

When the Stars Align

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Alexis Harris

Map Illustrated by Kirsten Stiles

WHEN THE STARS ALIGN

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Dedicated to my first readers.

Your motivation, criticism, and fandom pushed me to finish.

Thank you! Vondre Green, Kirsten Stiles, and Lauren Breed

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And as the wind whipped through her hair and the trees became a blur, all she could think was that she was finally free. No more rules; no more boundaries. The time was finally here to discover the true wonders of life for herself. She could almost taste it. Even with the sound of her pursuers' steeds pounding along behind her . . .

Princess Celestia

1

“Come on, milady. We must get you up and ready. Your mother is waiting for you,” Garrita said. She was the lady-in-waiting to the princess; a thin, pretty, young woman, not so different from the princess herself, with light brown hair and a fair complexion.

Princess Celestia groaned. “Five more minutes,” she said, burying her face in her pillow. She hated mornings. Her mother always insisted on starting the day early, but she’d rather clean the stables than get out of bed in the morning.

“You’ve already had over an hour,” she said, shaking her. Her white bonnet bobbed up and down against her head.

Celestia turned over, groaning again. She stretched out on the giant bed, her light blue nightgown ruffling up. Garrita helped her up and took her over to the tub she’d filled for her bath. She slipped out of her nightgown, revealing her pale skin, and climbed into the tub. Garrita helped her wash and then dried her off.

“Is everything ready?” Celestia asked as Garrita helped her slip her undergarments on.

She silently lifted her blue ballgown around her and started lacing the corset before she answered, “Yes, milady.” She pulled the laces tight, adding, “But, are you sure you want to do this?”

“Today’s the day, Garrita,” she said confidently, “I can feel it.”

Her lady-in-waiting helped her slip her shoes on, and then returned to her place behind her as Celestia sat before the mirror. She started brushing her long, blonde hair, saying, "If you say so, milady."

Just then, another servant burst in, saying, "What's taking so long? The queen is waiting!"

"She'll be along momentarily, Jameson," Garrita said, brushing faster.

"The queen doesn't like to be kept waiting," he said, slamming the door. He was a short middle-aged man with brown hair and an attitude problem. He never was very friendly and was always stressing over keeping the queen happy and keeping everyone on task. Or, as some would see it, sucking up to the queen and bossing everyone around.

The princess looked in the mirror at Garrita behind her. A few strands of hair were falling in her face as she hurriedly styled Celestia's. She wore a common brown dress with a white apron, like many other members of the staff. She was Celestia's best friend more so than servant. They'd grown up together. If there was anyone the princess was close with, it was Garrita. In her eyes, they were basically sisters. But, their stations in life forced them into different roles. In spite of that, they managed to maintain their friendship past the play dates of their childhood.

Celestia's room was huge, with walls and floor of stone. Tapestries were hung up to decorate, and there wasn't much furniture in the spacious chamber; only her bed, her vanity, her tub, and a large wardrobe of cherry wood. Her pale blue sheets were all in disarray, but soon her chambermaid would arrive and have the room clean again in no time.

Garrita finished up her hair and makeup and assisted with her jewelry. As Celestia looked in the mirror at her own reflection, she thought, *Today's the day.*



"There you are, finally," Queen Eva said as Princess Celestia entered the throne room, "So glad you were able to make it out of bed only an hour and a half late." She was tall and beautiful, with light brown skin and caramel-colored hair. She had brown eyes and a lavender ballgown. Celestia was the lighter version of her mother.

Celestia didn't say anything, knowing it was futile. She stood straight and tried to look lady-like.

Queen Eva sighed, "You know the drill. When you're late, you make up for every five minutes with an extra song. Get to it." She pointed to the

piano in the corner. The throne room was probably the largest room in the castle, consisting of a spacious floor for balls and other occasions, with two thrones at the back up a short flight of stairs, and the piano across the way.

Princess Celestia sighed and reluctantly walked over to the piano, starting to play. She knew she would have to play nineteen songs—one for every five minutes she was late, plus the one she would've had to play anyway. She was so sick of training to become queen. She didn't even *want* to be queen. But, she was an only child, and therefore, sole heir to the throne of Ivétoiless. Her parents had both been heirs to their thrones, and so their marriage had merged the two kingdoms, formerly known as Tristétoiless and Ivonneveille.

As she played the piano, her mother paced, answering questions and giving orders as the servants came and went. It was the same thing every day. She'd play piano, walk with a book on her head, learn about a lot of boring kingdom history, astronomy, and arithmetic, have lunch, be quizzed on what to do in different scenarios as queen, and have the rest of the day until dinner time to do what she pleased, so long as it was appropriate for royalty. She lived for her free time, which was soon to be taken from her when she became queen. She'd stroll in the garden, practice her archery, and ride her horse.

"Celestia," her mother was saying, "that's enough. It's time to work on your dancing."



"Mother," Celestia said, as their plates were cleared away at lunch, "Might I ask you something?"

"Certainly," Queen Eva said, looking at her with a mixture of suspicion and concern. They sat in the dining hall—a large stone room with a long mahogany table in the center surrounded by tall, ivory-cushioned chairs. The queen's eyes were close to the color of the table, and her skin almost matched the chocolate mousse they had for dessert.

Celestia twisted her spoon around in the mousse. "Do you think you . . . I mean, could you . . . Would you tell me about my father?" she said finally.

Eva sat back in her chair. The look on her face was one Celestia had seen many times before. She was clamming up and getting ready to refuse.

"Just one thing?" she said, "Please, I don't know anything about him."

"He was a great man," Eva said, taking a drink of wine from her gold goblet, "There's your one thing. That's all you need to know."

"Tell me something else," she begged, "You always say that."

"I think that's quite enough," Queen Eva said, "We're done with this conversation."

"But, you never tell me anything about him!" Celestia said, "It's been 20 years! What's wrong with talking about it?"

"I said enough!" her mother snapped, "And that's the end of it."

Princess Celestia couldn't take it anymore. She rushed from the room and to her chamber, slamming the door behind her. She'd been ready to give royal life one last shot, but if her mother refused to tell her anything about her father, she couldn't stay. All she knew of him was that he died during a war with another kingdom when she was an infant. She'd spent her whole life trying to figure out the other half of who she was, and wondering why she felt so out of place as a royal. Her mother refused to talk with her about such things, and she was a mere four months away from her twenty-first birthday, and her coronation as queen. She knew her mother would leave it alone until dinner, and then try to make up like she always did, so she called for Garrita.

"Yes, what is it, milady?" she asked, rushing into the room.

"It's time," she said, kicking off her shoes.

"Now?" Garrita asked, sounding panicked.

"Now," Celestia said with authority, "Help me unlace."

Garrita began unlacing her corset, "Are you sure about this?"

Celestia remained silent as she slipped out of her ballgown and into a peasant's dress. She took her hair out of its clips and washed off her makeup, taking her jewelry off as well. Finally, she set her tiara down meaningfully, saying goodbye to who she was, and the life she'd always known. She looked in the mirror. She hardly recognized herself; she looked like a peasant. Her white-blonde hair went down to her waist. She had a blousy white off-the-shoulder shirt under a dark brown front-lace corset. A light brown skirt flowed down to her brown shoes—shoes made for comfort and functionality rather than appearance. Her blue eyes shone. Though it was hard for her to let go, she couldn't bear to stay.

She took a breath, mustering her courage, "Goodbye, Garrita," she said, hugging her lady-in-waiting.

Garrita couldn't respond, except to nod, tearing up.

Celestia hurried out of her chamber and to the stables. Her horse, Razel, was waiting for her, ready to go. She'd had Garrita, and a stable-boy named Matthew, get everything ready for her escape. Razel—a beautiful

brown mare she'd had since she was a girl—already had her saddle and reins, and saddlebags filled with food and supplies for the road. She leaped upon her back, kicking her sides to get her going. She rode hard, headed for the nearby forest. It was now or never.

She heard the alarm sound, and she knew what that meant: they knew she was running away. The guards would be after her in a matter of seconds. And as the wind whipped through her hair and the trees became a blur, all she could think was that she was finally free. No more rules; no more boundaries. The time was finally here to discover the true wonders of life for herself. She could almost taste it. Even with the sound of her pursuers' steeds pounding along behind her . . .

Bridgot

2

She made it to the forest, and the trees gave her some cover as she rode. All she had to do was make it to the other side of the river, and the hounds wouldn't be able to follow her scent. She steered Razel toward the water, and waded quickly through it, climbing up to the other side and taking off again. The thunder of hooves hitting the earth faded as she got farther and farther away.

Celestia guided Razel to a walk once she could no longer hear them behind her. *I actually did it*, she thought, *I got away*. She was free. Royal life had always felt like a prison. She had to look a certain way, act a certain way, speak a certain way. For being at the top of the food chain, someone was always telling her what to do. She never got to think or make decisions for herself. That was the true reason she'd run away; her mother not wanting to talk about her father was only a small part of it. It was the factor that had finally pushed her over the edge.

She rode along, thinking to herself, feeling happy she'd left, and wondering what she was going to do now. As it started growing dark, she decided to stop for the night. She pulled Razel up next to a large tree and made a small fire. She'd learned survival skills as part of her princess training, in case she was ever captured, so she could get away and survive long enough to either get back home, or be rescued. She knew those skills would be useful now. She took some bread and cold stew out of the saddlebags. She had a pot as well, and she heated up the stew for herself. In the meantime,

she pulled out an apple for Razel, and let her graze on the grass and get a drink from the river.

She washed her pot in the river when she was done, and as she was putting it away, she heard a rustling noise. "Who's there?" she said, sticking close to Razel and looking around. As she turned to pull her sword from its scabbard, a group of men sprang out from the brush. Two of them grabbed her, and another three grabbed her horse. Their leader shouted for them to follow, and started treading across the river. They were pulling and pushing Razel, and dragging Celestia along as she kicked and flailed and tried to fight.

Just then, a man on a horse came riding up and saw what was happening. He leaped off his horse and drew his sword. "Let her go," he said.

The leader sneered, nodding to his followers.

The men that were holding Razel, along with one of the ones holding Celestia, drew their swords and surrounded him. The other man holding Celestia gripped both of her arms behind her back, holding her firmly in place. The leader grabbed Razel's reins and snickered.

The mysterious stranger smiled and swung his sword, engaging the men who'd surrounded him. He fought them off with ease, killing one of them. The rest ran away, leaving the leader and the man holding Celestia.

He walked up to the one holding her and pointed his sword at his throat, "I said, let her go."

The man dropped Celestia and ran, with the leader chasing after them and calling them a bunch of worthless cowards.

The mysterious stranger was tall and lean, with curly brown hair, blank, gray eyes, and unevenly tanned skin. He wore a brown peasant's shirt with dark brown pants and brown boots. A belt with a scabbard hung around his waist. He sheathed his sword in it and offered his hand, "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Celestia said, getting up on her own, "I didn't need your help. I had everything under control."

"Yes, I could see that," he said, "I suppose getting dragged through the river was all part of your plan."

She got ahold of Razel's reins and led her ashore.

"What on earth would possess you to travel alone?" he asked, leading his own brown stallion ashore.

"Do you always make it your business to know the travel plans of strangers, or am I just lucky?" she asked, putting Razel's saddle back on.

"It's dangerous," he said. "Look, why don't I accompany you? At least for a while."

"You want to accompany me?" she looked at him in disbelief.

"No one should travel alone. Not even a brat like you," he said.

"Excuse me? A *brat*? Who do you think you are?" she demanded.

"My name's Bridgot," he said, extending his hand and smiling smugly.

She stared at it a moment, then mounted her horse. "Thanks, but no thanks," she said, turning to ride away.

"How can you be so conceited?" he asked, "Is this the thanks I get for saving your life?"

Celestia paused, realizing how rude she was being. She sighed, turning back toward him. "Thank you," she said.

He shifted, giving her a slight nod, "You're welcome."

"But, you're traveling in the opposite direction," she said, gesturing back the way she'd just come.

"Look, I just have some business to conduct in the next town over, and then I'll be on my way back this way. It won't take long."

"I'm not going an *inch* back that way. So, this isn't going to work," she said.

"Alright, how about this?" he said, "I saw an abandoned farmhouse a couple miles back. It looks like it's been uninhabited for a while, so looters and slave traders won't bother you. You'll be safe there for a couple of days while I complete my business, and then we can set out the way you were headed."

She paused, considering. Realizing she couldn't continue traveling alone, she agreed. He hopped back on his horse, and they headed toward the farmhouse.

"So, you never told me your name," he said.

"It's . . . Margarita," she said, "And this is my horse, Razel."

"Margarita," he said, smiling, "Nice. As I said, my name's Bridgot, and this is Samson."

She nodded, "Nice to meet you, Samson."

His horse snorted, turning his head her direction in greeting.

"So, why are *you* traveling alone?" she asked.

"Well," he said, "I know these woods. I've traveled all through them selling things at market. I know what areas are safe, and which ones to avoid. My village sent me to fetch some things this time, and so I am." He paused, "So, what's your story?"

"Well, if you must know, I ran away from home, and I am *not* going back."

"That bad?" he asked.

"It's a long story," Celestia said.

"We've got time," Bridgot said.

Celestia remained silent, not wanting to tell anyone too much. If someone found out she was a princess, it would draw too much attention, and risk her being discovered and "rescued."

"Alright," he said, "Fine. I get it. We just met; I'm a stranger. You don't want to tell me your business."

She nodded in affirmation, and they continued silently until they saw the farmhouse. They dismounted and began walking toward it cautiously. Bridgot drew his sword and went ahead, with Celestia and the horses following behind.

As they neared it, Bridgot said, "Okay. You wait here with the horses. I'll go in first to check it out, and make sure it's safe."

"No way," she whispered, "I'm not waiting anywhere. I'm going with you."

Bridgot turned toward her, annoyed, and quickly jumped backward as an axe came down right where he'd been standing. Celestia screamed, and Bridgot lunged forward with his sword, ready to fight the old man who'd swung the axe.

"Get off of my land!" he yelled, swinging his axe up to meet Bridgot's sword, "Thieves! Trespassers!"

"No!" Celestia yelled, "Stop!" She rushed forward and got in between them as they were starting to lunge at each other again. They both stopped, and she faced the old farmer. "Please," she said, "We're only looking for a place to stay. We thought this house was abandoned."

The old man, who had gray hair and a gray beard, and was wearing a plaid shirt and overalls, stopped and lowered his axe.

"Come on, Margarita," Bridgot said from behind her, "Let's get out of here."

"We didn't mean to trespass," she continued, "But, it's not safe on the road. We only need a place to stay for a couple of days."

He looked from her to Bridgot, and then over to the horses. After a pause, he said, "Very well. You can stay here for a couple of days. Come on; I'll show you to the stable for your horses."

Celestia led Razel and followed the old man. Bridgot led Samson and reluctantly followed, annoyed and wary. They put Samson and Razel in the

stable, taking off their saddles and reins. Then, they followed the old man into the house. He led them upstairs to a spare bedroom.

"Blankets and pillows are in the wardrobe," he said, "Don't try any funny business. I sleep with my axe." With that, he headed down the hall to his own room.

Bridgot sighed, "I'll take the floor." He crossed the small room to the wardrobe, and pulled out a couple of blankets and a pillow for himself, spreading out a blanket to lie on, and keeping his sword next to him.

"You're sleeping with your sword?"

"Yes," he snapped, "Because I don't like this; I don't trust that guy. You got us into this, and I'm only trying to be prepared."

"I got us into this?" she said, sarcastically adding, "Oh, yes, I saw an abandoned farmhouse. You'll be safe there."

"Well, it's not abandoned," he said, "I said we should go. But, *you* talked him into letting us stay here."

"And where do you propose we go?" she asked.

"Well, it doesn't matter now," he said.

"Men," Celestia said, crossing to the wardrobe to pull out a pillow and blanket for herself. The room had only the wardrobe, a small table, and a twin bed. She couldn't see much of it, since it was dark, the only light being from the moonlight streaming in through the window. She went to the bed and sat down, unlacing her corset and removing it and her shoes. She then loosened her skirt to make it more comfortable to sleep in and lied down, closing her eyes and drifting off.



When she awoke, the floor was empty. Sunlight was pouring in through the window, and there was no sign of Bridgot anywhere. She got up quickly, tightening her skirt and putting her shoes and corset back on. She headed down the stairs and found the old farmer cooking breakfast.

"Good morning," he said, "Sleep well?"

She got a better look around the house now that it was daylight. It was wooden and old. The outside was in obvious disrepair, but the inside looked nice enough. The staircase creaked, but it was intact. The downstairs was simply a living area with a gray couch and chairs, an oak coffee table, a fireplace, and some bookshelves, as well as a kitchen and dining area. The kitchen had a fridge, a stove, and a sink, with white-painted wood cabinets

over gray counter-tops. The dining area was a large, square table with four matching wooden chairs.

“Have you seen the man I was with?” she asked.

“He left, early this morning. He didn’t abandon you, did he?” he asked. She could see him better as well. He had tan, ruddy skin, and his hair and beard were cropped short. He looked lean and muscled for an old farmer.

“No,” she said, remembering that he had said he had business to conduct in the next town over before they departed, “I just didn’t expect him to set out so early.”

“You like eggs?” he asked, lifting the pan he was stirring off of the stove.

“I’ve never had them,” she said.

“Never had eggs?” he asked, surprised.

She shrugged, “My mother liked to have me eat healthy. She said eggs were full of fat.”

“Well, have a seat, my dear,” he said, “Because you’re gonna try them today.”

Celestia pulled out a chair and sat down.

The old man served up a plate of eggs, toast, bacon, and some form of potatoes. He caught a glimpse of her face, looking at it questioningly. “It’s hash browns,” he said.

She looked at him blankly.

“You’ve never had any of this before, have you?”

She shook her head, “Only the toast.”

He set a glass of orange juice in front of her plate, “Well, you’re in for a treat today.”

He got his own plate and sat across from her, “Dear Lord, we thank you for this day, for our life and good health, and for this bounty before us. Please bless this meal we are about to receive. In your name, Amen.”

He began eating as she continued to stare at her plate, unsure. Finally, she picked up her fork and tried the eggs. To her surprise and delight, they were delicious. She continued eating, and cleared her plate, washing it down with the orange juice.

The old farmer took her plate and began doing the dishes. “Well,” he said, “How was it?”

“It was delicious,” Celestia smiled, “Where’d you learn to cook like that?”

“From my wife,” he said, scrubbing slowly.

“Oh,” she said, “What happened to her?”

“She died,” he said, drying a plate, “Pneumonia.”

"I'm sorry," she responded sympathetically.

They were silent for a moment. "Well, since then, I've just been trying to keep this place up on the inside. I let it look abandoned from the outside, so no one would bother me. I have my own garden, hidden by some shrubs, and I go hunting for meat. The only time I go to town is if I need something, and I just trade my kill for it."

"Sounds lonely," she said.

"What did you say your name was?" he asked, turning toward her.

"Margarita," she said, "What's yours?"

"Wells," he said, "Farmer Wells." He turned back to the sink, "So, what's your husband's name?"

"My husband?" she asked, momentarily confused, "I don't have a . . ." She trailed off, realizing he thought she and Bridgot were married. "Oh, it's, uh, Bridgot," she said.

"You don't sound too sure about that," he said.

"Sorry," she said, "we're newlyweds, and it's still strange calling him 'husband.'"

"I see," he said, draining the sink. "Well, shall we go tend to your horse?"

"Yes, of course, that would be wonderful," she replied, getting up.

Farmer Wells led Celestia out to the stable, and they brought Razel out of her stall. He pulled out a couple of brushes and handed one to Celestia. They began brushing Razel's brown coat. It was relaxing, just tending to Razel as she often did at home. The soft, repetitive movements kept her hands busy and allowed her mind to wander. *What am I going to do now?* she thought. The question had been nagging at the back of her mind since she'd run away. She still didn't have the answer. She wanted an exciting life of adventure, rather than the life she'd come from, full of rules, expectations, duty. But, traveling alone was out of the question. She'd never realized the dangers of the road. How could she? She'd never been outside of the palace grounds, except for royal balls and parties in neighboring kingdoms.

Once Razel had been groomed, they put her back in her stall, and Farmer Wells gave her some hay and fresh water. "Well," he said, "now that she's taken care of, I suppose I should tend to my garden. You're welcome to join me."

"Sure," she said, not having anything else to occupy her. He led her over to some overgrown shrubs near the back of the farmhouse. The house was a faded blue color, which she could now see in the daylight. The paint was chipped and peeling, and the doors and windows looked as though