

STAR-GAZING

by Maria Samuela



Kai time at Stella's house drove her nuts. Every night was the same: Nan sat at the head of the table between Mum and Dad; Aunty Nga and Uncle Tai came next; Aunty Mareta usually nursed pēpe Sam; then came cousins Lena, Jojo, and Nina; and Stella's brothers Ken and Kura sat by her. It was squashed, and everyone talked and laughed at once. The only thing that changed was what they ate. Tonight, it was mince chow mein.

"You've got more than me," Kura teased, peering at Ken's plate.

"Move your elbow," Lena said to Jojo.

But Jojo wasn't listening. "Gross!" she cried. "Whose is this?" Jojo dangled a strand of hair in front of Nina, who shrugged and flicked her plait. Pēpe Sam started to howl. Stella couldn't take it any more. She pushed back her chair and slipped out the back door.

It was quiet outside. The grass was damp and cool. Stella began to count stars to calm herself down.

"See that star?"

Stella jumped. "Nan! I didn't see you come outside."

"I wanted to star-gaze, too," Nan said. She settled herself at the wooden table by the back fence and pointed out a star just above the horizon. "That bright one, see? Back in the Cook Islands, we called her Mere. Auē! She was a jealous star, that Mere."

Stella loved the way her nan talked about the stars. It was as if they were people with brains and feelings. And the star her nan called Mere – was it *winking*?

"Mere wanted to be the brightest," Nan continued. "She almost was – but Matariki was brighter. So Mere set out to destroy him."

"Star wars!" said Stella.

"'Āe. Exactly," said Nan. "She teamed up with the god Tāne and Aumea, another jealous star. Together, they ambushed Matariki and smashed him into seven shining pieces. Our ancestors followed those stars to Aotearoa. They knew which ones they could trust to find a new home."

Stella looked at Mere again. She couldn't believe such a tranquil-looking star was such a troublemaker.





Later that night, Stella lay in her bed, gazing out the window. *Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight.* She was trying to distract herself from her cousins' snores. *I wish I may, I wish I might, have this wish I wish tonight.* Her eyes grew heavy until all she could see was blackness.

"Pssst. Stella. Yo! Stell-laa!"

Stella looked around. Her cousins were still asleep.

"Let's go, girl!"

Stella sat up and looked again, but all she could see was Mere, gleaming in the night sky.

"Yup, it's me," said Mere with one of her winks. "Get up."

Stella froze. What was happening?

"Don't you want a new home? One that's peaceful, without all the people. Just jump," Mere said. "It's not that far if you believe. Look up."

Stella looked at the ceiling.

"Beyond the ceiling, Stella."

Stella looked again, and this time, the ceiling melted away to reveal the sky beyond, filled with the light from countless twinkling stars.

Stella did what she was told and jumped.



The air was cold. Stella wished she'd worn Nan's jersey, the red one with the extra-long sleeves. "It'll keep you warm anywhere," Nan had said. Stella would miss her nan – she knew that already.

In the distance, a planet began to take shape. "Venus," Mere announced. "Your new home."

Venus was dazzlingly bright, and as Stella flew closer, the temperature became unbearably hot. Now she wanted Nan's church fan. What was Mere thinking? It was obvious no one could live on Venus.

"This planet is hotter than the sun," Stella exclaimed.

"Not true," said Mere.

Stella didn't like her tone. "Whatever," she said, using a tone of her own. "But I can't stay here."

Mere was silent for a moment. "OK. I know another place."

That place turned out to be Mercury. It was smaller, and its surface was pitted with craters. It looked like an orange.

"Welcome to Mercury," said Mere. "Smaller, but cooler."

"Isn't Mercury closer to the sun?" said Stella

"I know, right," said Mere. "Go figure. Something about it having no atmosphere. Anyway, the good news is that the temperature gets way cooler at night."

"How much cooler?" asked Stella.

"Minus 170 degrees Celsius – but I'm sure you'll cope."

Stella glared at Mere. A guiding star that couldn't guide? "I won't cope," she said firmly.

"You need to take me somewhere else."

"Manners," Mere snapped.

"You need to take me somewhere else, *please*," said Stella.

Next they tried Uranus. It was good to feel weightless, floating in the planet's gases, but no matter how hard she tried, Stella couldn't move about. The best she could do was float. "Whoa," she said, attempting to dog paddle.

"Uh," said Mere, clearly bored, "you know that's not water, right?"

"I need land," Stella complained. "I need land to ... you know ... *land on!*"

"So leave," Mere said. "Literally no one is stopping you."

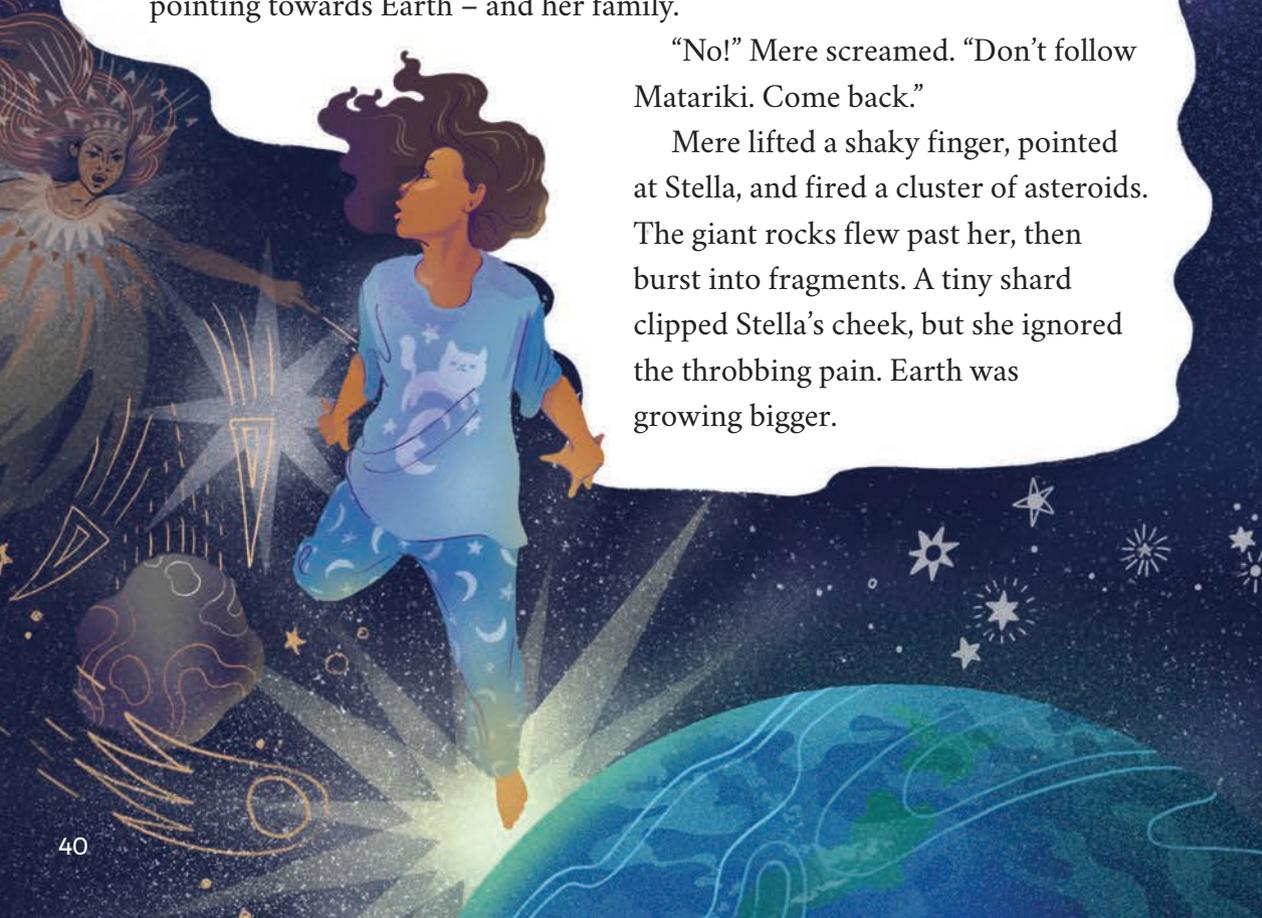
Stella was incredulous. "You need to find me a planet like Earth," she cried, "but with *no family*. That was the deal."

Mere flashed red, then cackled like a chicken. "I don't remember any deal. And besides, there's no planet like Earth except, oh, you know – Earth."

"You could have told me that before!" Stella yelled. What was going on? She began to count stars to calm herself down. "One," she breathed slowly, "two, three ..." Some flashing ones caught her eye: seven of them. Matariki. The same stars her ancestors had used to find Aotearoa. "They knew which ones they could trust," her nan had said, and now Stella did, too. They were pointing towards Earth – and her family.

"No!" Mere screamed. "Don't follow Matariki. Come back."

Mere lifted a shaky finger, pointed at Stella, and fired a cluster of asteroids. The giant rocks flew past her, then burst into fragments. A tiny shard clipped Stella's cheek, but she ignored the throbbing pain. Earth was growing bigger.



Stella quickly jumped to the second Matariki star. "I said come back!" Mere screamed. Now she was raging like a fireball. As Stella watched, a giant vortex emerged – a black hole.

"Aaarrggghhh!" Stella tumbled deep into the black hole's centre. Her head and stomach spun; the mince chow mein she'd had for dinner rose in her throat. Down, down, down she spiralled. This journey would never end.



"Stella! Yo! *Stell*-laa!" Stella struggled to move. Her body felt heavy, but she had to get moving. That crazy star was back!

When she finally forced her eyes open, she saw her three cousins staring down. "Bad night, cuz?" Lena asked.

"You look wrecked," said Jojo.

"*Totally* wrecked," said Nina, flicking her plait.

Stella was lying on the floor. The sheets were wrapped around her legs, and her cheek throbbed. Pēpe Sam was crying in the next room, and she could hear Nan in the kitchen, getting everyone's breakfast. Toast and eggs. It took every ounce of self-control to resist running through the house, kissing everything in sight.

Stella jumped up and pulled the curtains. The sky was blue. There wasn't a star in sight.

illustrations by Rebecca ter Borg

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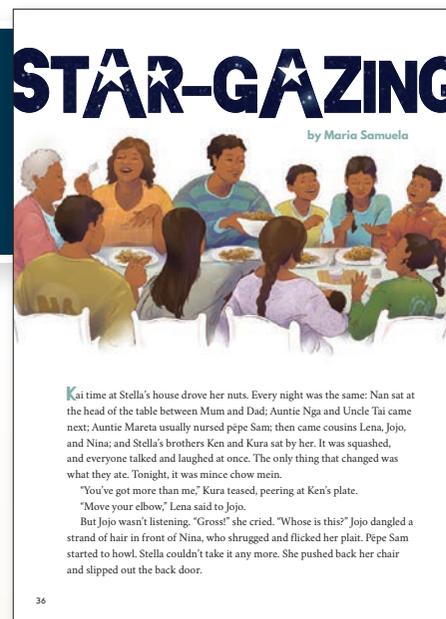
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