

Of Stars Below

Sample

Draft Three: Written by G.J. Terral

Chapter One: The Trouble With Stars

Liem contemplated taking the silver knife in front of him and ramming it home. An overreaction, to be sure, but there was only so much pain a man could take, so much a person could pretend to care about a conversation. The knife could find a residence in one of two places, either into his right arm— to cut off the burning that ate away at his forearm— or into his own skull so he wouldn't have to hear his aging father ramble regarding the latest political fiasco on the horizon. Not that Liem didn't once enjoy knowing what was going on all across Ashua, but his caring for the wider world had narrowed dramatically when he realized that the star-rot was eating him from within.

"Are you listening, boy?" His father didn't snap, he'd never be so undignified, but the man's tone was terse. Being clearly irritated yet so composed was a trait Liem often tried, and failed, to emulate from the man.

Liem considered pushing his plate away and stared up at his father, Tollin Mago. The head of Mago Mercantile was a man that insisted on calling him boy despite the titles Liem had earned through the Star-hold. *And despite my years.* Which for a caller still with all his limbs was nearing his twilight.

Not that I'll stay this way for long. Liem thought dryly. His thoughts lately were almost as dry as the meat that sat on his plate, insisting that a knife be used. But he hadn't told his father about the rot, and if a spasm took him while trying to use the damned cutlery, he would have no choice. With his unbothered hand, he took the fork and drove it into the center of the meat, pulling the whole chunk to his mouth at once. Thank the stars it was boneless. Maybe he would have something more in common with the meat than his father by the time the rot had run its course.

Between chews, his father's soft exhalation carried across the table, and a tut escaped Dupont's lips behind him.

"Young master Mago," Dupont, his father's right-hand servant, started and rounded on his left from behind.

If Liem's father was old, Dupont was primordial. The man was missing his left arm at the shoulder— claimed by the star-rot at a rather young age— and wore the comfortable weight of a man who ate well, and often.

Liem bit into the meat, ignoring Dupont and looking dead into his father's eyes. Despite his age, easily nearing his fifties, the man was still broad-shouldered and had a full head of hair. Even if the red of his youth had begun to fade into a shock of white. His father waved a ring-covered hand at Dupont.

"I miss our dinners," Tollin said, clasping his hands in front of him as if in prayer and resting his smooth chin on his knuckles.

Liem chewed, almost grabbed the glass of water with his star-rotted arm, and decided against it as a bolt of pain lanced up from his forearm into his bicep and shoulder. From what he could tell, he didn't exhibit the most noticeable symptom— a discoloration on the skin like a bruise that swirled as if it was an imprint of the cosmos themselves— but even if he did, it would be hidden underneath his crimson robes.

"What's wrong?" Dupont asked.

Liem swallowed and looked at the balding man that had been both watcher and warden in Liem's early years. Keeping the truth from him was harder for a whole slew of different reasons.

"Nothing." Liem set the chunk of meat on his plate. "I also miss our daily visits, but my duties at the tower keep me busy. Very busy." Liem searched for a napkin to wipe his face, noticed there was none, then noticed Dupont held it out for him— on his right side.

“A mere walk from the manor,” Tollin countered. “It’s not like the Hold is in Portsmouth.”
Better that it was.

“Regardless, it is a walk that I don’t always have time for.” Speaking with his father always felt like a duel that Liem didn’t have the time or energy to put up with. Not today. Not with everything that burdened him. A sharper, scalding pain lanced through Liem’s arm. It didn’t burn in the sense that he could feel his skin bubbling or his bones breaking, but as if the inside of his arm had been exposed to the sun for days on end and had just now decided to notice.

His eye twitched. This visit had been a mistake.

There was a silence interrupted only by Dupont clearing his throat and dangling the napkin next to Liem, just far enough from him that Liem would need to stretch his arm out to get it or look ridiculous grabbing it with his left hand.

“Dupont, could you hand me that?” Liem looked between the servant and his father, both sharing a similar impassivity on their faces.

“Take it from him,” Tollin said, bearing his chin down at a deeper angle to his knuckles.

“Father—”

“Did you think we wouldn’t notice? That you were so clever as to keep it from me— from us?” Tollin frowned as he spoke, his knuckles white.

Liem licked his lips and shifted his gaze between the two men once more. Why should they be so offended if he hadn’t wanted to mention the star-rot? He certainly hadn’t thought he would end up like Dupont of all people, but this was his struggle to endure. It’s not like catching the rot meant he had brought shame to his father, even if the man was a devout follower of the House of Stars. Or is that exactly what it meant? Liem had never followed the faith, and his father, as pious as he acted at times, had never forced it upon him.

“I’m sorry,” Liem said, preparing to roll up his sleeve and admit to both men what he had been struggling to keep hidden for the last few days.

“As you should be. Councilwoman Num’s daughter would’ve been an excellent pairing. Yet you throw it away with no more consideration than a tomcat would fish bones.” Tollin unclenched his hands and straightened his back, the quality of chairs in Mago manor made all the apparent by the lack of groaning as he shifted his large frame. Dupont nodded to the side, his oiled pate reflecting the light of the chandelier.

“Luckily, there are others you might still court.” Tollin continued pushing his now empty plate away.

Liem exhaled, pulling his arm deeper into the crimson robe. How long would it be until the truth came out? That Delilah Num wanted nothing to do with *him*, not the other way around? She was the only one he had confessed to the star-rot about... and needless to say, she wasn’t exactly enticed by the thought of being with a man who could be dead soon, no matter who his father was, or what he himself had accomplished.

“Father, I—”

“But the real reason I wanted dinner with you tonight was to confirm a new rumor that seems to be breaking through Finbastone.”

Just as Liem felt ready to tell him the truth, the man hinted that he already knew it. Why did his father insist on these little games, scoring occasional points against Liem’s every action?

“What is it?” Liem snapped out.

Dupont let out another little tut and laid the napkin against the table, folding it into a small triangle. “Young master, calm yourself.”

Tollin narrowed his eyes, rose from his chair and gestured for Liem to do the same. His father stepped around the table and pulled Liem into a stiff embrace. It was how they always ended meals, but Liem couldn't help but wince at the pressure against his arm.

“An ambassador is visiting. This could either mean war or peace, and the council seems hesitant to state its stance.” Even in their own home, his father whispered these words. There was no question where the ambassador would be from, as few world powers could stand against the might of Finbastone and the Starhold.

“The Empire of Encrodia?” Liem whispered, pulling away from his father.

Tollin stared into Liem's eyes. The man, for all his power and stature, looked older now than he had the last time Liem had made the walk back home. Perhaps it *had* been too long since his last visit. His father nodded, a strange look of admiration and concern going across his usually stoic face.

“And if it comes to war, what will you do?” Liem asked. He knew what side his father stood on. The man had made the brunt of his fortune during the Red War when Liem was barely old enough to walk. Tollin Mago stood on the side of prosperity for him and his. And war often seemed to bring that.

“On the winning side, I hope.” Tollin seemed to consider Liem for a moment. “And you?”

That was a simple question with so many edges hearing it was painful.

“The same, I imagine,” Liem hedged, a searing pain in his arm causing him to clench his jaw, his eye twitching wildly at the same moment.

“I suppose I've kept you too long from your duties?” Tollin asked, patting Liem's shoulder.

“I made sure to have my affairs in order before visiting. Father, I've become afflicted with the star-rot.” Liem blurted the words out, exhaling them in one go.

At least the man was capable of being surprised, his eyebrows raising and his mouth parting.

Tollin looked him up and down, frown lines cutting into familiar grooves of his expression. “Where?” he asked.

“My arm, right side. If I remove it, there's a chance I'll never be able to call upon the stars again. I certainly won't be able to form complex constellations.”

His father shook his head. “What would this mean for your position?”

Liem looked at his boots and the marbled floor beneath. He knew what his father meant: What would this mean for *his* position? But the question still rang painfully no matter which way Liem chose to hear it.

“I wouldn't be able to continue leading the Red Dawn, I wouldn't be able to promote to the position of Master, I—” Liem choked up at the last words. Everything he had worked so hard for had been taken from him in a blink. He knew it was the risk of channeling the power of the stars, but still, it had happened too suddenly.

“They don't have to take the entire arm, do they?” His father, ever pragmatic, seemed to be looking towards the future.

“Depends on how deeply infected it is,” Dupont said. The servant stood off to the side, his singular arm folded across his chest.

“It feels horrible,” Liem admitted.

“Surely there is some other way to make yourself useful?” Tollin Mago said.

Dupont's lips pursed, and Liem exhaled. What had compelled him to tell? A simple shoulder pat or the terribly forced hug? “I'm sure I'll find a way to *remain* useful.”

“You know what I meant,” Tollin shook his head, a practiced smile wrinkling his face.

“I do,” Liem said.

“Young master, might I see you out?” Dupont gestured to the main hall adjacent to the dining room.

“Please.” Liem looked at his father and nodded. “I’ll do what I have to do, whatever the cost.”

“That’s a boy,” Tollin sighed, buttoning his deep velvet coat. “Might go for a walk myself if the night stays clear.”

“Rain is expected, Master Mago,” Dupont said. “Do take an umbrella if you go.”

Liem walked out, through the marbled hall with dark cherry wood paneling, to the large double-doored entryway. In his youth, he loved the echoing halls, pristine paintings, and ornate marble. Now it all felt so... unnecessary. Not that his lodgings in the hold were sparse. Quite the opposite, but the difference was... they were his. He had earned everything in that room, and despite his father’s claims, Liem wasn’t sure the man had earned any of this. Not on his own merit.

“It was good seeing you, young master,” Dupont said gently. The man was at his side, matching Liem’s stride, despite his shorter legs.

“As it was to see you,” Liem replied. He slowed as they neared the iron-wrought gate, passing illuminated shrubs, beds of flowers that looked softer than most beds Liem had slept in, and the trees he had spent most of his youth climbing.

“He means well,” Dupont whispered. His face betrayed nothing. The man wouldn’t even sneeze in Tollin’s direction if it was the only place he could. Liem smiled at that. Dupont’s head would explode before he said anything ill of the man.

“How... how did you cope?” Liem asked, eyes drifting to the knotted sleeve where an arm would be.

Dupont nodded thoughtfully. “I didn’t. I cursed the stars, cursed myself. Cursed the war and those damned Encrodians, dirty underdwellers.” Dupont spat into lush grass and shook his head. “But I found the faith and your father. Not at the same time, but right when I needed them both, I think.”

Liem’s lip quivered, and he stared up at the cloudy sky, the hold cutting into the horizon like a black knife.

“No matter what, it will be okay. Losing an arm didn’t mean I lost myself. Maybe for a little bit, but not wholly.”

“And if it’s not the arm I’m worried about?” Liem asked, splaying the fingers of his left hand, letting each digit glow with the pure power of the stars. It was bright and beautiful, and lit the garden like a lantern, casting shadows across the grounds. He could do it with a thought; some callers never even managed the simple light.

Dupont’s hand closed around Liem’s, folding his fingers into a fist, snuffing out the light. “You’re more than your connection to the Stars.”

Liem exhaled, releasing the channeling, and placed his other hand over Dupont’s. “I-I know *you* think so. And I know you *mean* it. Truly I do.”

“Your father knows it too.”

If only that was the Mago man Liem had been thinking of. The power had been his. Something he hadn’t needed his father’s name to achieve. Even channeling the light had started an incessant throb throughout his infected arm.

Cobbled streets and homes separated by expansive gardens gave way to crowded stalls, and mud-trenched ditches as Liem took the less proper route back to the Starhold. Bells called through the

night, members of the House of Stars— the faith his father, Dupont, and many others shared— signaling that service would begin, or that there was food or shelter to be had. Whatever it was that the bells rang for. Liem never heard them in the Hold, and he certainly couldn't care why they rang now.

Eyes tracked him, less fortunate denizens of Finbastone watching him as he picked his way along the street, avoiding puddles and people alike. Some members of the Hold actually enjoyed visiting the Run-offs. *Unfathomable*. Not that Liem was in that destitute place, of course. But strolling along Vendor's Row was bad enough if the smells and muggy taste in the air were any indications. No, he preferred the flowered aroma of Nothrend and the almost sterile, clean smell of the Starhold.

Despite the promise of rain and the late hour, children played, running through puddles and splashing anyone who came close.

With his good arm, Liem pulled the hem of his cloak up a bit higher, a frown itching its way onto his face when he noticed the mud climbing the side of his boot. Like a mold spreading on old cheese. He licked his lips and sighed, meandering past closed stall windows until he was at the intersection of Stygg and Lou. There had been a chance, before the star-rot took him, that there might be a street named after him someday. A fanciful dream, but grander things had become of lesser callers.

A soft tug at the hem of his cloak pulled him from his thoughts. The first thing he noticed was how the dirt clung to the boy's hand.

"Excuse you," Liem said, pulling the fabric out of the grubby hand. A dark streak stained the cloth.

"Would you have a spare mark?" the child squeaked. *Child* might not be the right word. He was small, to be sure, but he looked old enough to be learning a trade. *I would have been in the Hold at his age. Old enough to know not to grab a caller's cloak.*

"I do, but—" Liem grunted as the pain in his arm reached new heights, his fingers clenching and unclenching as he grabbed his elbow with his other hand.

"Rot took root in you, eh?" An older woman's voice croaked.

Liem forced his eyes open. The boy had pulled away from Liem, but another figure had come into the road beside them. A short woman with wiry hair and the look of someone who had woken up moments ago stood as tall as the boy, her dirt-speckled face a mask of impassivity. Both she and the boy were dressed in dark rags, and if Liem didn't already know he had the rot, he would think he had been cursed like in some mummer's play.

"Yes," Liem said through clenched teeth. "Not that it is any of your—"

The woman sniffed the air, a smile showing surprisingly straight teeth. "Business, right? Of course not. Though I reckon they'll take the whole arm, bad as it is. None of our business, though, Kin. Best we leave him to his."

Liem's cheeks felt as red as the cloak he wore. "And how would you possibly know how much arm they would or wouldn't take?"

"Cause like with most things the Hold doesn't like, they cut first and ask questions later."

Liem's head shook, and he looked around. Others were walking the main road, but none seemed to look in their direction for long.

"You mean to imply that the rot is a *good* thing? You sound worse than the preachers of the House."

"Nooooo," she said long and low. A breeze cut across the street, and she tightened the dark shawl around her shoulders. "Think it's as bad as it comes, dreadful thing truly."

"Truly dreadful," the boy nodded.

The urge to call the stars pulsed in Liem's heart. With a snap, he could show these two the folly of antagonizing a caller and make them beg for mercy. But that would be the last thing he needed right now. Tensions in the city would be bad enough if an ambassador really was visiting. Another damned thing he had to look into. His arm had gone from a roaring pain to a dull throb, and he wiped his brow with his sleeve. These two just needed some coins to get by.

"Here," Liem said coldly, pulling three half-marks from the pouch at his belt. He made sure the hilts of his dueling points caught the light from the hanging lanterns of the intersection.

"Truly kind of you, but I don't do any begging," the woman said, sniffing again.

"Pom!" The boy cried, his eyes large and his mouth turning into a thin line.

"For you then," Liem said, exasperated. He tossed the thin pieces of metal to the boy and shook his head.

"It doesn't have to be the whole arm," the woman said softly. "There's a man that could take out just the rot."

Liem froze. He'd still have to find a way to keep from contracting the rot again, but keeping his arm was infinitely better than winding up like Dupont or any of the other countless callers affected. He licked his lips and turned to face the pair. The boy grinned from ear to ear, flicking one half-mark into the air with his thumb and catching it with the other hand.

"I'm not sure I'd let someone in the Run-offs, or Cinderside for that matter, excise the rot." Liem tried to sound polite. But he could feel how insulting his comment was, but what had she expected? *Yes. Please let a dirt-coated man dig into my arm.*

"Last I heard, he was out in the wastes," she said with a shrug, catching the coin the young boy had flipped and chuckling. "But have the conversation with your starry-eyed master in that glass tower and decide if you'll keep the elbow, or throw it into the deal for free." She placed an arm around the boy's shoulder and pulled him along after her. The boy looked over his shoulder and grinned.

The wastes weren't a place most people would go of their own accord. It was several days of travel westward and beyond all the comfortable farmlands that surrounded Finbastone. Liem had never been, but he had studied plenty of maps of Ashua, and the wastes seemed named well.

Liem stared at the tower that cut into the night sky, dominating the horizon as close as he was to it now. Even the stars were hidden behind the tall, glass structure, all sharp edges and plateaued levels above. He had no idea how it had been made, or how old it really was, but he called it home. It looked like a dangerous reminder, a knife stabbing into the heavens themselves. A reminder of how dangerous the stars were.

Come the morning, he'd talk with Perillium, mention his thoughts on excision, and go from there. Simple enough.