shula’s younger sister

**ARAKAM**—a prophetic dragon

**ARCHON THENODY**—the former chief magistrate and supreme ruler of the Elenil

**BAILEYA**—a Kakri warrior and Jason’s former fiancée

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

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

**BOULOS**—Shula’s older brother

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

**CLAWDIA**—a Kharobem with the appearance of a lion cub

**CUMBERLAND ARMSTRONG WALKER**—Darius’s “grandfather”

**CRUKIBAL**—a prince of the Maegrom

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

**DAVID GLENN**—an American human; close friends with Keko and Jason

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

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

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

**FANTOK**—a sovereign of the Kharobem

**FATHER TONY**—a Catholic priest

**FERNANDA ISABELA FLORES DE CASTILLA**—Lady of Westwind; the Knight of the Mirror's beloved

**GILENYIA**—an influential Elenil; Hanali's cousin

**HANALI**—an influential Elenil who has recruited many humans to the Sunlit Lands

**IAN**—king of Pastisia

**JASON WU [WU SONG]**—an American human who has spent a year in the desert attempting to become Kakri; always tells the truth

**JENNY WU**—Jason's sister

**JORDAN WALKER**—Darius's father

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

**KNIGHT OF THE MIRROR**—a human who eschews magic; onetime servant of the Elenil

**KYLE OLIVER**—Madeline's father

**LELISE**—ruler of the Southern Court

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

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

**MALGWIN**—ruler of the Sea Beneath

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

**MOTHER CROW**—a Kakri matriarch

**MRS. RAYMOND [MARY PATRICIA WALL]**—an English human woman who runs the Transition House for humans in the Sunlit Lands; wife of King Ian

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

**NIGHTFALL**—a Scim child thought to have been killed by the Elenil, but in actuality “reeducated” by Archon Thenody

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

THE STORY KING

**PATRA KOJA**—the antlered spirit of a Maduvorean marsh

**RANA**—a storyteller

**REMI**—the Guardian of the Wind

**RICARDO SÁNCHEZ**—a human servant of Gilenya

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

**RUTH MBEWE**—a young Zambian human

**SHULA BISHARA**—a Syrian human; adoptive mother to Yenil

**SOCHAR**—an Elenil guard known for his violent treatment of the Scim

**VASILISA “VASYA” MARKOVA**—a friend of Shula’s family

**WENDY OLIVER**—Madeline’s mother

**YENIL**—a young Scim girl

# PART 1

## THE BEGINNING

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*There is a being called the Story King. If there is a more vast and ancient being, I know not of him. His attention roves to and fro throughout the universe, and if one seeks—as I do—power for personal gain, one would be wise to avoid his gaze. I invest great energy in disguising my small endeavor here upon the plantation, for if he knew of it, surely he would confound my every effort. He cannot be defended against, for a story slips past all defenses. He cannot be defeated, only stalled. He cannot be destroyed, for it is said that he has died and yet he lives. And his servants are living Stories, sent to do his bidding.*

FROM THE MAGICIAN'S GRIMOIRE



# 1

## THE KAKRI TERRITORIES

*I know this story. I feel I have heard it, many years ago.*

THE KNIGHT OF THE MIRROR



I can tell you a story that will change the world.” The old woman said these words without looking at Jason Wu. She poked the fire with a stick, and a burst of sparks rose toward the stars, which shone far brighter here in the Kakri territories than Jason had ever seen on Earth.

In the last year, Jason had learned many things. How to drink water from the gourd of a tree called the pentex (or, as Jason liked to call it, the Knife-Bladed Widow-Maker. He was pretty sure he would have scars). How to track the canny wylna to its lair and trap it inside. How to hide in the sand if something was hunting you. How to survive a sandstorm, how to start a fire, and how to sleep despite the cold when fires were impossible. He had made friends with a Maegrom, and he had broken an ancient curse. He had freed a Kharobem—a living story—from slavery. But he had never figured out how to tell when Mother Crow was joking.

He thought she was serious. She didn’t make jokes when bargaining

with a story. Stories were the cornerstone of the Kakri economy, and several Kakri sayings put stories at the same level as breath and water and food. Story was life. Life was story.

This was how a bargain started. The storyteller told you what sort of story she would tell you. It could be something useful like “I can tell you a story about what is good to eat in the desert.” Or it could be something entertaining: “I can tell you a story that will make the listeners laugh every time they think of it.” Jason grinned remembering that one. A story could be described any number of ways. The story of how the Peasant King made the crystal spheres. The story of how Mother Crow got her name. Learning the right way to pitch a story to your audience, that was part of the bargain.

For instance, Jason had successfully pitched “Little Red Riding Hood” to Mother Crow by saying, “I can tell you the story of a girl eaten by a wolf.” Mother Crow’s eyes had lit up at that. She loved survival stories, as did most of the Kakri. Stories that helped you navigate the world were gold, and Mother Crow said the oldest stories were things like “I saw a scorpion near the water hole today.” Stories that warned you of danger or prepared you for the risks ahead. She had, to Jason’s surprise, loved “Little Red Riding Hood” and said it was about obeying your mother. Jason told her it was about not getting too close to your grandmother, and Mother Crow had laughed and laughed at that. Sometimes she called him Little Red now, which he didn’t love, but it made her happy.

She had never offered a story like this. One that would change the world. As the potential receiver of the tale, Jason could ask a few questions. You weren’t allowed to ask questions that gave away too much of the story, because she wouldn’t share it for free. The last question the recipient asked was the price. But first it was important to know what you were buying. “A story that will change the world,” Jason said, trying to act indifferent. “Change it for the better or make it worse?”

Mother Crow smiled at him, pleased with the question. “Better for some, worse for others. It will throw down kings and raise up cities. It will destroy governments and create worlds.”

“I thought it was a story, not a riddle.”

Mother Crow thought that was particularly funny. “A riddle is only a story you do not yet understand.”

“Uh-huh.” Jason threw some twigs into the fire and watched them turn bright orange before twisting away into ash. “I hate riddles.”

“Remember Nian. He was a puzzle to me. That story was a riddle.”

Two days ago Jason had told her the story of the monster Nian, who came down into the village to hunt people. A wise old man in the village suggested that the people band together and make a lot of noise, so they beat drums and lit firecrackers, and the monster was so terrified he ran in circles until he exhausted himself and the people caught and killed him.

Mother Crow had sensed there was something more to the story, and Jason had decided to make her guess instead of telling her straight out. She had pestered him and guessed and clapped her hands in his face, and he had enjoyed having a few hours of power over her for once. She had said, “You’ve only given me a piece of the tale.”

“You bought a story,” he said. “And I gave it to you.”

So she had bought another story from him. The story of Nian’s name. Jason was pleased because he got a really great Kakri story in exchange—the story of the gigantic stone creatures out in the Kakri territories that moved so slowly you almost couldn’t tell that they moved at all. He and his former fiancé, Baileyya (long story), had passed them when they were on the run from her brothers, who were trying to kill Jason (an even longer story). These creatures, it turned out, had been sent to destroy the Sunlit Lands. They were going to break the entire world apart, or so it was said. Mother Crow said, “This is a true prophecy and a true story.” Many years ago a powerful magician had cast a spell on them that made them move so slowly, they were no danger to anyone. “But one day, it is said, they will destroy the Sunlit Lands.” It was an interesting story, and he had definitely gotten the better part of the bargain.

Mother Crow had told him the story of the living stone creatures, and he had told her about Nian. How the monster’s name was also the Chinese word for “year.” That’s why the New Year celebration included fireworks and the beating of drums.

Mother Crow had complimented him on the canny deal and said, “A single word can hold a thousand stories.” Which, honestly, had sounded like another riddle.

He could ask more questions, but Mother Crow had pitched the story

just right. He knew he wanted it. Of course, he could always ask for it another night, but what if she didn't feel like it then? She said there were seasons for some stories—special times, perfect moments. Some stories might come and go. You could pass on a story today and never have the opportunity to hear it again. So he could ask questions, but there was only one question that mattered.

“How much does it cost?”

Mother Crow's eyes sparkled. She stirred the fire with her stick. She knew he wanted the story. He should have asked more questions. He had set himself up for a terrible bargain. He wasn't ready for what Mother Crow said next, though. She settled on the stone she used as a chair and put her hands on her knees. She watched the stars for a moment as if adding all the costs in her head.

“It costs your entire life,” she said at last. “Only your entire life.”

“That seems a little steep,” Jason said.

“To hear it is free,” Mother Crow said. “But to tell it requires a lifetime of practice.”

“All I want is to hear it.”

Mother Crow said nothing to this. She watched the fire, a smile on her face. She knew he wanted the story, but she wasn't going to give him the hard sell. She just waited for him to bite again.

“So it must be a rare story,” he said, “to be worth so much.”

“It is common.” Mother Crow paused and looked into the darkness beyond the fire. She listened for a long moment as if tracking something that had made a small sound and then fallen silent. At last she turned her attention back to Jason. “It is common and a well-known story among the Kakri. Every child knows this story.”

“Then it's worthless.”

The old woman sighed. “Have you learned so little, Wu Song? It is common, but it is precious. As common and precious as air. Would you rather have air or a diamond? Would you prefer water or emeralds?”

“Could I have a little of both?”

As they spoke, a lion cub limped into the circle of light. Mother Crow leaned back from the fire, one eye squinted, studying the little beast. It settled down between them. “She knows you,” Mother Crow said.

Yeah, she did. She wasn't actually a lion cub at all—she was one of the Kharobem, shape-shifting creatures of the desert whom the Kakri claimed were “made of story,” whatever that meant. This one, though, wasn't like the one he had released from captivity a while back. This one Jason had saved from a pack of wylna, and she had hidden him and Bailey in a sandstorm. Later a whole bunch of Kharobem had appeared when he and Madeline had confronted the archon in one of the towers of Far Seeing.

“Maybe she wants to hear the story,” Jason suggested.

“I think not, Little Red. The Kharobem often come to watch some momentous occasion, some turning point in the history of the Sunlit Lands. They came when we left the city of Ezerbin, and they watched when the Sunlit Lands were being fashioned.” She appeared to hear a sound outside the ring of firelight. Her eyes tracked something in the distant darkness.

“Why don't we ask her?”

“The Kharobem do not answer such questions.”

“Ha, shows what you know.” Jason addressed the lion cub. “Hey, what's going on?”

The lion cub settled onto her haunches. “Many years ago,” she said, speaking with the voice of a young child, “there was a shepherd who desired the people of his village to join him in searching for and killing the wolves in the hills. But none would go. ‘The wolves have not bothered our sheep in four seasons,’ they said. ‘Let us leave them alone.’ The man grew angry, and when the villagers left the meadow, he killed ten of his own sheep. He made it look as if a great wolf had done it, and he said, ‘Every five seasons the wolves come and eat all the sheep.’ This was not true, and none could remember it, but as he told the villagers of the monstrous size of the wolf that had done this horrible thing—it had not even eaten the sheep, just destroyed them—the villagers were filled with fear. ‘Do not be afraid,’ he said, ‘but rather get your swords, your bows, your knives, and your hunting dogs.’ They set out and killed all the wolves they could find, and when it was done, the shepherd had lost only ten sheep.”

Jason rolled his eyes. “Ugh. More riddles.”

Mother Crow stared at the Kharobem, her eyes wide. “Wu Song—” she began, but then the arrow sank into her chest and she listed to the side, sliding into the sand. Jason didn't even know it was an arrow at first. He thought

some black bird—a raven—had flown at her, and he was about to say something about how strange it was when she raised her arm, eyes wide, and he saw the shaft of the arrow. Jason ran over and fell on his knees beside her.

“Come close,” she gasped. “For one last story.”

And when he leaned near her, trying to hold back his tears, she told him the story that would change the world. She lifted her hand and brushed his hair back tenderly, like a mother with her child. He put his hand over hers. She closed her eyes and breathed, ragged and tender.

“You’re going to be okay,” Jason said. He had promised never to tell a lie again, but he said this more out of hope than anything else. He didn’t know anything about arrow wounds. He would need to try to get her to the other Kakri as quickly as possible. Was it safe to move her? He wasn’t sure. But safer, surely, than staying here.

Jason recognized the fletching on the arrow. It was from the Scim. He almost stumbled into the fire when he rose. He clenched his fists and stood at the edge of the firelight. “Who did this? Show yourself! Cowards!” But there was no answer. His head, his chest felt tight, felt like he had been wedged into a crack of stone. He could barely pull a breath, and his jaws had clamped shut. He couldn’t speak, couldn’t shout. Sobs forced themselves through his teeth. He fell beside Mother Crow, cradling her head in his arms.

The lion cub gave him a pitying look with her large, dark eyes, then slipped away into the darkness. Mother Crow had fallen onto the carpet they set out between the tents. Whoever had shot that arrow was still out there—he knew that much—but he also knew he needed to get her out of the open. He dragged the carpet toward one of the tents, then pulled her the rest of the way by her arms.

She was still breathing but felt terribly cold. He put a blanket over her, carefully draping it so it wouldn’t disturb the arrow. There was very little blood, which concerned him more than buckets of it would have. He pulled the flaps of the tent shut, so that no one could get a clear shot at her, and propped her up a bit, hoping it would help her breathing.

Jason crouched at the tent door and slipped a long, curved knife into his hand. He had been practicing with various weapons in the Kakri way, and though he still wasn’t an expert, he was far, far better than he had been

a year ago. This knife was Mother Crow's. She called it her "tent knife." She had a tent knife, a cooking knife, a hunting knife, a blanket knife, a cape knife, and a ceremonial knife. No doubt she had more, but Jason had finally told her he didn't want to know about any others.

A shadow moved beyond the fire. The stranger had a hood over his face, a quiver of arrows on his back, and an arrow nocked on his bowstring. He didn't seem to know where Jason and Mother Crow were. He must have been distracted somehow after shooting her. The hooded stranger moved around the fire to the place where the carpet had been. The sand didn't leave much to the imagination about what had happened, and he followed the tracks easily to the tent. He was thin and about Jason's height. He set his bow and arrow aside, crouched down, and studied the blood on the carpet.

Jason flew from the tent, tackling the stranger. There was a brief skirmish, but a year in the desert had made Jason strong and wiry, and two quick punches—one to the kidneys and a second to the face—took most of the fight out of the man who had tried to kill Mother Crow.

The tent knife appeared at the stranger's throat. Jason wanted to say something about how he was going to kill the guy, but he had taken an oath a long time ago not to tell lies. So instead he said, "Knives are sharp, and people get hurt by them every day. Usually by cutting but also sometimes by stabbing. This is a knife I am holding to your neck right now."

The stranger fell extremely still. "Wu Song," he said. "You are making a terrible mistake."

Jason hesitated. How had this guy known his real name? He tore the stranger's hood away. "No," Jason said. "That's not possible."

"And yet you see me with your own eyes." The man grinned at him. "Surprise."