

THE MYSTERIOUS LAND

THE 1ST TALE

At a time during the dawn of A.B. 528, Benjamin Guildford had announced his commitment to taking the role of leader of Cantonia; a land never known to all kingdoms surrounding its small, but sacred nature. A world, hidden from the eyes of the outside world, was home to the rare, Cantonian race. A wild, Molokai-related-and-similar species that enjoyed the silence and fresh air that smelled like scented primroses in the mornings and evenings. Their skin was a smooth, glowing blue-dotted, light black epidermis that allowed them to breathe underwater and have exceptional thermal sensitivity. Even without noses or ears, their senses for smell and sound were profound. They spoke like humans and built treehouses shaped like spheres hanging from strong branches.

One sunny morning, Benjamin sat under the shade on a bench in his small flower garden, watching the sunlight shine through the treetops and form a vast, golden pattern on the forest floor. Everywhere else was his treehouse and finely cut, healthy grass. Beyond the property fences made of thick, dark green sticks and light brown, cotton string, a group of Cantonian children played in a small opening and listened to a few silver breasted broadbills chirp in the treetops. Some of them ran after a flock of swallowtail butterflies, and the rest ran after each other in a narrow stream, splashing water onto the grass and tree trunks. Like most or every other young Cantonian, they enjoyed playing in the water (not too cold, not too hot) on a warm, sunny morning or evening under a blue or orange sky. As they grew older and wiser, they became fonder of philosophy and studies of magic. The time of shifting from childhood to adolescence was fourteen years and six months. Between morning and evening, the children helped their parents or guardians water gardens, harvest crops and replant their small fields, and collecting water from the rivers or lakes, depending which source was closer to their homes. Before and after such chores, the parents or guardians spent their time sitting in the sun, reading a book or scroll, taking a walk with their best friend, making meals for their families, or lying on the soft grass and watching the stars brighten the night sky.

Benjamin got up from his garden bench, feeling the thin blades of watery grass crush beneath his feet. As he walked alongside the fence, a passing carriage, driven by an older Cantonian seemingly born three or four years earlier than Benjamin (in his twenty-fourth year), came to a stop at the fence gate of a smooth-pebbled path that led to the treehouse ladder.

‘Mateo, my friend!’ Benjamin called, waving his hand to the driver.

‘I am pleased to see you!’ Mateo replied, stepping off the carriage. ‘The election manager is yet to announce the new leader at tonight’s presentation and party after last week’s poll with twelve-hundred voters.’

As Benjamin opened his fence gate, Mateo searched his mailbag full of letters and scrolls at the back of the carriage.

‘I am delighted to be a volunteer in readying the candle lanterns after sunset. That vast collection of shining, colourful paper rafts floating down the Aronia River. Before that, I am to set the tables and chairs, then arrange games for the children. It will be a busy day for sure and might lightly spoil the mood as I am not fond of doing such tasks on my own.’

After a short moment of silence, Mateo found the scroll (labelled with Benjamin's name), wrapped in a brown, thin sheet of paper, and tied with a white, cotton string.

'I am willing to help you until sunset, Mateo,' Benjamin said. 'I have nothing else to do.'

Mateo felt a sense of gratitude and relief.

'Will you?' he replied in slight astonishment, passing the scroll to Benjamin.

'Yes, my friend, I shall.'

Mateo softly laughed, seemingly full of joy.

Cantonian, the land itself, was entirely covered by forests of trees that grew beyond the heights of all other woodlands in the surrounding kingdoms. Beneath the shade of the vast, flat treetops, rivers of clean water flow from the north to the south. Their beds glowed white and pink colours in the darkness. Unlike all other kingdoms, there were no villages, castles or any other hand-built structures, apart from an underwater monument shaped like a pyramid; a place where many mysteries lay in the depths, some of them to do with the power of unique magic. Though the Cantonians were a well-settled species, they had an unpleasant, average death age of thirty, compared to the averages of fifty-two and seventy-nine for the Molokai and Human races. The oldest Cantonian known died at thirty-five years and four months. Benjamin, who had endured a rough, unforgiving life before becoming a contender in the election, enjoyed the company of young children and always had since the dawn of his adolescence.

The pebble-peppered road to the party grounds felt painfully sharp for a group of Cantonian children who crossed the track barefoot. Benjamin sat beside Mateo on his carriage for the last leg of the journey.

'What am I to expect at the party?' Benjamin asked.

'The catering staff will serve food and drinks for everyone at the party. Apple, cherry and mince pies, trays of roasted potatoes, a few bowls of vegetable salads, red wine, cider, and four or five plates of fruit. Good food and bitter drinks for everyone.'

'I did not know we had cherry or apple orchards, did I? I thought we only grew crop fields like every other field farmer in the surrounding kingdoms.'

'Might you have forgotten your knowledge on what we grow in this land of mystery?' Mateo asked, looking mildly surprised.

'Might, but I am not sure,' Benjamin replied, watching the children run along the track.

'Either way of being sure or not, farmers have taken great care of their orchards for hundreds of years and sometimes expanded such fields to grow more fruit to support the ever-enlarging Cantonian race.'

'Then I am sure, Mateo,' Benjamin said after a short moment of silence. 'I must have forgotten such history. I could have a troubled memory of my childhood years without realising it.'

‘You shall not need to worry about it tonight, my friend, unless you are to give thanks to the farmers who grew their apples and cherries to their ripest and richest flavours for tonight’s table of good pies.’

‘I will make sure not to forget this time, thank you.’

‘My pleasure, Benjamin. I am certain that you will cope simply fine.’

Benjamin and Mateo came to a stop before the gateway to a large, grassy opening surrounded by the dense forest. A group of Cantonians began setting a new line of tents. More carriages arrived. Their baskets were full of tables and chairs. In the distance, a narrow river of cold freshwater flows through the centre of the freshly green field. From deep in the trees, old brown, and new green, three or four youths seemingly ten or eleven years, peeked at the volunteers setting up the tents. Their blue dots glowed in the shade. Benjamin and Mateo’s day of work began by emptying the carriages and then carrying the tables and chairs to the opening that at the start felt moist. A relief for their body cores as the sun rose hotter and brighter. For an hour or three, they carried on setting up the tables and chairs, sweating from head to heel. They became exhausted. Once more, eight volunteers picked up their watering cans and filled them up to the brim with water from the river. As Benjamin and Mateo settled the last table, they re-watered the dry, hot opening (covering one-hundred-and-twenty or one-hundred-and-forty square metres) which then remained moist for roughly two more hours. As noon approached, another convoy of carriages arrived, carrying the gaming equipment. The tent organisers finished setting up the tents.

After Benjamin insisted on having a break, he and Mateo washed their faces, chests, and hands as they sat on the river’s edge with their lower limbs in the refreshingly cold water. Though a short rest, it brightened their moods for the rest of the afternoon. With their spirits lifted, they completed their final task of setting up the gaming equipment within minutes before evening. That same time, everything was ready. The food, drinks, tables, candle lanterns, games, decorations, banners and music stage, all set. As the Cantonians arrived in groups, Benjamin and Mateo admired the scene that took a body-aching eight hours to prepare (from early morning to late afternoon).

‘I have never been prouder of tonight than any other time, Benjamin. You have made my day,’ Mateo said with his heart and soul full of satisfaction. ‘Yet, I hope that you win the election because you deserve it more than the other contenders.’

‘Thank you for your support, Mateo,’ Benjamin replied. ‘I am sure things will go well until and after the end.’

‘I promise you that.’

Benjamin and Mateo joined the party.

As the evening sky turned a dark orange, parents and guardians helped themselves to the freshly baked apple and cherry pies, followed by a pint of vintage cider or a glass of red wine. The food was delicious, and the catering staff made sure that there was plenty on the tables. A few moments after the children had finished eating their plates of fruit, roasted potatoes, salad, and slices of mince pie, they moved on to either playing games or walking with the fireflies that colourfully sparkled in the darkness. Volunteers kept the grass soft and moist after a hot, humid day that brought a refreshing sensation to many Cantonians (young and

old). As Benjamin finished the last few drops of his pint of cider, Mateo began placing the colourful candle lanterns into the river. As he did, many of the young gathered around the edges to watch the vast collection grow along the stream.

The candle lanterns slowly drifted down the river, shining like colourful stars. High above the treetops, a blue, thin cloud overlaid the sight of a wondrous night sky. The crickets called to the moon so did a flock of rufous fantails that sat on the tree branches. The catering staff moved on to washing the tall piles of plates and the immense collection of glasses. Mateo had longed to light the candle lanterns and place them in the river, perhaps for two or three years.

‘That vision of seeing the candle lanterns drift along a freshwater stream,’ he thought, ‘that scenic view of watching them float over the glowing, violet riverbed.’

Mateo was often peculiar and sometimes treated strangely by others, except Benjamin who understood him better than everyone else. More Cantonians arrived at the river’s edges. Though Benjamin was full of respect, love, compassion, and a friend to all others, he had come from a troubled family that haunted his childhood. After shifting into adolescence, he moved far away and started a new life on his own. After a few months, he and Mateo became good friends. Every month, they journeyed through forests for three or five days, watching the stars shine in the night sky, walking upstream and exploring caves, visiting the carved field of boulders, cooking food on campfires and listening to the songs sung in the treetops. Many years later, they remained close friends who were to do good things for one another.

Other than eating or drinking their favourites, or playing games, or watching the candle lanterns, a Celtic band performed songs to comfort the guests. Instruments they used included a flute, a renaissance guitar, a harp, a rebec, a long tabor, a psaltery, a curtal and a cornett. For some songs, they played one instrument. For others, they played more. After Benjamin had returned his plate and glass to the catering staff, he walked off to the back of the stage where the election manager prepared his speech. The announcement of the new leader began in a few minutes. Benjamin felt his heart pounding as he nervously waited behind the stage.

‘How is the preparation of your speech?’ Benjamin asked, trying to calm down.

‘It is ready, Mr Guildford,’ the manager answered as he proofread his speech, ‘please try not to put me under more pressure, I am shivering enough.’

The other three contenders joined Benjamin like a group of confident, but anxious men.

‘Are you getting nervous?’ one of them asked as the election manager walked to the stairs.

‘Best of luck,’ Benjamin replied.

The election manager stepped onto the stage, tightly holding his speech in his hand. The band stood against the wall.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, it is a privilege to have you be a part of this extraordinary party with thanks to all the volunteers and catering staff.’

The crowd performed a round of applause to the catering staff and the volunteers.

‘Before announcing the new leader, I want to say that I am enormously proud of all contenders who gave exceptional speeches the day before the poll.’

Mateo joined the group. Again, they performed a round of applause, some of them cheered.

‘I am pleased to announce that the new leader of Cantonia is —.’

Tension rose. Benjamin closed his eyes and took another breath.

‘Benjamin Guildford.’

Benjamin widely opened his eyes in astonishment as the people cheered and gave a loud round of applause. Benjamin ran up the stairs. As his eyes filled with tears of joy, he and the election manager shook hands and presents him the leader’s armband, printed with a gold branch-like pattern from the former leader who then tied it around Benjamin’s arm. He was speechless.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, our new leader Benjamin Guildford will say a few words,’ the election manager said and stepped aside.

The crowd turned silent.

‘Good evening, everyone! I thank you all for coming. It is a great pleasure to stand on this platform, speaking to you good folks. The Grimsson family, I thank you for your efforts in brewing the bitter red wine and sweet vintage cider. The Moretti family, I thank you for your consideration in bringing your fresh vegetables.’

The Cantonians cheered.

‘The Anastasia family, I thank you for crafting the colourful candle lanterns. The Morrigan family, I thank you for bringing the tables and chairs. The Jordan family, I thank you for setting up the tents. The Lambert family, I thank you for cooking the roasted potatoes and mince pies. And the orchard farmers, I thank you for growing the good apples and cherries that you have added to your delicious pies.’

Again, people applauded and cheered.

‘Most importantly!’ Benjamin called, silencing the group. ‘I thank you all for supporting me on this life-changing journey that I, undoubtedly, will not forget until the end of my time of thirty-three. Best of luck to everyone, and farewell for tonight. Thank you!’

The crowd cheered and applauded for one last time as Benjamin walked off-stage and stepped onboard a roof-topped carriage, waiting for the new leader. The driver took the reins.

One morning, in the bright sunlight shining through the window, Benjamin, seemingly at the end of his childhood, woke up. He heard a few pink robins chirp from the branch of a young, healthy apple tree. The sky was blue and clear of white clouds, but the air was warm. The curtains blew in a brief, gentle breeze. Benjamin got up, brushing a few dry leaves off his chest with both of his hands. He has been spending the night lying on a long, thick fur coat inside what seemed like a storage room. Inside the room, there were a few bags of seeds, a shelf full of tin cans and glass jars, a lidless chest of garden tools and a wheelbarrow. Benjamin wondered for a short moment as if this was a nightmare or a vision. Either what, all was silent for the time being. After stepping out the room, rubbing his forehead, he looked around the dining room. The wooden floor covered in dead leaves.

The glass panes were broken and dirty. The table surface had turned into a sea of grey dust. There, a couple of copper plates, an iron knife and a fork sat along the edges. Other than dead leaves and dirt, there were a few holes in the floor. Behind the white, silk curtains, a couple of candles sat on the oak windowsill. He began to feel that the house was abandoned and has been for years, but more intriguingly his old home.

‘I remember this place,’ he thought, wandering around the dining table, and hearing the dead leaves break into pieces. ‘The dining room where my mother served her home-made blueberry pies for dessert every Sunday night after dinner. It remained a mystery of why my parents were a troubled couple.’

Out of the dining room and past the worn kitchen, Benjamin entered the parents’ room. The sheets on the double bed tucked in, and the pillows were thick and soft. Although covered in dust, they looked rather new. There was a chest of drawers, a wardrobe, a couple of picture frames, a table, a chair, and a shelf. Unlike the dining room, the floor was clean, but a bit creaky as Benjamin took a few steps towards the chest of drawers. There, he picked up one of the frames, blew the dust off, and looked at the hand-drawn picture. His parents had posed in front of the square-shaped door of this abandoned house. It was during a time when they finished renovating the property before giving birth to Benjamin. Though he had a troubled early life, he loved his mother and father, and he was their only child. He continued looking at the picture for another short moment before placing it back. As he does, he wipes a tear away from his left eye. He opened the bottom drawer, only to find nothing but a wooden box of medical tools, bandages, and a sample of dark, purple blood in a small glass bottle. More tears drifted down his face as he read the label on the glass bottle.

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Dark, purple blood was nothing but lethally contaminated blood cells.

‘Heavens above!’ Benjamin thought, letting streams of tears dampen his cheeks. ‘Oh please, this could not have happened!’

Suddenly, darkness swallowed the room. All became silent.

Benjamin woke up, hearing the trotting and creaking sounds of the horse and carriage.

All was silent when the carriage arrived back at Benjamin’s property. He had quietly fled the party which had driven Mateo into curiosity. On the way out, many of the guests proudly tapped on the walls and glass panes, half, or most of them cheering for the new leader. Deep down inside, he felt unbearably anxious. The moon rose, nearing midnight. By now, the catering staff had started stacking up chairs and loading up their baskets with remaining food and drink. Mateo, concerned about Benjamin, had left the party and was silently walking back to his friend’s treehouse. After Benjamin’s carriage came to a stop, he stepped off and into an eerie green mist, covering much of the forest floor. The moonlight shone through the treetops and formed a dimly white pattern. Still wearing his leader’s armband, he shuts the carriage door and pays the driver a couple of silver coins. They thank each other. The driver

shakes the reins, setting off the carriage and disappearing into the distance and thick mist. Benjamin started climbing up the bamboo ladder to his treehouse, ten or twelve metres above the ground. Though a small, sphere-shaped structure, it was large enough for a single bed and dining table, a little furnace and chest of drawers and a stool. It had three round windows and a square trapdoor. He had everything he needed.

Benjamin pushed the trapdoor open, letting in the chilly air. The room was dark but dimly lit by the moonlight and his glowing, blue skin dots. For a minute or two, he searched his chest of drawers for his iron-and-flint kit, pushing old letters and scrolls from side to side. Down below, a convoy of carriages, loaded with tables and chairs, creaked past the treehouse and each pulled by two horses trotting along the peppered track. Benjamin, still suffering from a seemingly heart-throbbing breakdown, found his iron-and-flint kit from underneath the messy pile of paper. Most of the guests had left the party whereas the other few helped the organisers dismantle the tents, but only for a short while as they yawned in tiredness. Meanwhile, Mateo arrived at Benjamin's property and barely saw the treehouse. A firelight fades into his sight from the windows and hatch.

As a flock of silvereyes called to the moon, Mateo, having little confidence, walked through the fence gate. After closing the trapdoor and lighting two, honeycomb-shaped, large candles, Benjamin sat on his bed and stretched his arms and legs. He looked out the window at the opposite side of the room, watching the colourful stars shine in the dark blue night sky. He took a few deep breaths, looking proud but very anxious. His heart continued to pound. Suddenly, there was an abrupt knock on the trapdoor. Benjamin got up and looked through the peephole. It was Mateo, waiting outside in the chilly air. Benjamin opened the trapdoor, surprised to see Mateo a few minutes before midnight. He climbed up and into the room, leaving the trapdoor open.

'Hello, Mateo,' Benjamin said as he took a step back and away from the hatch.

'Leader Guildford of Cantonia, my dear friend Benjamin, I wonder why you left in a hurry,' Mateo said, sounding compassionate, but with a bit of suspicion.

'Mateo, with great respect, I must ask you to come back another time. I need to be alone until tomorrow morning to clear my mind and get rid of my fears.'

'Fears of what?'

'Mislead, my friend. I am afraid of misleading the land,' Benjamin answered, sitting down on his bed, and rubbing his hands on his upper legs.

Mateo closed the trapdoor with his foot and sat next to Benjamin. He comforts him.

'I know about your worries, Mr Guildford, but I cannot help you unless you let me talk you out of your emotions this moment. Will you give me a chance to prove myself worthy? To set you free of your anxiety. Even for once?' Mateo asked with a compassionate heart and a soul full of affection.

'Oh Mateo,' Benjamin cried in relief, embracing Mateo.

Mateo softly laughed for joy. It was like freeing a heart-broken soul from the shadowy darkness which he had never done before.

‘Lead for your satisfaction, my dear friend, not for the satisfaction of others. They can take care of themselves as you can. I cross my heart that you will forever be a great leader to Cantonia until the end of your time if you approve your efforts, Benjamin, your approval only,’ Mateo said.

‘I will, Mateo, on every day until the end,’ Benjamin replied.

‘And remember, my leader, you are born for what you have become, and no one will take it away.’

Benjamin nodded, feeling no more anxiety.

‘Whenever you need me, I will always be here for you. I will support you because that is what friends do,’ Mateo said.

‘Thank you for your affection and compassion, my dear Mateo. I will never bring dishonour to my country for as long as I live,’ Benjamin said.

‘Very well,’ Mateo nodded and got up.

As Benjamin removed his leader’s armband, Mateo pulled open the oak and gold-framed trapdoor. The air in the room began to cool down.

‘Have a good rest, and do not forget to read today’s scroll’ Mateo said and started climbing down the ladder, closing the trapdoor on his way out.

Benjamin had forgotten all about reading the scroll posted to him this morning. At this time, the green mist had partially cleared off the track and Benjamin’s property. Mateo, stepping onto the smooth-pebbled, garden path, heard a forest owlet call to the moon as did the chirping crickets and the ribbiting frogs. Benjamin, looking out his window, watched Mateo travel along the grassy centre of the track. The eerie colour of the mist turned to a lighter green by the brightening moonlight. Mateo’s blue dots glowed in the darkness. Back at the party grounds, all guests and volunteers have left. All that remained were the gaming equipment and the stage, and the mist had swallowed much of the opening. Other than Benjamin, Mateo and a couple of adventurous children taking a short walk in the fresh air, all Cantonians were asleep in their treehouses. Tomorrow will have another busy morning of clearing the rest of the party ground. The candles in Benjamin’s treehouse began to melt.

‘Have no fear for what you will be for many years to see,’ Benjamin thought as he sat down on his bed and grabbed the unread scroll; ‘Stay strong, keep being honourable to your people as you are to yourself. Never let the dark times interfere with your leadership as you will make the Cantonians proud of their land and their lives.’

After deciding to read the scroll tomorrow early morning, he slides himself into the sheets tucked under the leafy mattress. After taking Mateo’s advice, he was now free from his heart-pounding breakdown and tearfully haunting past.