



THE UNBURIED QUEEN

A metaphysical fantasy by
Capes



Published by *Capas LLC*
2021

The Unburied Queen

Published by Capas LLC 2021
www.capescreates.com

Ebook ISBN: 978-1-7343776-6-8
Print ISBN: 978-1-7343776-5-1
Copyright © 2021 by Capes. All rights reserved.
www.capescreates.com

Edited by Ben Wolf
www.benwolf.com/editing-services

Cover design by E-Django

Available in print and ebook format on amazon.com.

All rights reserved. Non-commercial interests may reproduce portions of this book without the express written permission of the author, provided the text does not exceed 500 words. For longer quotations or commercial concerns, please contact the author via email at capesdoes@gmail.com.

Commercial interests: No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means—electronic, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without prior written permission of the author, except as provided by the United States of America copyright law.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, and incidents are all products of the author's imagination and are used for fictional purposes. Any mentioned brand names, places, and trademarks remain the property of their respective owners, bear no association with the author or the publisher, and are used for fictional purposes only. Any similarities to individuals living or dead is purely coincidental. The brand 'KitKat' is used as a name in reference to a beloved cat, not a candy bar. (Although the cat was likely named in reference to the candy bar.) This brand belongs to Nestlé.

TOTW
INGC

DEDICATION



For Freya & the Goddesses in the Willow

THE ISLAND

SPLIT

FOREST OF SPIDERS

MIST

ROOST

FOREST OF GEMS

CLOUDSPY

POND

OASIS

THE RIVER

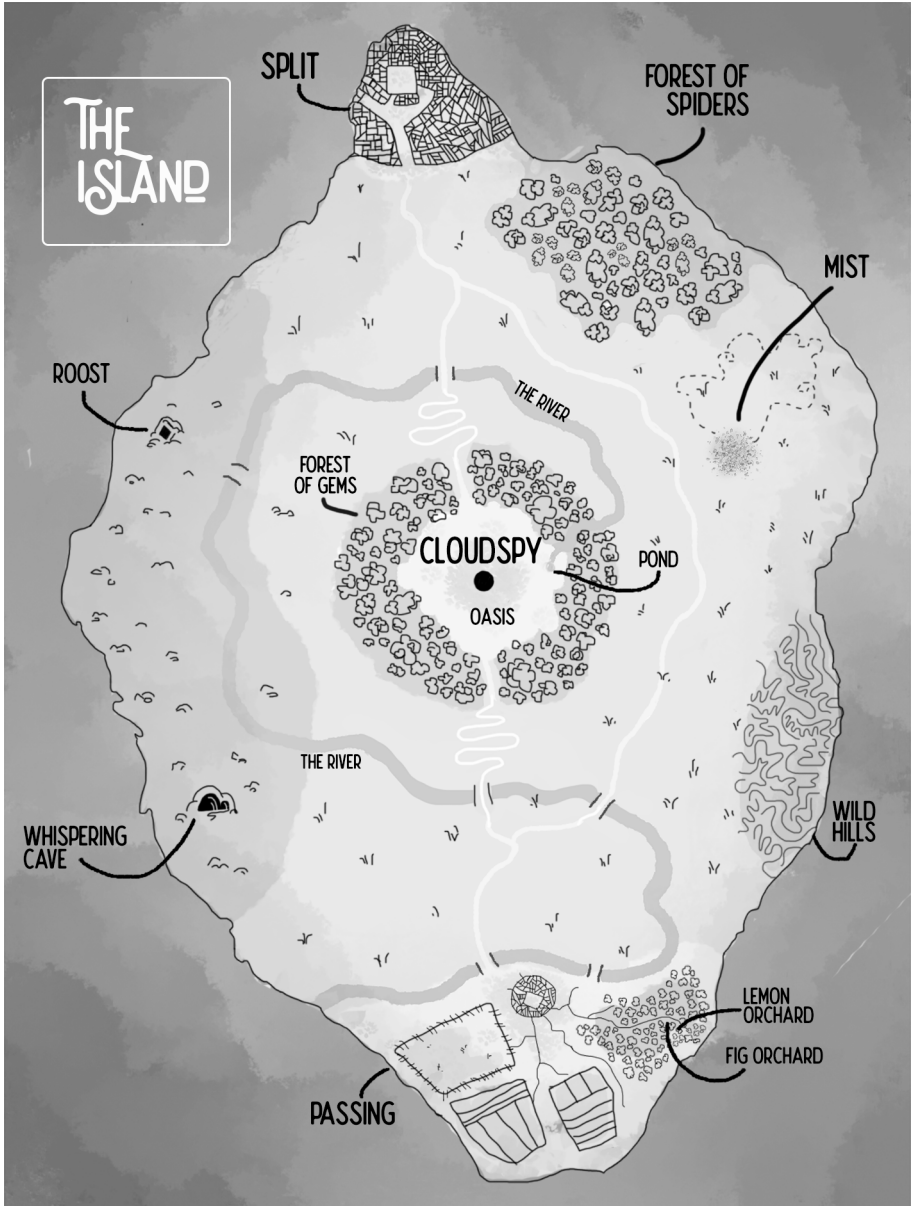
WHISPERING CAVE

WILD HILLS

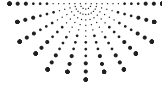
PASSING

LEMON ORCHARD

FIG ORCHARD

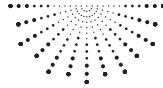


PART I



Those who lived on the Island had no word for death.

LOON



“The Islanders wouldn’t do much if they found out what I was. Don’t you ever wonder if all the fuss is for nothing?”

Above Loon, a wide pine tree cast a fig-scented shadow, and it was making her hungry.

She went on with a flick of her hand. “Maybe they’d stare for a few days, ask some weird questions. But then they’d go back to normal.”

King Godwit raised an eyebrow. “Unless they decided to worship you. The Island comes before all glory, Loon.”

Between the pair sat a plate stacked with cleanly cut fruits. Nearby lay a pile of soft, golden veils and the crystal-beaded cords used to secure them to the head.

Loon sifted through the assortment of apples, figs, and pale grapes. Hers was a modest birthday celebration, but they always were. Father and daughter sat hidden away in the farthest reaches of the Oasis, where one pine tree grew wide rather than tall. They lounged beneath its broad shadows, crisscrossed with bare branches and dangling acorns.

Loon shrugged. “Nomor knows what I am. She doesn’t worship me.”

“That doesn’t mean you had the right to tell her. A Royal’s closest

tie isn't to another Islander, but the land. It isn't our job to rule, but to support the Mages and their ability to execute the Island's will."

Loon said no more. Though she wasn't convinced it was necessary for her to be anonymous as a Royal, the tradition was ancient as the Island.

She could hear King Godwit's voice in her head, *We don't tend the Island because it's kind to us. We tend the Island because it also serves us, and in this mutual service, there is balance and fertility.*

As though in response, a breeze shivered through the canopy. Loon leaned her head back into the current. Wind wove through her hair, scented of geraniums. It comforted her like the warmth of sunshine.

King Godwit kept his eyes closed for a moment longer, then looked at Loon. "You always reminded me the most of Queen Petrel."

Loon took a bite of fig and waited for him to go on. His aging had made him predictable—unless it was Loon herself who was maturing rapidly.

"Though you don't smell of geraniums how she did," he continued. "You have your own scent. You always have."

Loon licked her fingers clean. "I smell like figs. Everyone says so."

"They said the same of your mother with geraniums. Before she became Heart, you could smell her in the Palace from ten rooms away. Her scent carried through the halls. It got sweeter right before the trance... I could smell her everywhere in those weeks."

Loon returned her father's smile, more for his sake than her own.

He'd changed in the past year, prone to tugging on his grand, mahogany beard, and grinning at Loon with twinkling eyes.

"You're getting sentimental. It's because Rook's getting married soon, isn't it?" She peeled the skin off a second fig in the shade. "If you're this upset to see your youngest son married, imagine how you'll feel when it's my turn. Last daughter *and* last child."

King Godwit wiped his hands clean and reached for a cluster of grapes. "Do you suppose you'll get married? I know it's common in Cloudspy, but it's rare elsewhere on the Island. Few marry in Split or Passing."

She arched her eyebrows. Loon had always imagined herself with a husband. “I’m Cloudspian, aren’t I?”

“And children? Have you thought of that? The Island relies on you and your siblings to create heirs, just in case... just in case...”

Loon nodded. “In case we become the next Heart.”

Her eyes drifted to the path beyond the squat tree they sat under. It passed between the wild, overgrown pampas grass and cattails in the northeastern corner of the Oasis.

The sage-colored reeds grew in dense, jagged patches. Every time she passed through the thicket, tendrils clung to her veil and scratched her cheeks.

Loon looked back at King Godwit. “If I didn’t live at Cloudspy, coming up here to wash my face in the Pond would take an entire afternoon.” The more she considered the idea, the less she liked it. “I can’t live in Split. It’s too cold, and who wants to live around all that stone? Everyone there is so serious... brooding.”

Loon wished Nomor were here to explain. Of the pair, Nomor had a way with words; Loon tried to phrase her thoughts how her friend would. “I like the festivals in Passing, but the city is a bit mundane. It smells like cows. And cow shit.”

As though it might have disappeared, Loon bent onto an elbow to stare up at Cloudspy Palace, visible from the far edge of the Oasis.

In the late dawn, milky light hit the proud walls perfectly. The uneven obsidian composing the Palace and Tower above shimmered in the sunlight.

The hallowed rock occupied the land’s highest peak, visible across the entire diamond-shaped isle. Grand archways functioned as windows, encircling the Palace floor by floor. Hungry vines and creepers from the Oasis crept up into the archways. They serpentine all the way to the Palace’s seventh floor, lining the black obsidian with vibrant green veins.

Commoners and Royals alike lived inside. Still, whether by force of steep incline or daunting beauty, Cloudspy remained the least populous of the Island’s three cities.

Loon looked around at the peaceful Oasis. Leaves danced in the

breeze and flowers opened toward the sunlight. Hidden within the luxurious bushes and trees, birds sang sweetly.

King Godwit took a deep breath. “I saw Pipit yesterday. She said you’ve been attending the Mage’s lectures.” It had been Nomor’s idea to attend the lectures, but Loon didn’t mention that as he reached into the satchel strung over his shoulder. He pulled out a palmful of tiny glass charms. Five pieces caught the light as he offered them to Loon. “These are from your siblings. A gift from each. I can’t remember who gave me which...”

Loon cupped her hands and collected the pieces. She brought them close to her face to study each, wondering which charm came from which sibling.

Though she knew the faces of her brothers and sisters and could guess at each’s personality based on the gifts they’d sent her over the years, each Royal grew up isolated from their siblings.

Guardians raised them in the same vast Palace among fostered children from across the Island. Anonymity prioritized the Island’s wellbeing over the celebrity of the Royal line—but it also protected Royals from undue scrutiny and attention.

Though Loon wouldn’t have minded living publicly as a Royal, she was certain her siblings felt differently.

Only King Godwit, their father, linked all six brothers and sisters with subtle exchanges and important announcements.

Loon tucked the pieces away, then fished out a bauble she’d brought. “Here. I got this for Rook. It’s just a leaf. You can slip it into his hand after the wedding.”

King Godwit accepted the charm, then frowned. “I won’t be officiating his ceremony. It’s too risky.”

“Why? You did it for Lark, Cygnini, Pipit, Jackdaw... No one suspected you were their father. You officiate too many weddings for anyone to connect you—”

“The Islanders are speculating more these days. It’s been twenty years since Queen Petrel became Heart. You know how the Island gets, Loon. People look sideways. They whisper. They notice little details, especially about those who live at Cloudspy. Rook’s eyes look so much like mine...”

“Well, give the charm back.” Loon stuck her hand out with a tsk. “I’ll take it to him myself.”

King Godwit patted his satchel. “*That* would be even riskier.” His face tightened. He leaned over the plate of fruit to grab Loon’s hand, still sticky from peeling figs. “Loon, I—”

“Concerts!” Her mouth popped open as she remembered. “There aren’t concerts like ours in Passing or Split. The Palace makes for great acoustics.”

King Godwit’s taut expression hadn’t changed. “Have you washed at the Pond today?”

Loon glanced again at the narrow path, invisible to all but her and her five siblings. She’d brought a long-sleeved tunic to navigate the prickly cattails and pampas grass easier.

Just beyond, she caught sight of Nomor rushing through the Oasis. Her long, slender legs moved quickly while she jerked her veil into place at her crown. Loon didn’t mind she was late for her birthday celebration; she’d stayed up just as late the night before, drinking wine and spying on their latest love interests.

Loon looked down at the King’s hand. It was coarse and old, twice the size of hers. “I’ll go once we finish the fruit. Are you feeling alright...?”

Loon wanted to say *Father*.

She rarely wanted to use that word.

King Godwit was just that: King.

Even as a toddler, Loon couldn’t separate which pieces of her father belonged to her and which belonged to the Islanders who relied on his leadership. She’d never found an answer, though she didn’t know if it mattered.

Like Godwit said, the Island came before all glory.

And Royals belonged to the Island.

Though some people wagered on the gender of the next Heart, most left the chosen lineage to enjoy life while they could, because all knew what kept the Island fertile, gentle, and resplendent.

A Royal’s life.

One from each generation born to the King and Queen paid that price to become the Island’s next Heart.

Royals washed their faces in the Pond until one failed to return from the place beyond the reeds.

Queen Petrel had been a mother of six when a geranium-scented breeze lured her into the Pond's clear, still waters.

"Does she look the same?" King Godwit whispered, eyes wide and trembling. He barely glanced at Nomor as she sat down near the plate of fruit. As though sensing the tense mood, Nomor tore off a cluster of grapes rather than sign a greeting.

"You ask me that like my answer will change." Loon squeezed his hand. "She's beautiful as ever."

"And her body... it's not floating close to the surface of the Pond? There's a legend that—"

"I know the legends, King—"

"Call me Father. It's your birthday. Just today. Please."

"*Father.*"

Loon glanced at Nomor, whose chewing had slowed. Nomor's ability to lipread was dependent on conditions like good lighting, having a grasp of the topic at hand, and familiarity with the speaker.

Still, Loon figured she could read the word *father* on her lips. She flexed the hand King Godwit held, hoping he would release her so they could transition to signing. Otherwise, Nomor would sit through their conversation without participating, and Loon would have to interpret their conversation later based on memory.

And Nomor would certainly wonder why Loon was calling King Godwit her father—not based on their relationship, but the fact that Royals weren't meant to live in cahoots.

"Queen Petrel looks the same as always. Peaceful and happy." Loon held the King's eyes as they filled with tears. "I don't remember her face, since I was so little when she became Heart... but I think she's smiling in an understated way. Cygnini agrees. And she's the oldest, so she remembers Queen Petrel's—"

"Call her Mother. Please. Just once, Loon." King Godwit remained hovering over the plate of fruit, hand wrapped around hers.

Loon was even less apt to say *Mother* than she was to say *Father*.

Not because of what the word insinuated, but for all that the word failed to convey.

Mother.

The word didn't do the Queen's glory justice.

On the living Island, water conducted magic across the land. Something as ordinary as a bowl of fresh water could be used to cast a spell so long as an Islander had the patience to transmute their will into the water. It took some years to learn, but magicians lived in all three cities.

Only the Heart was born as a living spell, with magic in their veins. Nestled in the Pond, freshwater extracted the latent magic from the Heart's physical form. From her place in the Pond, the River ferried Queen Petrel's magical vitality through watersheds that ran across the Island like blood vessels.

Water from the Pond fed the fields that grew crops, filled the reservoirs where all drank, pushed endlessly against the water mills, and washed linens and bodies. Imbued with Queen Petrel's magic, the water provided vital nutrients; fruits often grew throughout the wintertime, while outbreaks of illnesses were infrequent.

Loon could feel that same power within herself—a kernel that might lie dormant forever, or that might awaken and lure her beneath the water.

Either way, she accepted her fate.

Loon was Royal.

And, as much as she adored him, King Godwit was born a scribe in Split. He'd become Royal only when he married Queen Petrel. Islanders revered him not for the marriage he'd secured, but for all that he would sacrifice in the coming years.

For this, Loon whispered, "*Mother.*"

King Godwit smiled. Pooled tears trickled down his cheeks.

Nomor bent forward suddenly and seized King Godwit's hand in both of hers. Finger by finger, she pried his grip from Loon's hand.

Royals were meant to stay anonymous, not to mingle.

Certainly not to cling.

Loon watched Nomor pry his fingers loose and thought it seemed like a countdown.

CAPES

Five, then four.

Three.

Two.

One.

With a sigh, Loon stood. She reached for her veil as Nomor and King Godwit faced one another to sign. She paused as he asked if the pair would be attending an upcoming inauguration; the Mage of Split would name her Apprentice soon. Though she wanted to chime in, Loon decided to join the conversation after she returned from the Pond.

She secured the gold tulle over her body by winding the cord of obsidian crystals around her temple.

Then Loon stood, brushed the pine needles from her sarong, and ducked away from the broad tree.

She took the slender path to the Pond. As usual, the clinging pampas and cattails caught against her cotton sarong and veil, which took time to free from the stalks.

As she reached the oval clearing, she tugged her veil aside. Out of sight, a gurgling spring provided a consistent dribble that fed the Pond, fed the River, fed the Island. She kneeled before the body of clear water where the Island's Heart floated peacefully.

Queen Petrel's dark sarong and golden veil hung suspended in the water. The veil collected above her black hair, which surrounded her face like a splotch of ink, rippling gently.

Loon stared down at the Heart's long lashes and full lips with a gentle smile. "Today is my twentieth birthday."

She reached into the cool water to free a piece of hair caught in the corner of Queen Petrel's mouth. The same happened to Loon all the time.

"He misses you. King Godwit. My father. Your husband."

Loon never spoke much during her trips to the Pond, focusing instead on the idea that the sentient Island used the Pond like an eye. She strove to present herself as a Royal in bodily gestures to whatever force watched from within the water.

This trip was no different.

She took a deep breath and bent at the waist toward the surface.

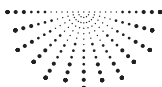
She stared down for a long moment before cupping her hands and taking up the chilly water. She splashed it onto her face and scrubbed it while breathing out with her nose.

The rest of the Island ceased to exist in those seconds.

Loon lost herself in the water's geranium scent and silky caress.

It always lingered on her skin for days afterward.

KALA



The layers of shadow and stone in Split were making Kala nervous.

The wind racing through the streets on the Island's northernmost tip didn't help. Just like Cloudspy tended to make Kala feel insignificant, if not ugly, Split left him feeling dumb and impermanent.

He stared across the street into the windows of the cluttered shop. Mounds of rolled parchment teetered below candelabras consumed in wax. Workers milled from desks to chests of drawers while the reflections of passersby crisscrossed the shop's glass windows.

Kala thought of his wooden cabin outside Passing, of the chipped clay shingles on its roof and the rotted wooden planks of its porch.

By comparison, Split seemed just as indestructible as the obsidian of Cloudspy Palace.

At Kala's side, his best friend seemed at ease in the city of cobblestone streets and two- and three-story buildings. He leaned against the wall of a bakery and whistled a light-hearted tune.

Peter nodded toward the scribe's shop. "Should we go in?"

Kala shook his head and glanced through the crowd. "Tetra said to wait here."

“Didn’t he also say not to bring the bat?”

He slid his eyes toward Peter. “I didn’t invite Moses. He’s a bat. He can fly wherever he likes.”

Moses, perched atop Kala’s shoulder, let out a squawk that startled passing Splitians. As large as his head, the bat’s barrel chest was top-heavy. He relied on the claws at the crest of his rubbery wings to cling to Kala’s earlobe, or his hair, or the collar of his huipil.

Peter raised an eyebrow. “Did you forget to feed him? He looks finicky.”

“He ate before we left. I doubt we’ll stay long.” Kala lowered his voice. “You know how it is here. Everyone moves so quickly. Mage Cassandra will come out of her Tower, name her Apprentice, and we’ll be back in Passing before Moses gets hungry again.”

“Sure, but the walk back takes forever. He can have this.” Peter reached into his satchel and pulled out a bright green fruit. “Plus, we’ll probably stay around to celebrate with Tetra after the ceremony.”

Moses lunged for the fruit before Peter could hand it off. The bat’s tiny, sharp teeth nicked his pointer. With a curse, Peter folded his finger into the cotton fabric of his huipil.

As Moses gnashed into the fruit, Kala fidgeted with his clothes. Both he and Peter wore bright red, which stuck out compared to the navy and gray cloaks worn in Split.

Not only were they wearing the colors of Passing, but the edges of their square garments were frayed and faded after years of harvesting figs.

Much like the stone buildings, the cloaks worn by Splitians seemed effortlessly immortal. Kicked up by the frequent breeze, the cloaks made the streets seem clogged with phantoms.

Peter elbowed Kala. “Stop looking so nervous. Cassandra is going to name your brother the Apprentice of Split and—”

“We don’t know that. Mage Cassandra hasn’t confirmed her appointment yet.”

“Oh, come on. I can’t think of anyone who’s as hardworking and discerning as Tetra.”

“I agree... but I never leave Passing. I know little of Split, and even less of Cloudspy. The same goes for Tetra.” Kala could see it in his head; a casual magician bent over a bowl of water, murmuring hurriedly before casting the water into the dirt. Magic made little sense to him, and he knew his brother felt the same. “I don’t understand what the Mage of the Island’s most magical city could see in him.”

As though by reflex, both men leaned away from the cobbled edifice of the bakery. They bent their necks to look up at the obsidian Palace and Tower of Cloudspy looming over the Island. It gleamed wildly in the sunlight, making its black face difficult to study. Ripe emerald vegetation climbed into the huge archways as though in search of something.

Pete whistled low. “Thank the Island the Mage of Cloudspy didn’t choose Tetra to be her Apprentice instead.”

Moses thrashed as he tore more skin from the apple. With a *tsk*, Kala ducked his head around the bat. “Why? Dremza’s an honored Mage. Certainly more so than Mage Cassandra.”

“Cloudspy’s too far away to visit regularly. Walking up there would be exhausting. Plus, Tetra would have to wear a veil, and we’d never know if it was him or not. We’d have to hear his voice or get close to his face just to be sure.” Peter checked on his finger. The bleeding had stopped, but Moses’ fang marks were stark against his pointer. “I don’t like the veils they wear up there. Never have. It feels *tricky*.”

“Peter, you only say that because you get by on your good looks. The veils aren’t compulsory. It’s just a measure to provide Royals with an ordinary life and allow Cloudspians to—”

“To live free of physical judgment and representation.” Peter bobbed his head as he recited the common trope.

“Exactly. I think it’s nice.”

“Really? I don’t think I’d be able to breathe. Imagine trying to harvest figs with one of those veils.”

Kala rolled his eyes. “They aren’t compulsory. Sometimes I think you like to argue just hear your own voice.”

“No, no. I argue on instinct. I’m just saying there are days when even our loincloths feel like a layer too many.”

Kala ignored Peter’s last comment.

He fixed his eyes on the wooden door of the shop across the street. A river of Splitsians continued to advance toward the Tower of Split, blocking the entrance.

The spliced ends of conversations and the rushed pace of steps overwhelmed Kala. He glanced again at the Tower of Split, peeking above the rooftops.

Much like the obsidian of Cloudspy and the shining wood of Passing, the local tower in Split represented its people. Lined with white marble, the monument had the valiant glow of an unsheathed weapon.

There, Cassandra fulfilled the responsibility of each of the Island’s Mages: to read a Manuscript and train an Apprentice to inherit their position. In Cloudspy, Apprentices learned of wellness; in Split, they learned of magic; in Passing, they learned of fertility.

But the genius of the Mages and their Apprentices was finite.

Kala eyed the white Tower with his eyebrows bunched. He struggled to imagine Tetra living in Split. It almost seemed like a punishment to live without the scent of soil and flowers common in Passing; the constant birdsong and buzz of insects in their fig orchard; the wooden cabin that had been passed down for generations.

Peter elbowed him, then followed his gaze to the Tower. “Is that what’s bothering you? You’re nervous about Tetra reading the Manuscript someday, aren’t you?”

With a raucous hack, Moses dispelled the apple’s core into the migrating crowd. It bounced off a man’s shoulder and fell beneath the drifting fabric and shuffling feet. The stranger studied the stain on his cloak and shook his head disdainfully at Kala and Peter.

Kala raised a hand toward the Islander, but he kept moving. “He’s not domesticated!”

Peter pushed on as though nothing had happened. “*I’d* be upset about the Manuscript if it—”

“Why should I be?” Kala clicked his jaw. He wouldn’t let the vast

difference between what he felt inside and what the Island expected of him to undermine their day. “If Cassandra chooses Tetra to become the Apprentice of Split, it will be an honor for him to read the Manuscript. Tetra will continue the Island’s legacy of magic.”

“Please, Kala. We can recite every fairytale about the Island we want, but the fate of the Mages is just as fucked up as the fate of the Royals.”

Kala clicked his jaw again, hoping Peter would drop the subject.

Instead, his friend raised a finger as he went on. “You may not have any problem with the *idea* of your brother losing his sanity to that Manuscript, but wait until you see him running around like Mang, screaming at tapestries and rearranging furniture for no reason. I can’t imagine how Mang keeps the Island fertile when he can barely go an hour without pissing himself.”

Kala adjusted his huipil. “It’s an honor. I won’t see it as anything else.”

“I’ll be there when you change your mind.”

“Is that why you agreed to move to the orchard with me? Just to say *I told you so* someday?”

“Sure. Let’s go with that. Hey, I know what’ll cheer you up.”

Kala froze as Peter glanced through the passing throng. “Please don’t do this,” he whispered.

A trio of young women in flowing navy cloaks floated by. The woman nearest them had thick curls of tawny hair and lips the color of hibiscus. The trio left a scent of bergamot and the sounds of high-pitched, hushed words in their wake.

“Excuse me,” Peter called.

Kala pressed himself against the wall as half the crowd turned toward him and Peter. As if the red huipils weren’t conspicuous enough.

The women huddled close as Peter stared at their leader. With a shy movement, he angled his head so that his firm jaw and lover’s lips were on full display. Kala had seen the movement countless times before.

He stood through the subsequent small talk and avoided the urge to roll his eyes.

When the women finally moved on with a flourish of giggles, Peter elbowed Kala. “Go on, then. Your turn.”

“If you could hear yourself from my place, you wouldn’t be so self-assured. You sound like an idiot. If I said those things to Vermilion—”

“Her name was Vinhilda.”

“—she’d call her father over here to beat me.”

“That’s because you always look at their tits. Gotta keep your eyes up. When you feel their gaze shift, that’s when you can glance down.”

Kala shook his head, turning toward Peter. “I know when to look—”

“I thought I told you not to bring the bat.” Tetra appeared before them, ducking through the crowd. It took Kala a moment to recognize his brother, who now wore the gray cloak and black tunic of Splitians. “And keep your voices down if you’re going to keep up the tits talk. I’m not sure it’s a topic befitting Apprentices.”

With a blinding smile that relieved the tension of his words, Tetra embraced Kala. Moses leaped from his shoulder onto Peter’s with a hiss.

Pressed near, Tetra whispered, “It will all be different now.”

The words sent a stone-shadowed chill up Kala’s spine.

His brother pulled away, still wearing the same vibrant smile. Sharing the same height, weight, and facial features, only the hue of Tetra’s irises distinguished the pair.

Kala stared into his brother’s fair, amber eyes. Near his pupils, they seemed flecked with pure gold.

Aside from his eyes, Tetra’s smile always seemed wider than Kala’s, too. His teeth always whiter, and his charcoal hair perfectly tossed. Now that Tetra had the beginning of a beard, Kala wondered what he would look like with facial hair.

He glanced again at the marble Tower that loomed above the rooftops.

Tetra went on, “It’s official. Cassandra chose me as her Apprentice. Looks like you need to find someone to fill my room at the

orchard.” He clapped Kala’s shoulders before turning toward Peter. “Unless this one’s already volunteered.”

Peter stepped forward to embrace Tetra, sending Moses scrambling back to his original perch. “I couldn’t leave Kala on his own. I’m the harvest muscle, after all.”

“Harvest muscle? I suppose it’s time you found steady work. Last I heard, you were dodging a hefty bill at Groog’s Tavern.”

Kala watched Tetra’s smile grow wider as the men laughed.

Even Moses seemed to relax, trading his nervous squeals for authoritative grunts.

“Come on, then. I don’t want to be late for the ceremony.” Tetra lifted a scroll tightly bound with a silver ribbon, then nodded toward the Tower. “I wanted to have my official acceptance written up by Split’s most celebrated scribe. If Cassandra doesn’t keep it for official records, maybe you can take it home to Passing. I’d like to keep some piece of myself there since I’ll be moving here.”

With a few steps, Tetra deftly pierced the crowd. Kala struggled to keep his place between his friend and brother, afraid to bump into a hustling Splitian and be lost in the rush.

In Passing, crowds meandered. Processions like the inauguration of a new Apprentice took the entire day because food, friends, and inviting patches of shade distracted the people.

In Split, Islanders moved as though anxious.

As they neared the vast square plaza that surrounded the Tower, Kala studied Tetra’s gray cloak and black tunic. He’d never seen him wear anything but the red huipils and loincloths of Passing. Around them, Splitians wore the same extended dark tunics beneath their cloaks. The loose hems flared around their calves as the fine fabric swayed back and forth.

The crowd condensed as they neared the square.

Kala and Peter pressed together, but Moses took off a moment later, yowling as he beat his wide, rubbery wings.

Suddenly, Kala realized what a horrible idea it’d been to give the bat a sour apple.

Part of him wondered if Peter had done it on purpose.

The pair followed at Tetra's heels to the Tower, where a temporary wooden scaffold leaned against its exterior.

Men with polished brass horns surrounded the makeshift platform. The wide sleeves of their cloaks collected at their elbows as they prepared their instruments.

Tetra turned to clasp Kala's shoulder. His pale eyes gleamed as a breeze tousled his hair. "We'll have so much to tell our parents when we go Beneath the Island."

Kala's mouth went dry as he thought of a response. Before he could, the men surrounding the scaffold tilted their horns skyward and blew into them. Tetra disappeared behind the men, toward the platform's stairs.

The crowd, packing further into the square at the sound of the horns, jostled Kala as he considered Tetra's words.

The pair had seldom mentioned their mother or father since a Flood had taken them from this life to Beneath the Island. In the end, there had been little to say.

There was only life on the Island, followed by another existence Beneath It.

There, Kala's parents awaited him and his brother.

The men blew their horns once more.

Bodies packed tighter.

Beyond the scaffold, the Tower gleamed with blinding light.

Mage Cassandra emerged from the arched door at its base. He saw her graying hair first, stringy and unbrushed, then her hands. They folded together gently near her abdomen.

The crowd cheered as the Mage rose onto the platform. Beneath the midday sun, her silver cloak glittered as though infused with quartz shards. It sent pocks of light onto every surface near her, blinding Kala as his brother ascended the platform to join the Mage.

His Mage, Kala realized.

Cassandra's chin remained high as she raised her hands to the crowd, which fell silent at the gesture. Only when Tetra reached her side did Kala realize how tiny Cassandra was.

She reached his brother's shoulder, and her hands, though barbed with long nails, now looked childishly small.

The Mage pulled a silken bandana from the endless sleeve of her shimmering cloak. For how frail her body seemed, she spoke in a booming tone. “As the Mage of Split, keeper of magic on the Island, I now entrust my legacy to the next generation. Tetra, do you accept a position as my Apprentice and as the future Mage of Split?”

Silently, Tetra bowed his head.

Slowly, Cassandra knotted the bandana at his jugular.

Like her cloak, ethereal quartz speckled the bandana. The crystals reflected light onto Tetra’s cheeks and brow, much like Cassandra’s cloak did upon the world.

His brother bowed at the waist, and the crowd erupted with cheers. As the people hooted and whistled, Cassandra carefully pulled Split’s rolled Manuscript from a hidden place inside her wide sleeves.

She held up the Manuscript like a baton, raising it high above her head so all could see. Then Tetra extended his hand and took up the base of the parchment.

Peter wrapped an arm around Kala’s shoulders, but the touch only weighed him down.

Kala wanted it to stop.

He suddenly wanted to prevent Tetra from accepting the position—but it wasn’t his place to interfere with the Mages and their Apprentices.

He watched Cassandra and Tetra hold the ancient tome as though it wouldn’t eat their sanity idea by idea, thought by thought, memory by memory.

The crowd’s roaring increased, but a distinct squawk distracted Kala.

Too late, he remembered Moses.

Just as Cassandra and Tetra made to exit the platform, the bat’s dark silhouette appeared from the far side of the vast square. Some in the crowd cried out at the creature’s sudden, disjointed flight, but not loudly enough to warn those who lingered closest to the Tower.

Kala saw the bat’s final bank before, with a battle cry, Moses shat precisely over Cassandra’s head.

But with a splayed hand, the Mage of Split projected an invisible barrier from her palm that shielded her from the plummeting feces.

Kala was too stunned and aghast at Moses to marvel at the unexpected feat of magic. He shrunk into the crowd, certain someone would tie the bat back to him and his conspicuous red huipil. As though doing the same, Peter retracted his arm from Kala.

As Moses disappeared skyward, Splitians erupted with celebratory cries at the feat of their Mage.

“How’d she do that?” Peter asked. “I thought she’d need water to cast a spell like that.”

With a jubilant laugh, a navy-cloaked man leaned toward the pair. “She’s the Mage of Split! She’s the most powerful magician on the Island! And where do all powerful magicians get water from in times of need?”

The man pointed to his mouth as he bared a smile at the pair.

Peter’s eyes widened, and he swiveled away from Kala to engage the stranger. “*Spit?* Is that what you mean?”

“Sure is! Only casual magicians need a bowl of water. A *Mage* needs far, far less to cast a spell. You know, there’s a...”

The two men bantered on, but Kala stared at the empty platform, now covered in shit. He hadn’t noticed the Mage and Apprentice depart, and couldn’t see either of them behind the platform.

Tetra’s words orbited his mind.

We’ll have so much to tell our parents when we go Beneath the Island.

As a former Mage, Tetra would have much to say when he finally went Beneath the Island.

And what would Kala say?

He stared at the wooden platform until a sudden fig-scented breeze distracted him. He lifted his chin, indulging in the fragrant gust that reminded him of warm soil, of trident-shaped leaves, of the orchard he called home.

He tracked the scent to two golden veils amid the crowd of gray and navy cloaks.

One of the Cloudspians faced the opposite direction, but he was certain one veiled face stared at him.

CAPES

Kala gazed back and wondered if the Islander felt as out of place as he did in his red huipil. He wondered if they smelled figs, too.

Feeling alone and hopeless despite the crowd, he raised his hand and waved.

Before the Cloudspian could react, Peter pulled Kala around by the shoulder. “Ready to go? This guy knows of a great pub. He says it’s close.”

Kala jerked back toward the Cloudspian but saw only a sea of Splitians.