

The Legend of Starcamp

Excerpt taken from Chapter 3 in The Three Houses by Elise Nelson.

When the three Spirits of Terra spawned across the Earth, something inside the planet came alive. Each one of them brought with them powers beyond mortal comprehension, including the power to educate humanity on how to utilize these abilities. The spirit who possessed the most intellectual powers was Cato, the spirit who would one day be known as the creator of Starcamp.

It was an ordinary day when Cato felt his existence materialize and saw himself turn into a humanoid form. Although his two spiritual counterparts had overwhelming bouts of emotion surging through them, Cato's influx of information was just as powerful. His immortal brain swelled as every ounce of knowledge about the Earth, its solar system, and the anomalies of its existence raced through his mind. The surge was a heavy burden that left him aching at the temples. Although he was immortal, he felt the way a mortal would if they had been stranded without food for over 24 hours.

With his powers of unfathomable intellect came the immediate perception of how things generally worked on Earth, both in the ecosystem and within mortal civilizations. He scanned his surroundings and noticed he was in a place of great warmth, but not in a place that would be wanting for food. On the contrary. This place was lush with long landscapes of grassy fields and long, billowy trees that sprouted from the soil like the hairy trunk of an animal. The temperature was undeniably hot, but he could tell that it wasn't this hot all year round; soon, it would be warm and much more tolerable for the humans living there. While the sun burned down heavily from the sky, there was a breeze that hung sweetly in the air, relaxing in the nostrils. It gave the land a more pleasant feel, and he was sure the humans appreciated this.

The sun soaked into Cato's dark hair, reminding the immortal being to find a place in the shade. However illogical it seemed, he believed water could help relieve the throbbing in his head. It didn't take long for him to find where he needed to go. He followed the signs of life left evident in the land around him and soon reached a place with large structures that immediately displayed great signs of accomplishment. *These humans don't have many buildings like this on their Earth at the moment...these must have taken...approximately 10.45 years each.* He fixed his gaze on the largest building, a v-shaped crease appearing where his eyebrows scrunched together in thought.

He walked toward the structure, all the while analyzing each and every detail that would give him the necessary information it took to provide him with a good theory. When he reached the landmark, he realized it was about what he expected—it was a large gathering place for the townspeople to seek refuge in, likely on hot days such as this.

This is when he knew he needed a plan. He couldn't just march in and ask for water. These people have likely worked together for decades to bring this place to a flourishing state. There were very

few people in the town, from what Cato could see, so an outsider coming in would either be a very good thing or a very bad thing.

After searching every possible outcome in his mind, Cato realized it was pointless to assume and just opened the front door. Once inside, he was entirely underwhelmed. The walls were a dull gray and blank everywhere other than around the rounded door frame that led into a large room where echoes of children's laughter and loud chatter could be heard from the entryway. He peered at the colored markings around the doorframe and studied the patterns carefully drawn in purple and blue. The vibrant colors lit up the entry to the large gymnasium like a berry-filled vine. They caught the eye and gave a certain element of warmth to the otherwise bland walls, like an invitation to let them know this isn't somewhere to be feared. The curved lines weren't letters or numbers, and they didn't look to be of anything that would tell this village's history. He gathered that these patterns held some kind of meaning for their village nonetheless—symbols that meant togetherness, whether that was the direct translation or not.

He took his eyes off the art to enter into the large gathering hall. As soon as he did, one by one voices hush to nothing like a silencing wave. There were 84 people in attendance, fifty of which were children. The people looked Cato up and down, and it was clear they hadn't had an outsider in quite some time. His appearance was utterly human, so they wouldn't have suspected he was anything more than that, but he was an outsider, nonetheless.

After another excruciating moment of silence, he asked, "Could I please have some water?"

One of the villagers—a man with a crooked nose and short legs—rushed to the far-right corner of the room. Cato's eyes narrowed. *Why do they seem afraid?*

"I mean you no harm," he said as he approached. The man handed him a wooden cup of water. He took it thirstily and drank the whole thing in one go. The headache remained, but it was now greatly reduced. He figured the rest would go in time, after the knowledge settled in his newly shaped mind.

"Please have a seat," one of the other men in the village said, gesturing toward the dirt below. The being nodded and took a seat.

Recognizing social cues from his newfound knowledge, Cato asked, "Would you care to tell me about your town? I am new here and would love to know." He folded his skinny legs and crossed his arms as he waited for someone to speak.

"Well..." a woman with a long black braid and sun-kissed skin started, "All of us have lived here our entire lives. We call our town Carlanea, after the founder of the village. She is the one who also wanted to build stronger structures to withstand a lot of the storms we get here. Her idea has saved all of us in many ways."

"We are very proud," the man next to her said, nodding in agreement.

Cato nodded too and watched as the others shifted awkwardly and silently throughout the room. He smiled. "Well, don't let me get in your way of having a good day today. Please continue your

merriment. I would like to talk with the leader of this village, though.”

A burly man with a dark complexion and thick curly hair stood up. “That would be me. Please meet me out in the hall.” He did as the man asked. He walked back into the entryway and turned around to greet the man.

“Hello. I am Cato, and I would love to set up a research station here.”

The two men were the same height, so Cato could see every shade of brown flecked within the man’s eyes as he spoke. “I don’t really follow. A...research station?”

Cato nodded. “Precisely, yes. You see, there are a lot of things I need to teach hu—I, uh, I mean...there are a lot of things I need to teach the people I meet. I can explain all of that another time, if you are willing to put me up in your town.”

The man lifted a bushy eyebrow. “Why would we give you a free place to live? We all work so hard for what we have here. We don’t need an outsider coming in and asking to get special treatment. We’re just fine.” He turned to leave when Cato put a hand on the man’s shoulder.

“Please allow me to explain,” Cato said. The man brushed the being’s hand from off his shoulder and grumbled. “I am not from here, but I possess a great deal of information that I believe you would find useful.” Cato knew perfectly well that he would lose all credibility if he tried to explain who and what he truly was, so he figured he could let that information come out on its own naturally, whenever that time may come.

“Useful how?” the man asked, unconvinced but still intrigued.

“I can teach you a writing system that will combine your village with others in the area, and I can teach you valuable information about the weather and environment—things that will help you better understand the storms here, such as the ones that have been fatal for you and your people. I can also teach you about medicine and education. I can—”

The man held up his hands, his brow heavy but his face blank. “Whoa. Well, I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t know if you’re telling me the truth about all this or not, but I’ll tell you what: if you are able to help us somehow, please do. I’ll give you one week. You can stay here in this building. The residents here return home at suppertime, when the sun is setting and the air cools. If you can’t teach us anything we don’t absolutely need to know, you have to leave.”

Cato nodded. “Agreed. Thank you. Your name, sir?” He held out his hand for the man to shake.

“Matthew,” he said, taking Cato’s hand. “And I hope you don’t like to eat too much. Although...from the look of you, I wouldn’t say you eat much.”

Cato smiled. “Don’t worry. I don’t really eat at all.”

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The next day, Cato set up an area in the building to teach his first lesson. Before the humans woke up, he scoured the nearby rocks for ones to use for chalk. When he found the ones he was looking for, he headed back to town and started writing simple markings on the wall for them to see. When the sun was up, the villagers arrived one family at a time. They each wore the same look of confusion as they walked into the room.

When about half the villagers arrived, one of them asked, "Why are you drawing on our wall?"

"I am not drawing," he said, his hand continuing to busily etch into the wall, "I am ready to teach you basic arithmetic, and then symbols for writing. This is the first step in teaching you the valuable lessons that will help your civilizations here on Earth thrive."

His hand stopped for half a second when he realized how very un-mortal he sounded just then, but then he kept writing at the same pace until he was done writing everything he needed to. "And don't worry: this washes right off."

"I don't think we're—"

"Matthew! Good, you're here. Look at what this man is doing! Are you going to let him do this?"

"He's ruining our walls—"

"He—"

"Enough!" Matthew said, his voice like thunder. Cato dropped his hand and turned to the town leader. "This man is named Cato. He will be living with us for one week. He has vowed to teach us valuable information that will help us against the storms, and other things. He will be sleeping in this building each night, and he claims to not need any food. Give him a chance. Try your best at listening and learning. If his teachings prove invaluable by the end of the week, he will be gone." He gestured to Cato. "Please begin teaching."

Cato wanted to smile but knew the man didn't care too much about the immortal man's wellbeing. He just wanted to keep up his end of the bargain and see if Cato actually knew what he was talking about.

He nodded. "Okay, well, today I am going to teach you about some basics that will help you better understand some other concepts."

"How can you help us against our storms?" A short, overweight man called out from the crowd. Cato let out a breath and turned to face him.

"I can teach you about that tomorrow, if you'd like."

"No. I want to know now," the man said, his arms crossed, and his chest puffed out. This sentiment was seconded by many voices saying *yeah!* in the crowd. Cato sighed and nodded.

"Well, I can tell you a little about that, too. Maybe we can get to that after lunch. I already

prepared this lesson, so let's start with this. Is that alright?" He waited for the villagers' input.

Finally, the man with the crossed arms nodded reluctantly, and others did the same. Cato smiled. "Good. Then let's proceed."

The days went by. Each one was presented with an assortment of lessons the villagers couldn't get enough of. They loved learning about the water cycle and everything to do with the weather, and they enjoyed learning the basics of math and letters. They had their own system before, which Cato tried to incorporate into it. This made them excited, and many of them loved that they could now more efficiently create messages to share with one another. Before, they couldn't make messages longer than a sentence or two, at most, as they didn't have a specific alphabet or structure set in place. None of them had seen it important enough to do something about because the way they had it seemed efficient enough at the time. None of them ever left the village unless they needed to go into another city for food and trading. This—and other eclectic purposes—was the only time they found they really needed to correspond in this way to begin with. Now, the possibilities seemed endless, and they were hungry for more.

To his immense relief, Cato was given the opportunity to stay in the village for as long as they all saw fit (including what he felt would be best for his own endeavours). So, he continued teaching everything he could almost every day for an entire year. Each subsequent year went about the same, except that they decided upon a five-day education week. On the sixth day, the villagers expected Cato to help with shared physical labors, and on the seventh day they rested and only worked to cook, clean, or help someone in need.

Slowly, the village grew. The people learned how to use their knowledge in a variety of ways, which both grew the desirability of their village and expanded each villager's horizons. People would move out of town to teach what they'd learned to people all around and learn more about the world. This gave Cato the greatest satisfaction. It was all precisely what he'd hoped.

After a few years, Cato established a couple different houses of education in the town. The leader of the town agreed to give Cato the gathering building as an education center. They were able to build smaller structures next to it for expanded disciplines. Over time, more and more buildings were created for the purpose of education in this town, which soon developed into a city. As more people joined the community, more people were able to use their skills to help the others in the city and in the towns and cities nearby. The people still used the biggest building to have social gatherings, but it was now officially a school from the hours of 7 am until 5 pm each day.

Over the years, Cato was able to teach others in different disciplines so they could be teachers of their own. They could stay in this town or go to another to teach in their respective fields and areas of interest. Decades passed by, and the city was suddenly a huge metropolis for education. The humans had also caught on to Cato being a being of immortal design, as he never aged, but by that point he had already shown the evidence of who he truly was, and they knew and trusted him. Luckily, he never had to have any awkwardly failed attempts at explaining he wasn't human. He just let himself be an open book, and they trusted the knowledge they found in his pages.

Tales of him reached far across the land, and even across the Earth. People would come from all

over to be taught under his tutelage. It had been nearly a thousand years since entering this city when he received a special knock at his office door.

“Come in,” he called out, turning the page of a sand-yellow book in his hands. A young woman stepped forward. He knew upon looking at her that she was about 24 years old. Her eyes were a deep-sea blue and her long hair, cascading in ripples down her back, were as sandy as the pages in his book.

“Hello,” she said, wringing her hands nervously. “May I...Um...are you busy?”

Cato closed his book and leaned forward in his seat, his elbows balanced against the smooth wooden desk some of his former students created for him as a “thank you” present years before. He shook his head with a smile. “Not at all. Please take a seat.”

The woman did as he asked and plopped down on the seat across from him. Her hands kept wringing in her lap as she silently watched him looking back at her. He opened his mouth to break the silence when she did it for him, “My name is Mary, and I just want to say ‘thank you’. Because of you, everything in my life came together. Because of you, I can be happy.”

One of Cato’s eyebrows rose. “Oh. I’m...I’m glad.” His advanced intellect always gave him the responses needed in every given situation. This was the first time he couldn’t find the words to say.

She nodded nervously and continued, “You see, my brother was dying a few years ago. We didn’t know what to do. My brother and I were sixteen at the time, and since we were the eldest and my brother needed our mother, we decided we’d go out and find a way to save him.” Water droplets began to form on the windowpane and humidity thickened the air in the office. Cato just watched in awe as the girl continued. “My father died when my brother was a baby, so my brother, Richard, and I have been taking care of our family ever since. When my brother was eight, he got very sick and we didn’t know what to do. He was always in and out of fevers, and it was hard for him to breathe. Richard and I had heard rumors of you—and another—beings that were more than human. People who could help us. So, we decided to split up to gather as much information as possible—to find anything that could save William. Richard went to see you, and I went to a land in the mountains. To see a woman named Lumine.”

The name of his sister sent a shiver down Cato’s spine. He hadn’t seen his spirit brother and sister since arriving on this planet. Yet, he knew her by name. And he’d never seen her with his own eyes.

The girl’s hands stopped wringing. She looked deep into Cato’s eyes and said. “I found so many answers in healing, and so did he. We wrote down as much as we could and met back at our family home six months later. I was terrified the entire time that William was going to die at any moment. Luckily, my mother always raised us to read and write, so we were able to correspond with her. It was hard, though, as the letters took months to get to us. I only ever got two letters from my mother and one from Richard—one that said ‘Coming home’.” She looked out the window and watched the rain begin to fall. “So, I left. I studied all the way home and got there three weeks later, by horse and wagon. Richard and I conversed and agreed on what we thought my brother needed. I taught him the remedies and techniques I’d learned in Lumine’s school of health and

wellness, and he taught me everything he learned here that matched with what I learned. Our notes overlapped, but we each also brought necessary information to the table that the other didn't have. Together, we were able to save my brother. And it was all because of you and Lumine."

Tears formed in her eyes, and it took a minute for Cato to realize tears had formed in his eyes as well.

"So, thank you again," she said, getting to her feet. "Thank you for saving our family."

Cato talked with the young woman for another hour or so before she left with a man who appeared to be her husband. The two kissed and walked down the street and out of view.

Time ticked by in his office, but the spirit being of intellect couldn't get this girl's visit off his mind. *It was all because of you and Lumine* he heard her say in his mind, over and over again.

The clock on his wall slowly ticked by, but he didn't pay any mind to it. His thoughts were elsewhere. The only thing that distracted him were the subtle hoots of an owl right outside the window. That's when he realized just how much time had passed.

Without him even realizing it, the sun had set and he'd made his decision.

He looked back out the window and stared with narrowed eyes at the silhouette of the owl against the light of the moon. Its image looked like a picture inside of a light source, and something about the creature made him feel at ease. For the first time in a long time, he truly felt at peace.

The next day, Cato informed his apprentice that he would be leaving and that he could take over all his classes and be in charge of the school in his absence if he'd like. If not, he could appoint the next teacher he deemed fit for the job. His apprentice nodded in excitement and said, "I won't let you down, sir!" and uncharacteristically gave the immortal man a hug. Cato laughed and gave him a pat on the back.

After he packed a bag with what he thought necessary for his travels, a smile broke across the immortal man's face as he looked toward the mountains. "I'm ready to meet you, Lumine," he said to himself as he stepped into the street. "I think there are some great things we can teach each other, and I'm ready to learn."

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