

Star Boys

By April May Jay

Every summer, Dylan would cut through the pasture separating our houses, and we'd play Star Boys.

Most kids played it, or some variation. Star Boys, Star Girls, Star Puppies and Unicorns. The game came from a legend, which was also just history, though nobody could separate the two. Every few centuries the moon went out and the stars sent down a piece of themselves to find it. A person made of sky. We didn't remember the moon—we were babies when it happened—but that didn't stop us looking for it, checking branches behind the shed or rooting through Dylan's old barn. It would be white, like the pictures, and made of light. The moon itself was still there in the sky, pulling at the tides, but it was dark. New, the adults said, but it seemed old to me. It was always, always dark. The light had fallen to Earth, and it was up to us Star Boys to bring it back.

We'd take turns. The Star Boy would search for the moon while the soldier protected him from aliens. We fought over who got to be the soldier. Dylan said he got sick of looking for the moon, but he wouldn't dive into bushes or crawl through irrigation ditches to protect me the way I did for him. And I looked the part, stocky, with hair like dead grass and a stick in my hand. Dylan was sharper, clean, a sniper hitting his target from a mile away. The aliens didn't stand a chance.

Some days we both got to be soldiers, separated from the Star Boy or Girl we were protecting. We'd duck under the overturned wheelbarrow in the barn, breathing hard as fire rained down around us, all dirt and scrapes and shit-eating grins.

Then at sunset, Dylan would chase his long shadow home. His parents were strict about that. Nights at our house were quiet without him, just Mom and Dad and me, books and board games and wholesome edutainment. A window full of stars and the dark place where the moon blocked them.

“What happens if the moon never gets found?” Dylan asked once. We were lying on plywood his dad brought out for some project, fingernails black-rimmed. Dylan’s brown skin looked warmer under the sun. Mine was starting to turn pink, but I was too stubborn to look for sunscreen. Star Boys were immune to the sun.

“I dunno,” I said. “I guess it just stays dark.”

“But don’t people need the moon?”

I shrugged. “Ask a scientist.”

Dylan worried about things—homework, diseases, the gap between his teeth—but he worried about the moon most of all. I worried about Dylan.

“Where do you think it would be?” he asked.

I pressed my lips together, thinking. “The bottom of the ocean.”

He bolted upright. “What?!”

“Most of the world is water. Just makes sense.”

He collapsed back onto the wood with a groan, and I grinned at the clouds.

#

One day when we were eleven, sunset snuck up on us. We were watching a movie, and it was going on longer than we thought it would, spinning us a cocoon of colors and noise and musty throw blankets Grandma crocheted when I was a baby. The light creeping around the curtains’ edges turned from gold to pink to blue.

It was some dumb joke, I don't even remember. Somebody in the movie did something funny, I guess, because I looked at Dylan to see if he was laughing too, and he—

He was—

I didn't understand.

I stared, waiting to, waiting for it to click into place. And he just—

Lights. All over his skin. Dylan, *my* Dylan, who bled from scratched up knees and bruised like nobody's business, looked like he'd been dipped in diamonds. Like an optical illusion that wouldn't resolve into something real, no matter how long I looked. He was made of galaxies.

Dylan watched me watching him, and I saw the moment he realized, when his eyes flicked down to his skin—void blue, cosmic—then back up to me. And he swore. That was the first time I heard him swear.

“Are you okay?” I asked, because I didn't know what this was, but he looked like he was in pain, like all his constellations were coming undone.

His lips parted. He still had a gap between his teeth.

“Dylan?” I asked.

He ran.

#

The next day I kicked up gravel all the way down our road and knocked on his door.

“He's not feeling good,” his dad said.

I plopped down on their porch steps. “I'll be here when he gets better.”

Three hours later, he sat down next to me.

“Still sick?” I asked.

“No,” he said. His hands twisted together like snakes. He looked normal now—not a hint of starlight.

“So are you gonna tell me what that was?” I asked. He shook his head numbly.

Summer moved around us. Wasps swarmed the nest on the far end of the porch, erratic and unnerving. The sun crept behind the eves of the house, and shadows flowed over our shoes like water.

“It’s real,” he said at last. “The Star Boy stuff. Those stupid games. It’s like that.”

“You’re a Star Boy?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“Since when?”

He frowned. “Since I was a baby, I guess?”

“But you were four months old when the moon went out,” I said.

“So?”

“So, I don’t know. I always figured it was someone born right at that moment.” I felt stupid saying it, admitting to the rules I’d made up for something I knew nothing about. Like meeting a dragon and asking why it couldn’t breathe fire. “What, were you just a normal baby, then one day you started glowing?”

“Basically.”

I scratched my cheek. “Does that keep you awake? I can’t even sleep when Dad’s got the light on in the garage.”

He looked at me like I put my feet on backwards this morning. “You’re serious?”

I shrugged. He shook his head.

After about four hours of us not saying anything, I asked, “Find the moon yet?”

“No,” he said.

“Have you looked?”

His eyes narrowed.

This was new territory. Dylan and I didn’t talk like this. The wasps were flying all through our conversation, and I didn’t know how to avoid them, so I talked through them. “It’s gotta be somewhere,” I said. “It’s always somewhere. Do you think it’s in the ocean or on land? Or maybe underground.”

“I don’t know!” he snapped. “It’s not like somebody gave me a guidebook for this, okay?”

I sucked on my lip. “Sorry.”

He tried to shake the ghosts out of his head. When he spoke again, it was rushed, hushed, the words afraid of being alone. “I’ve got all these stories telling me to find the moon. It’s so obvious, right? ‘Cause it’s always been that way. Every few hundred years, the moon’s light falls from the sky and the stars send someone to go get it. Been happening as long as people have been painting stick figures in caves. But nobody says *how* to do it. Nobody says ‘This is how you look, and this is where you go, and you just toss it up here when you’re done, easy.’” He bent over his knees and pulled his fingers through his hair like he wanted to rip off his scalp. “I don’t care about the moon,” he murmured. “I hope it’s in a volcano so I never have to get it out.”

I stared at him. Just stared. I wanted to do something, say the right thing to fix this mess, but I was a stupid little kid next to what he was going through. He didn’t know how to be a Star Boy. I didn’t know how to be a soldier.

I knew Dylan, though.

“Maybe it’s something else,” I said slowly. “Maybe you just—”

“—turn into starlight every night?” He glared at me between his fingers.

“Maybe.” I kicked my feet against the porch. A clump of dried mud fell into the grass.

“Anyway, I don’t think you have to worry yet. You can’t even drive. How do people expect you to find the moon, ride a bike?”

“My bike’s got a flat,” he said.

“Exactly. Wait till you get your pilot’s license or something.”

His hands weren’t twisting anymore, but I felt some snakes in my stomach from the way he was looking at me. “Did you tell anyone?” he asked.

“No.”

“I don’t want anyone to know.”

“If we tell my parents, you won’t have to leave at sunset anymore. We can have sleepovers,” I said.

He bit his lip. “Do you think they’ll be okay with it?”

“As long as we don’t make a mess in the kitchen.”

He laughed, sudden and loud. “I mean the Star Boy thing.”

“Oh,” I said. “Yeah, they love you. They won’t care about that.”

“Okay,” he said. The corners of his mouth twitched up a tiny bit. The prophecy of a smile.

“If you’re gonna find the moon, you’ll need someone to protect you,” I said. “I don’t have a blaster. You should find one of those, then we can deal with the moon.”

He tapped his feet against the porch next to me. “There might be a crowbar in the barn.”

The next few summers, sleepovers turned into moon hunting missions. We'd sneak out after everyone went to bed, poke around. At first it was just up and down our road, the light of his starry skin comforting next to me. Then one day he grabbed my hand and gravity turned off. My hair billowed around me like I was underwater. Between one breath and the next, the air turned sour, the sky disappearing under a blanket of light pollution. Buildings appeared so suddenly, I thought they were rushing toward us. I stumbled back, but it was concrete beneath my feet instead of gravel, and I fell on my butt.

Dylan laughed.

“What was that?” I sputtered.

“Star Boy perk,” he said, offering me a hand up. I shook my head and took it.

That night, we hollered in the park like idiots, then teleported home before anyone called the cops.

We got into high school. Went out a lot, but weren't looking very hard. Every time he grabbed my hand, we'd hold on a little longer than we had to. I never knew whose idea that was. I thought maybe it was both of ours.

Each year, he took us farther and farther away. Different states, then continents. We took a picture inside one of the red telephone boxes in the UK and pretended it was blue like on *Doctor Who*. We hid in a bush while a cheetah took down a gazelle. We watched fireworks over an ocean, my head dipping like the waves. He held onto me so I wouldn't fall in if I nodded off.

“It wouldn't be so bad,” I mumbled. “It's probably down there, anyway. The bottom of the ocean.”

He pointed at the colors rippling on the water's surface. “It's made of light, so it would float.”

“Should’ve brought a net.”

“Can you catch the moon in a net?” he asked. I could hear the amusement in his voice, could picture the smile that went with it.

“You can,” I said.

He dipped his hand in the water and pulled the colors off it, let them drip down his fingers like paint. The reds and yellows of the fireworks weren’t quite as interesting as the stars beneath them. “I don’t need a net, I need a bucket,” he said.

“Maybe there’s a bucket in the barn.” I mumbled the words directly into his shirt.

“With the crowbar and the blaster?”

“Yeah.”

“You’ve never actually protected me from anything.”

“I protect you from boredom,” I said, and he chuckled.

#

Junior year, he changed.

I didn’t know what it was—he didn’t talk about it—but I saw it. The way he tensed up in the middle of conversations, the way he’d snap at people out of nowhere, even his mom and dad.

“Are you doing okay?” I asked. It was November, early out for Thanksgiving break. Dead leaves drifted like snow in the park, and we sat in the middle of them, waiting on an avalanche. Some had found a home in his dark hair. I wanted to pull them out.

“I’m fine,” he said, voice hoarse.

“You seem...” He ripped the head off a gummy worm and smashed it between his fingers. “...tense.”

“Not me. I’m good.”

“Would you tell me if you weren’t?” I asked.

His face softened, ice caps melting into tired pools. “I’m just tired,” he said. “I’ve got a lot on my mind.”

“Is it the moon?”

He rolled the dead gummy worm between his fingers. When he finally spoke, it was quiet, like he didn’t want the leaves to hear. “It’s always the moon.”

I grabbed his hand and held it for a long time.

#

I didn’t know about the moon. Dylan said he could feel it, but couldn’t explain what that meant. It was this great big mystical thing the whole world loved, and I hated it.

He’d go days without coming over. Weeks, sometimes.

“We could play something,” I’d say.

“Maybe.”

“You want to check out that new horror movie?” I’d ask.

“I heard it wasn’t good.”

“We could teleport to Botswana.”

That one got him to stop. “What’s in Botswana?”

“Hell if I know. Let’s see.”

His mouth twitched in annoyance. “Don’t you have applications to work on?”

“I finished those. Just waiting to see who’ll take me,” I said.

He shoved his locker closed. “Good for you.”

#

“Did he decide on a college yet?” Mom asked.

“If he did, he didn’t tell me,” I muttered.

She put a hand on my shoulder. “He’ll come back to you when he’s ready.”

I laid my head on the table.

#

Time. Space. Whatever he needed.

I didn’t know what he needed.

#

Fate reared its misshapen head in the form of Mia Romero throwing a get-together for all the seniors. I cornered Dylan after school.

“You going to Mia’s get-together?” I asked.

He gave me a skeptical look and shoved a folder in his backpack, giving it scoliosis. He kept his minifigures and Lego creations aligned with laser precision, but to school supplies, he was Godzilla. “Why doesn’t she just call it a party?”

“No alcohol. Also she posted an itinerary on Instagram.”

“Really pulling out all the stops,” he grunted. “Tell me how it goes. Celebrate living life or whatever.”

I nudged his arm. “Come on, we’ll bail before sunset, and the rest of the night is yours. We can look for the moon, or we can just hang out and watch movies, I don’t care. It seems like I never see you anymore.”

“You see me every day. We go to school together.”

“That doesn’t count.”

“What, I’m not me when I’m at school?” He rolled his eyes and shouldered his backpack. Dylan had always been a bit of a burr, but the last year or so, he’d gone straight-up cactus. I didn’t hate it—I could never hate him—but it made him miserable, and I hated that. “You’ll have to get used to spending time away from me anyway,” he said. “You’re going to college, and I’ll be...” He cut off.

“You can teleport,” I pointed out.

“That doesn’t mean you won’t be busy. You’ll have classes and internships and jobs, new friends, new everything.” His eyes shuttered, and he added, “Maybe you’ll meet someone. You want me third-wheeling on your dates?”

I opened my mouth, but I couldn’t get my thoughts rounded up into words, the fragments: *But—, You—, No.* The clear path ahead of me twisted into a maze, I couldn’t bring myself to enter.

“You’ll have fun,” he continued. “Give yourself a chance. I’m gonna find the moon eventually. What will you do when I’m not here?”

“You’re not gonna find the moon,” I said. His eyebrows lowered, and I backpedaled. “You’re eighteen. You’ve got the whole world to search and a lifetime to do it. What are the chances you find it in the next four years?” His eyes flicked away, and I squeezed his arm. I meant to reassure him, but I think I needed it more, needed to feel him standing there with me. The world wasn’t real without him in it. “I’m not saying goodbye to you, Dylan,” I said. “Please don’t say goodbye to me, either.”

He slumped, a marionette hung up for the night, loose limbs and bowed head. My heart beat faster than a hummingbird’s, a thrum in my chest.

Then: “Send me the itinerary.”

#

4:30 – 5:30 p.m. — Guests arrive; board games

5:30 – 6 p.m. — Yearbook slideshow

6 – 7 p.m. — Build-your-own-pizza!!!

7 – 10 p.m. — Bonfire (with s'mores)

10 p.m. – 12 a.m. — Hyphen games! (Truth-or-Dare, Never-Have-I-Ever, No-Pressure-Spin-the-Bottle-With-Optional-High-Five-Substitutes)

12 – 1 a.m. — Please leave :)

There would be other parties for graduation, ones for families and ones for getting drunk, but none of them would be Mia's. She was a Pegasus plushie of a person, immune to drama and negativity, and everyone showed up determined to have a great time for her sake. Even Dylan loosened up when she tackled him in a hug and slapped a Congrats Grad hat over his dark hair.

“I’m going to miss you so much!” she said. (She would, too. Pegasus girl.)

The first few scheduled activities passed in a blur of dollar store decorations and goofiness-turned-sentimentality. Promises about who we would become, blackmail over Jenga, wars over pineapple on pizza that came to an armistice when pickles on pizza rose up to threaten the kingdom. Dylan snickered. Dylan whispered in my ear. Dylan jumped on the couch and threw Catan tiles like frisbees. Mia’s party didn’t have alcohol, but I felt dizzy. He looked at me like everything was alright again, like it would always be alright, and laughs bubbled out of my chest. I felt fizzy-light.

Then the bonfire. People sat on stumps and logs and camping chairs, tossed sticks and tin cans into the fire (and were promptly reprimanded). Heat blistered my front, the air full of ashes

and burnt sugar. I leaned into Dylan's side, said I was hiding from the smoke. "I'm glad you came," I said.

"So I can be your shield?" he asked.

"Yeah, exactly."

He side-eyed me, suppressing a smile.

The wind shifted to blow the smoke away from us. I sat up, resenting the loss of an excuse. "It's crazy we won't see anyone anymore," I said. "Like, some of these guys have been in my class since preschool, and we might never see each other again. Some will stay here, some will leave and come back, some will stay gone. What if the next time we see Mia, she's thirty-five and has skull tattoos on her face?"

I threw him a smile, looking to see his reaction to cultist Mia, but he'd gone stiff as stone next to me. "I'm not even going to be here when we're thirty-five," he said.

I frowned. "Of course you are."

He stood, shoving his hands in his pockets. "I need to go, the sun's going down. Let me know how the rest of the night goes." And he walked away, weaving through the bonfire obstacle course almost as fast as he could teleport. I checked the sky. The sun barely touched the treetops, painting the fields gold.

I went after him.

"Dylan!" I grabbed his arm—not hard enough to make him stop, but he stopped anyway. I hoped that was a good sign. "We've still got an hour till sunset. You don't want to stay?"

"Honestly? No, I don't," he said, jerking out of my grasp. "I only came in the first place because you guilt tripped me. This party isn't for me."

I floundered. "It's for all of us. You're graduating, too," I said.

“*Why?*” He threw his arms up. “What’s the point in me graduating? I can’t go to college, I can’t get a job or do anything with my life. There’s no reason for me to be here.”

My brows pulled together. “Nobody said you can’t go to college. I can help you—”

“I don’t want to go to college!” he seethed. There was a gravity about him, pulling reality towards him, eating daylight and context and thought. He was a star, collapsing.

I held my hands out, helpless. “What *do* you want?”

His jaw set, fists clenched.

I dared a step forward. “Dylan...”

He kissed me.

Everything else evaporated. My brain cracked in half, the pieces falling to either side of me, and it was so *much*—his lips, the smell of him, his hand on the small of my back, pulling me closer—that I only had room for one thought, and it was *Finally*. Finally, yes, and *more*.

Then gravity turned off, just for a moment, half a heartbeat, and he was gone.

#

It felt familiar, this.

Unanswered calls, read texts. A decision.

“Is Dylan home?” I asked.

“I’m sorry, Asher, he’s not feeling good.”

I sat. Tapped my feet against the porch. Waited.

My shoes weren’t muddy anymore. I guess somewhere along the way I stopped crawling through irrigation ditches. I grabbed a stick and used it to flick rocks out of the treads.

Eventually, he sat down.

“Surprised it didn’t take you longer,” I said.

He looked tired, bent, like he'd fall in the ocean if I didn't hold onto him, float on the surface like moonlight and fireworks. "No point," he said. "You wouldn't leave."

"So why'd you make me wait an hour?" I worked to make my voice light, teasing, but when I dared a glance over, he ducked his head.

Okay.

Space. Time.

The fields rolled on for miles, spring-soft and green. The sun burned through the clouds, sky so bright I might've thought the stars lost their light, too. His parents were watching some too-loud comedian inside, and occasional fits of screams and laughter punched through the stillness.

"I wasn't supposed to be here this long," Dylan said quietly.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not supposed to have a future," he said. "I'm not supposed to go to college or get a job or do anything. Find the moon, take it back up, that's it. That's all I'm here for."

"I think you're here 'cause your parents got hammered on a cruise," I said.

Dylan scrunched up his face. "You know too much about my family."

I smiled at nothing, squinted into afternoon sky. "Nah."

"You know the ending of those myths, right?" he asked, cautious, like the words were made of glass. Like he was made of glass.

The smile slipped. I nodded.

"I'm gonna have to take it up there," he continued. "I won't be able to come back. That's how it always is."

He was watching me, trying to read something in my face, the set of my shoulders. I felt like a bug under a magnifying glass. I wanted to say *Maybe it'll be different for you*, but that felt cruel. Like, yeah, I know everyone else who went on this mission never made it home, but maybe you'll be the exception. Maybe you'll win the lottery, too.

“People seem to be doing fine without the moon so far,” I said.

“They miss it,” he said. “The people who remember it. They’re always writing songs about it, the hole in the sky, the hole in their hearts. They need something to look up to.” He craned his neck back, searching the sky. “Literally, I guess.”

“I was sad when Deez Donuts went out of business, but I survived.”

“There were rats living under the fryers.”

“For flavor,” I said.

He grimaced, shaking his head. “You’re gross.”

“But you kissed me.”

Dylan sucked his lips between his teeth. “Well,” he said, voice soft, like that was starlight, too, “you kissed me back.”

“Of course I did! Do you have any idea how long I’ve been in love with you? Shit, man, I thought we just didn’t talk about it ‘cause you were stressed about the moon thing. What did you think was gonna happen?” It came out in a rush, adrenaline-fueled and clumsy. A boy swinging a stick and calling himself a soldier. My heart felt like it was going to bore a hole clean through my ribs, but I didn’t regret it. The Earth turned, the moon was dark, and I was in love with Dylan. It was fact.

He blinked, dazed, like I really did hit him with a stick. “I...I don’t know,” he said. His eyes flicked down to my hand. I laced my fingers through his and he squeezed, and God, that smile broke every muscle in my face.

Gravity turned off. My hair floated up around my head.

I landed on my ass in the barn.

“You could’ve warned me!” I snapped.

He ignored me, wiping dirt off his jeans before darting around mountains of junk that had accumulated over the course of our childhoods. I followed him to a stall with a broken riding mower, a bundle of barbed wire, and the overturned wheelbarrow we used to hide under when aliens attacked. Dylan wrenched the wheelbarrow upright and let it clatter to the side.

Underneath it sat a bucket.

“What is that?” I asked, creeping closer.

“It’s the moon,” he said.

And it was.

Liquid light, white and cratered just like the pictures, rippling. It bleached the daylight sifting in through cracks in the walls. Nothing about it was possible, nothing made sense. I was used to that, in a way—I played soldiers with a fallen star. But Dylan was real. He was flesh and bone and school projects put off till the last minute. This was pure. White light in a bucket, and it pulled something out of me, a thread right out of my chest. My throat closed up. I blinked rapidly.

I had to try several times before I could speak, and when I did, the only thing that came out was “When?”

“Two years ago,” he said quietly.

My head shot up. “You’ve been sitting on this for two years?!”

The moonlight caught the wetness in his eyes, made a spark where it brimmed over. His voice came out rocky. “I didn’t want to leave,” he said.

“Dylan...”

He folded his arms across his chest. “I didn’t want to leave you, and I didn’t want to leave my parents and everyone else. I didn’t want to go to school for sixteen years just for some cosmic power to say, ‘Just kidding, you don’t get a life. Come up here and forget everything you learned. The sooner you leave, the sooner everyone else can move on.’”

“You don’t have to leave,” I said. “There’s no guidebook, remember? You can stay.” Then, “I want you to stay.”

“The moon needs its face back,” he said.

“The moon is billions of years old. It can wait a few more decades.”

“*People* need the moon back,” he said. Like that was all that mattered. Like he wasn’t the most important person in the world.

“You’re a person, too,” I said. “What about what you need?”

“I’m not a person!” he shouted. “I haven’t been a person since I was four months old. I’m just some *thing* the stars possessed to run an errand, but that’s done now, so I’m done, too. I was done two years ago.”

I took his hand again, warm and dusty and bone-deep familiar. We’d hold hands when he teleported. Touching him felt like going somewhere. “You’re not done,” I said gently. “You know you’re not.”

He looked up at me, untethered, lost in space with his feet on the ground. “What else am I supposed to be?”

“What do you want to be?” I asked. “What do you want to be when you grow up?”

He was quiet for a long time. Planets spun into being and dissolved in those moments.

Trees fell over, new ones sprouted up. The continental plates crashed together, and Everest grew by a mile.

Finally, he said, “I want to be a fireman.”

“Really?” I could see it. Dylan could be anything. He was already everything.

“No,” he said, testing the word. “I want to be a singer.”

I nodded. “Good.”

“I want to be a paramedic,” he said, straightening.

“Good!”

“I want to be a shitty accountant who switches careers in his forties and shows everyone what he’s made of!”

I clapped a sonic boom. “Hell yeah, you do!”

“I want to be a person,” he said.

I laughed, breathless. “You’re already a person. You were a person first.”

“I want to be yours,” he said.

I kissed him, took his face in my hands and brought it to mine. It wasn’t starlight or moonlight or anything celestial. It was Dylan, sweet and snarky, Earth-bound and actual. Realer than anything else in my life. It was him.

We pulled back, foreheads pressed together, grinning like maniacs. I breathed his air and spoke into it. “You are mine,” I whispered. “What about the rest of it?”

He chuckled. There was still uncertainty there, in that smile, in the creases around his gorgeous eyes, but there was joy, too. “Maybe I can figure it out as I go?” he said.

I kissed that smile, whispered, “I think that’s a great idea.”

When we managed to separate, I flipped over the wheelbarrow and let it settle over the bucket again, kicking up dust.

“You’re just going to leave it there?” Dylan asked.

“Nah,” I said. “We’ll come back and check on it in five years.” I gave him a sly look and added, “Maybe ten.”

Dylan pulled me close and nestled his face in my shoulder. He *was* a star. He was the whole damn sun.

“It’s a date,” he said.