

The Stars Were Made to Guide Us

Li Rasmussen

Soft petals brushed against a young girl's fingertips, and she watched in amazement at the ways the material gently bent to her touch. Countless buds jutted out from the bushes, pink shining out like stars. She carefully pulled the flower from the plant, raising it to her nose as she shut her eyes and inhaled the floral scent.

The girl then jumped as the harsh snapping of twigs sounded in her ears. She whipped her head to face an older woman gripping her arm, pulling her away as the flower fell out from between her fingers.

"We don't have time for your antics today," her mother said, yanking her in the direction of an old church.

The girl frowned, hopelessly trying to pull herself from the woman's tight grip. "We don't have worship today," she protested. "Why are we going to the church?"

The woman scoffed, her hold unrelenting. "I'm concerned for you, Penelope. You've spent your whole life being distracted by stupid things—I think it would be good for you to spend some time remembering what matters and may Abrus forgive you for the time you've spent ignoring him."

"I'm sure Abrus hardly cares that I've spent 'too much time' gardening," she said, rolling her eyes. Her mother didn't respond, and instead pulled her through the open door of the church, slamming it behind her.

Thin light trickled in from the cloudy stained-glass windows. The blue and white hues dimly illuminated the large chapel. The woman led Penelope through rows of benches, guiding her to the front and pulling her to her knees in front of the altar. The young girl knew what she was expected to do, and she bowed her head in silent prayer, listening as her mother kneeled beside her. Time blurred as the two sat in tense silence.

Penelope picked at her fingernails, her body restless and her thoughts silent of prayer. Her hands had long been unclenched, and she had stopped bowing her head after her neck began to cramp. She carefully cracked her eyes open, and her gaze flicked to her mother who was still firmly bent in prayer.

Penelope turned towards the windows lining the sides of the chapel. Through the tinted glass, she could make out the faint orange hues of the sunset. She sat silently, staring as the sky grew dark. She pictured the stars littering the night sky, twinkling a greeting to her.

"Penelope."

The young girl jumped, her heart racing at the sudden break of silence. She whipped her head around to her mother who she couldn't quite make out in the darkness. The older woman sighed, pulling Penelope to her feet. The girl winced as the sound of her knees popping from hours of kneeling rang out across the empty room.

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Her mother carefully approached the altar, her hands blindly feeling around.

After a few moments of Penelope idly listening to the rustling sounds, a small light appeared in front of her mother's face. A fragile flame sparked in the candle held between the woman's hands.

"Come," she said, striding past the altar to a small wooden door, hidden away in the back of the chapel. "Go on."

Penelope's shoulders drooped as she followed behind the older woman. She wearily reached forward, slowly pulling the door open and wincing at its piercing creak. She was frozen in the open frame as her eyes fell upon the dusty staircase.

"Go on," her mother repeated firmly.

Penelope slowly made her way down the stairs, coughing as she kicked up dust. Her mother followed behind her. She sat the candle carefully on one of the many boxes that were piled alongside the walls, kneeling and bowing her head. She cracked one eye open, training her gaze on Penelope. The young girl paused for a moment, a slight frown firm on her face, her eyes growing distant as she joined her mother in silence, and their ritual began again.

Penelope hardly cared enough to keep her eyes shut long enough to satisfy her mother. Within minutes, her patience ended, and she turned her gaze to the candle sitting in front of her. She stared into it until she could see the shape of the flame burned into her eyelids when she blinked. She watched as it flickered, a sense of peace filling her as she imagined it were the stars overhead, blinking in their celestial code. The young girl was able to ignore the thickness of the air, or the quiet occasional sound of rats hidden

within the stacks of cardboard as she stared into the light of the candle.

Wax dripped from the candle, and Penelope distantly wondered if they would stay long enough for the whole thing to melt. Her mother began to shift after what was likely hours, and the girl slammed her eyes shut, rushing to bow her hand and clasp her fingers together.

She startled as she felt a hand grace her shoulder, and she nervously cracked her eyes open.

"Let's go," the woman said, groaning as she pulled herself onto her old knees, making her way up the creaking staircase without waiting for a response.

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A thin light trickled into the room, shining into Penelope's eyes. The girl sighed as she swung her legs over the side of her bed, wincing at the tenseness in her neck from the previous night. A pop rang out throughout the small rooms as she twisted her neck to the side, and disappointment flooded the young girl as it did nothing to ease the discomfort.

She carefully creaked her door open, listening for the telling sounds of her mother rustling around in the kitchen. She carefully crept out when she heard nothing.

She cracked open the back door, sliding out and shutting it quickly behind her. The tension fell from her body the moment the first breath of morning air filled her lungs. The girl made her way to the center of the small, fenced-in garden and she watched as the world seemed to come to life in front of her eyes.

Birds landed in the bushes she had raised herself. The energetic reds and oranges of the sun lit the morning clouds ablaze, reflecting in

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Penelope's pupils. She shut her eyes, allowing the soft birdsong, loud colors, and gentle floral scent to fill her lungs, swirling and mixing with her soul until they were one in the same.

She jolted as the back door creaked open, startling out of her trance. She whipped her body around to face her mother, who was gazing around the garden with a small wooden box held in her hand.

The woman hummed thoughtfully, approaching one of the blooming flower beds and crouching down. "I like these," she said with no real conviction behind her voice. She plucked one of the bright red tulips from the ground and approached her daughter, carefully stringing the flower behind the young girl's ear.

Penelope said nothing, only watching as her mother sat facing her. The woman carefully clicked open the small metal latch on the box, slowly pulling out a thick silver necklace. From the bottom of the chain hung a small charm—the symbol of Abrus. Penelope recognized the leaves curled around the small berries associated with their god despite the small size, and did nothing as her mother clasped the necklace around her neck. The harsh edges of the silver leaves poked slightly into Penelope's skin. The chain settling on her shoulders seemed to bring back the tension from the night before, her muscles tensing.

Penelope's expression was blank as she watched her mother dress her in religious iconography, the world around her quickly growing distant.

Her mother sat the box down and lifted her hands up to Penelope's face, gently caressing her cheeks. "You sadden me, child," the woman whispered, staring deep into her daughter's eyes. "Don't look so empty. Abrus will forgive you,

Penny. You're just distracted—you'll grow out of it," she said in an attempt to reassure her, smiling gently.

Penelope offered no response. The jewelry felt heavy and cold on her neck. Her mother twisted into a small frown, and she laid a careful kiss on the young girl's forehead before standing up and brushing the dirt off her knees.

"You'll feel better soon, it'll just take a bit of work and focus," the woman said as she began walking back towards the house. "Breakfast is nearly ready; you should come in soon." The woman carefully shut the door behind her, leaving Penelope in an empty silence.

She lifted the necklace to her eyes, examining the careful metalwork. She glanced to the side at the flowers she had been smelling before her mother joined her. She carefully plucked one from the flowerbed, thoughtlessly threading its stem through one of the silver links. The young girl carefully weaved it through the metal, before picking another and another until the necklace was hidden behind the gentle green stems.

She smiled, admiring her work. "Something's missing," she whispered her voice barely louder than the silence. "You'll grow me some flowers, won't you?" She asked the stems gently.

She watched in amazement as the stems bloomed before her eyes, orange and yellow petals emerging from between the silver chains, protruding from around the religious symbol until it was invisible from the outside.

She giggled as she ran her finger over the flowers and jumped to her feet giddily before making her way to the kitchen to join her mother for breakfast.

The woman was shoveling eggs onto two plates as she glanced up at her daughter. Her

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smile dropped as her gaze fell onto the jewelry, her eyebrows pinching together tightly. She surged forward, yanking the necklace harshly towards her.

Penelope gasped as the woman began tearing the stems out from between the metal links, petals falling to the ground. She pulled helplessly against her mother's tight grip.

"Why would you do this?" the woman asked. "The flowers are too big to thread through the chains." She examined the way in which the stems were weaved through the necklace. "Are you some expert in forsaking Abrus all the sudden? How did you manage to do this so quickly?" she said.

The young girl hesitated, staring wearily at the flowers that had fallen to the ground. "I didn't do the flowers, just their stems," she said after a moment of silence. "The flowers grew themselves; I just asked them."

The woman gasped harshly, pulling her hands away suddenly to cover her mouth in shock, the stems that were gripped in her palms falling to the floor. "You're working against Abrus? Like some sort of— some sort of heretic?" her mother shouted. "You dare undermine the power of our god? You're so selfish as to think of yourself as his equal?"

The girl shook her head violently. "No! No, mother, it's not like that. I didn't— I'm no heretic! The flowers just like me, I guess! I didn't do anything!" Penelope shouted, her voice growing frantic.

The woman grabbed her wrist harsh enough to bruise. "The flowers like nothing! They have no mind—no opinions! You're working against Abrus with some sort of evil spirit! I should've seen it sooner! No daughter of mine will practice magic! The only thing you should be asking help from is

Abrus, not whatever your source of power is!" she screamed, letting drops of spit spray out onto Penelope's face. The rings that adorned her mother's fingers cut into her skin, drops of blood joining the petals and stems beneath her feet.

Tears streamed down the young girl's face as she continued to shake her head violently, pulling against her mother's grip. "I have no powers! I swear, I swear!" she sobbed, her whole body shaking.

The older woman ignored her, yanking her out the door.

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Unlike the previous day, the church was not empty. At the front of the church sat a kneeling figure, who Penelope quickly recognized as a priest. The man lifted his head at the sound of the pair's entrance, his expression twisting into one of concern as he watched tears stream down the girl's face.

"You must help us!" her mother shouted. "My daughter Penelope is possessed by magic! She's working against Abrus!"

The man leapt to his feet, rushing over to where the two were frozen in the middle of the chapel. "What do you mean? Working against Abrus?" His gaze flicked between Penelope and her mother anxiously.

"She claimed this morning that she asked for flowers to bloom, and they did! Around Abrus's holy symbol no less! She has never shown much interest in our god, but I didn't expect this." Her voice fell off towards the end as she pulled the hand not holding Penelope to her mouth, breaking out into sobs. "My daughter is tainted, please help her."

The priest placed a gentle hand on the woman's shoulder. "Be at peace, there is still hope

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for her. All we need to do is remind her of Abrus's light." He spoke as if Penelope was not right beside them. "We must make her forget her treachery."

The woman sniffled, raising her sleeve to her face to wipe the tears from her cheeks. "How do we do that? Will it hurt her?"

The man hummed. "It may, depending on how strong her connection is to the source of her powers. Do you have any idea what that source may be?"

The woman paused before nodding. "Yes. She spends all her time in the garden, and when we were praying last night, she couldn't stop staring at the stars."

The man bowed his head in sadness. "Ah. The Earth is the source, then?" His voice was resigned, and for once, his gaze turned to the terrified girl next to him.

Her mother nodded, her sobs quickly returning with vigor. "I don't know how this happened. I raised her to be a follower of Abrus, I swear! I don't know where I went wrong," she said.

The man shook his head. "It's not your fault. Tragedies like these strike without cause, unfortunately. Abrus has many enemies." He clapped his hands together, causing the pair to jump. "However, there is an easy solution." He smiled cheerfully despite the somber energy. His smile quickly faltered as he continued on. "It may be distressing, but it's a necessary precaution. We must keep her away from the source of her powers at all costs. There's a room here, in the church, that would fulfill this purpose."

Her mother nodded, still sobbing. "Anything. I'll do whatever it takes."

"You should leave," the man said. "Go home and pray to Abrus for comfort; it is all you can do."

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Penelope sat with her head between her knees, heavy sobs seizing through her as tears flowed from her eyes. The musty air of the church basement hardly allowed her to breathe, the dust nearly choking her. The cuts and bruises on her arms stung and the silver jewelry weighed heavy around her neck.

Her eyes shot open as something soft brushed against her legs. She squinted through the darkness as moss hidden between the brick walls of the basement grew towards her and crawled up her legs. It did not grow any higher, only growing around her as if to remind her of its presence. She carefully ran her fingers through the soft surface, giggling as it crawled up her finger, only to retreat when she pulled away.

She flinched back as a cold drop of water dripped onto her scalp, turning her eyes up towards the rotting ceiling. A small crack was visible along the edges of the ceiling where a slow but steady leak was dripping down into the room.

Penelope watched as the water trickled out, making a small squeak as it landed around her. She frowned as she noticed that no matter where she sat herself in the small room, the water followed her. As she shuffled around in an attempt to avoid the leak, the moss grew to follow her until eventually the creaking of the floorboards were muffled underneath a soft green blanket.

The young girl eventually accepted her fate, frowning in annoyance as the water trickled down from above her. She watched idly as a drop dripped down her arm, wincing preemptively as it landed itself in one of the scratches on her arm. Her eyes widened as the water seemed to expand,

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filling the scratch before condensing back into a single drop and dribbling further down her arm.

The empty spot on the arm where the cut used to be stared back at her.

Her sobs drew quickly to an end as she took in the scene before her. The moss had begun to grow up the walls, and the ceiling cracked above her every time she moved.

“Please,” she whispered, sniffing slightly. “I can’t be stuck down here,” she begged, uncertain of who exactly she was begging to.

As soon as the words left her mouth, the cracks in the ceiling audibly expanded, crumbling down into the walls. The moss ran up the walls, growing itself deep into the fractures in the old bricks, dust flying throughout the room at the sudden movements. The stone bricks that made up the wall fractured and split, the Earth eager to return the kindness that the young girl had offered it so many times.

The wall collapsed with a loud bang, causing Penelope to violently flinch back, coughing as debris fills the air. She whipped around as she heard the door creak open from the top of the staircase, making eye contact with the fearful gaze of the priest. She stumbled back, turning to face the wall that had fallen away. A jagged tunnel opened up to the surface, a thin stream of moonlight trickling through, faintly illuminating the dark room.

She hardly hesitated to sprint towards the hole and scramble up to the light.

“Thank you,” Penelope said as she surfaced, pulling herself out of the tunnel, not daring to turn around for even a second.

Instead, she turned her gaze up to the sky. Her eyes caught on the brightest dot she could find—she couldn’t help but feel pulled to it. As she

stared deep into its light, everything melted away, leaving only the girl against the sky. She startled when a firm hand landed on her shoulder, a shrill yelp escaping her mouth.

Penelope ripped herself from the harsh grip and began to run. She didn’t think about where she was going. Instead, she allowed the star to guide her, something deep in her screaming that she would follow it across the galaxy if she could.

She didn’t notice how the angry voice grew distant, or how her surroundings changed around her. Her only focus was the night sky. It wasn’t until she was deep in the forest, miles away from her town, that she realized how far she had traveled. She breathed heavily, not out of fear or exhaustion, but of exhilaration. She giggled in delight as she examined her surroundings, and the world giggled back with the rustling of the trees and the whistle of the wind.

Penelope knew in that moment that she was no different from the ground underneath her feet, or the leaves that brushed past her hands as she ran deeper into the forest. She felt everything around her—the faint warmth of the young spring air, the light breeze, the blaze of the stars, the wings of the birds—until she couldn’t tell the difference between the Earth and her own body—maybe the difference wasn’t as obvious as it seemed.

She hardly noticed as branches snagged on silver, pulling the necklace off as she ran. It buried the metal symbol underneath fallen leaves and a thin layer of dirt. The glee never left her chest—the feeling so intense, she nearly choked on it.

Every so often, she glanced up at the sky to make sure she hadn’t strayed from following her star, but eventually she didn’t need to look. She could feel it in her steps, in the air that she

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breathed—she could even hear the star calling to her, pulling her closer.

Her elation only grew when she noticed the birds flying alongside her—they too were pulled in by the star's beauty. She could hear her laugh in their song and her footsteps in every flap of their wings.

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Her heart fell the moment she heard the distant voices ahead of her. For the first time in what must've been hours, she stopped running. Glancing up at the sky, she realized that the voices were coming from directly below where the star had been leading her—it was almost directly overhead.

Exhaustion finally consumed her limbs, sweat streaming down her forehead. Her mouth felt uncomfortably dry, and her stomach twisted with hunger. She gasped at the sudden flood of feeling, her peaceful daze fading away.

Her mind stuttered as the reality of the situation dawned on her. She had run away from the priest, her mother, and Abrus. Her God would never forgive her for this, not if what everything her mother said was true. She had no idea where she was, only knowing that her home was somewhere far behind her.

Penelope stood frozen, finding herself eerily numb at the hopelessness of her situation. She turned her attention to the voices ahead of her, slowly creeping towards the noise. She prayed silently that they would be able to point her back to her village. She squinted to see ahead of her through the dark night. As she drew closer, she could make out the sound of booming laughter. Her foot caught on a branch, and she yelped as she tumbled down to the forest floor. Her hands flew to her mouth as the laughter immediately

went silent, internally cursing herself for her carelessness.

"Hello?" a voice called out from somewhere in the trees. Silence followed as Penelope's breathing quickened, silently begging Abrus that she didn't stumble upon a group of murderers in the middle of the forest.

"Hello?" Penelope called back, her voice cracking, willing herself not to panic as she heard multiple pairs of footsteps race towards her. Finally, a face broke out from the dense forest, quickly followed by three more. The first was an older woman, her face beginning to be weighed down by age and a few telling gray hairs scattered amongst the dark brown. The woman smiled gently, offering a hand to the young girl lying fearfully in front of her. Penelope hesitated for only a moment before reaching for the hand and pulling herself up with its help. The three figures behind the woman watched, excitedly murmuring amongst themselves without taking their eyes off Penelope.

Penelope wearily brushed the dirt off her lap, eyeing the four people standing in front of her.

The youngest glanced briefly at the group surrounding her before darting forward. Penelope flinched back before realizing that the girl was offering her a hand.

"I'm Nora!" she said as she shook Penelope's hand with vigor. "Welcome!"

The first woman sighed, placing a gentle hand on Nora's shoulder, pulling her back towards the group. "Nora, you're going to scare the poor thing," she said. Penelope frowned, eyes darting between the four. The woman turned back to her, smiling warmly. "You don't need to be scared. We won't hurt you," she reassured as if calming a frightened animal. "I'm Evelyn, that's Nora, and

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the other two are Amelia and Theo,” she said to Penelope, pointing to each person as she listed their names.

Penelope hesitated, though the tension in her shoulders lessened slightly. “I’m Penelope,” she said after a moment of silence, shuffling slightly from side to side. “What—” she paused, considering her words carefully. “—what are you doing here?”

The woman—Evelyn—chuckled slightly. “We live here, what are you doing here?” she asked.

Confusion crowded Penelope’s face as she processed the woman’s words. “You live here? In the middle of the woods?” she asked astonished.

Nora nodded brightly. “Yeah! You do too, now!” she exclaimed bouncing from side to side on her feet. “It’s been awful long time since we’ve gotten someone new.”

Evelyn groaned, putting her head in her hands.

“What?” Penelope said, taking a step back, glancing around wildly for an escape.

“Oh, no, no, don’t be scared, it’s a good thing!” Nora said taking a step forward.

The boy standing behind her—Theo—pulled her back and took her place. “What she means is that everyone who comes ‘round here is supposed to be here. You followed the star, yeah?”

Penelope nodded silently.

Theo hummed. “Then you belong here. You’re only brought here if you need to be. You can leave if you’d like, but I’d bet that if you’re here, you don’t have anywhere else to go.”

Penelope considered his words for a moment. He wasn’t right; she had her village. Her village that she was just chased away from, yes, and the village who locked her in a church basement for hours—maybe this guy had a point.

Amelia spoke up for the first time, pushing curly red strands away from her eyes. “We could show you our home,” she said softly. “There’s no rush for you to leave, right? If you hate it, you can go whenever.”

Nora clapped her hands together, the sound ringing out throughout the forest. “That’s a great idea!” she exclaimed before grabbing Penelope’s forearm. She yelped as she was pulled deeper into the trees.

They only walked for a few short minutes before breaking through the thick forest into an open clearing. Penelope gasped in amazement as she glanced around.

Stars lit up the clearing so brightly you could mistake night for day—the star that had called to her hung directly overhead. The grass was dotted with bursts of color and flowers of all types decorating the ground. The surrounding trees were draped in vines, creating a thick wall of green around the camp.

Two large cabins were placed in the center, decorated with thick flora. On either side of the clearings, small farms were stationed with carefully curated crops growing large and bountiful from thick stems. Small paths were laid throughout, meticulously weaving between structures.

Nora paused once they had neared the cabins, “What do you think?” the young girl asked hopefully.

“It’s beautiful,” Penelope said, taking in the nature that surrounded her, her eyes shining as she bent down to examine the flowers growing around her. She gasped as she noticed Nora bend down beside her, giggling as the flowers grew around her fingers. “You—you’re like me?” she

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asked, her previous excitement draining. “You’re some kind of cult against Abrus, then?”

Evelyn laughed, shaking her head. “No, we’re not a cult. We’re just people who have no desire to dedicate our lives to a myth, especially not one as harmful as Abrus.” She spat the name ‘Abrus’ like a slur.

Penelope hesitated, unable to wrap her mind around the concept. “You’re not a follower of Abrus?”

Theo laughed from behind the group. “Of course not. ‘Abrus’ was created because people couldn’t grasp the idea that the world around them was all that there was. They couldn’t accept that that was more than enough.”

Penelope’s mind spun. She’d never heard anything negative towards Abrus before. She decided to drop the topic, unable to comprehend that there’s an entire group of people—no matter how small the group may be—that didn’t only dislike Abrus, but simply didn’t believe in him. “Where am I going to stay?” she asked, avoiding the topic.

Nora grabbed her hand. “You can stay with Evelyn and me! We both share a cabin, and Theo and Amelia share the other. You’ll have to sleep in one of our rooms until you decide if you want to stay or not, and then we can make you your own room,” she said her eyes shining brightly.

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Penelope decided to stay.

The four quickly became five, and they taught Penelope their way of life. They taught her how to grow food rather than just flowers. They taught her about the world—about life without Abrus.

Penelope—cautiously at first, then enthusiastically—incorporated the world around her into everything she did, and the world

returned her enthusiasm, blessing her far more than she ever believed she could be blessed.

Time flew by, and she grew old with the ones around her. Wrinkles weighed her down, and her hair grew grey.

Eventually, her atoms were fed to the plants they had grown and the stars they gazed upon each night.

When Penelope was on her deathbed, she thought about her mother, who was surely dead. She thought about how her mother’s body had probably provided nutrients to the flowers that she had grown in her garden all those years ago, despite her mother’s resentment towards them. She thought about how despite everything, Penelope, and her family and friends, and her mother, and that priest, and everyone else all ended up in the same place, but they never left. They would always be there in the colors of the flowers and the heights of trees. They would always be in the shine of the stars and the darkness of space.

When Penelope took her final breath, she knew it was hardly the beginning. She would live on in the bird’s song and the running of the rivers, and she accepted everything around her as herself.