The Star That Fell on the Longest Night



On the longest night of the year, Professor Hooten tells an old, old story. Long ago, the smallest star in the sky leaned too far and fell into the snowy wood. The strongest, the best climber and the best flier all try to send her home before morning. But the one who finds the way is the one nobody noticed.



On the longest night of the year, the library was warm and the windows were black.

Booklava, Cluck O’Clock and Luckybug sat on the rug by the paper tree. They had made a star out of gold paper for the top. It was a bit crumpled at one point.

“Why does the star go at the top?” asked Luckybug. “Why not the middle?”



Professor Hooten put down his tea.

“Ah,” he said. “For that, you need a very old story. Older than the village. Older than the library.” He took a thin blue book from the highest shelf. “Shall I?”

“Yes,” said all three at once.



Hooten opened the book. The lamplight flickered, and outside the snow went on falling.

“Long ago,” he read, “before there was a village, or a library, or a single book, there was only the wood, and the snow, and the sky.”



And on the longest night of the year, the sky was full of stars.

The smallest star lived right at the very edge. From there she could see the wood below, white and silver and fast asleep.

She wanted to see it better. So she leaned over, just a little. And then a little more.



She leaned too far.

Down she fell, through the cold and the dark, past the cloud and the treetops and the branches, and landed in the snow at the foot of a young oak tree.

Fsssss, went the snow.



The creatures of the wood came out to see what had fallen.

Bear came, who was the strongest. Squirrel came, who was the best climber. Owl came, who was the best flier. Hare came, who was the quickest.

And in a crack in the oak bark, a small grey Spider watched. Nobody noticed her. Nobody ever did.



The star lay in the snow, glowing, but already a little less bright.

“She’s getting colder,” said Hare. “A star can’t live down here.”

“When the sun comes up,” said Owl, “she’ll go out altogether.”

“Then we’ll put her back,” said Bear. “Before morning.”



“I’m the strongest,” said Bear. “I’ll throw her home.”

He picked up the star in his big paws. He swung his arms back, once, twice, three times, and threw her as high as anything had ever been thrown.



The star went up, and up, and up... as high as the treetops.

And then she came down again. *Plop,* into the snow.

She was dimmer than before. And she was heavier, too. A bright star is as light as a feather. A fading star grows as heavy as a stone.



“I’m the best climber,” said Squirrel. “I’ll carry her home.”

She tucked the star under her chin and climbed the tallest pine on the hill, higher and higher, until the branches were thin as straws.

But the very top twig was too thin to hold her. She stretched and stretched. The sky was still far away.

Slowly she climbed down. The star was dimmer still.



“I’m the best flier,” said Owl. “I’ll fly her home.”

He held the star in his claws and flew up into the night, higher than the pine, higher than the clouds, until the air was thin and his wings ached.

But the sky is always higher than wings. Owl glided down, tired out, and laid the star in the snow.



Now the star was no brighter than an ember in a dying fire. She was too heavy for one creature to lift at all.

The creatures sat around her in the snow.

“The strongest couldn’t do it,” said Bear. “The best climber couldn’t do it,” said Squirrel. “The best flier couldn’t do it,” said Owl.

Hare said nothing. She just watched the star grow dim.



“Excuse me,” said a tiny voice.

They all looked round. There, on the oak bark, was the small grey Spider.

“I’m not strong,” said Spider. “I can’t climb like Squirrel or fly like Owl. But I’m very small and very light. I can go where none of you can go. I can go right to the very top twig.”



“And then what?” said Bear.

“Then,” said Spider, “I’ll need all of you.”



So Bear carried the star, heavy as a stone, up the hill to the tallest pine.

Squirrel wove a little cradle out of moss. Owl pulled one soft feather from his chest to line it. Together they laid the star inside.

And Hare, who was quickest, ran to the top of the hill to watch the moon.



Spider began to climb.

Up the trunk she went, past the place where Bear could reach. Past the branch where Squirrel had stopped. Up, and up, where the twigs were as thin as whiskers.

And all the way, behind her, she spun a single silver thread.



At the very top twig, Spider looped her thread over, tight and neat.

Then she let herself down again on the other end, slowly, swinging in the starlight, all the way to the snow.

Now the thread went up the tree, over the very top twig and back down, with both ends on the ground.



They tied the moss cradle to one end of the thread.

“That thread is thinner than a whisker,” said Bear. “It’ll never hold.”

“Spider silk is stronger than it looks,” said Spider. “So are spiders.”



Hare came racing down the hill. “The moon is almost over the pine! It’s nearly the middle of the night!”

The middle of the longest night is the moment when the sky bends lowest to the ground. Everybody in the wood knew that.

So they all took hold of the other end of the thread. Bear first. Then Squirrel. Then Hare. Then Owl, with his claws. And last of all, at the very end, Spider.



“Together,” said Spider. “Pull!”

They pulled.

The cradle lifted off the snow. Up it went, past the lowest branches. And as the star rose, she began to glow a little brighter.



The thread creaked. Bear’s paws slipped in the snow. Squirrel dug in her claws. Owl beat his wings.

“Together,” said Spider. “Pull!”

Up went the star, past the middle of the tree, brighter and brighter, until it was hard to look at her.



At the very middle of the longest night, the star reached the very top of the tallest pine.

And the sky, which had been so far away all night, bent down. Just a little. The way someone big bends down to pick up someone small.



The star let go of the cradle and went home.

For one moment, the whole wood was as bright as a summer noon. Every snowflake shone. Every creature’s shadow stretched across the hill.

Then it was night again.



The creatures looked up.

There she was, the smallest star, back at the very edge of the sky. She was shining brighter than she ever had before.

And on the very top twig of the pine, one tiny spark stayed caught on Spider’s thread until morning.



“And that is why,” the creatures told their children, and their children’s children, “on the longest night, we put a star on the very top of the tree.

“To remember that nobody could do it alone. And that the smallest of us went the highest.”



Professor Hooten closed the thin blue book.

Nobody said anything for a while. The paper tree rustled. The snow tapped at the window.

“Is it true?” said Cluck O’Clock at last.

“Which part?” said Hooten.

“The spider part.”



Professor Hooten turned his head, almost all the way round, to look up at the dark corner of the ceiling.

There, in her web, sat Spinnerella. She waved one leg.

“My great-great-great-great-great-grandmother,” said Spinnerella, “never stopped talking about it.”



So Spinnerella let herself down on a silver thread, and Booklava, Cluck O’Clock and Luckybug held up the crumpled gold star together, and Spinnerella fixed it to the very top of the paper tree.

Outside, on the longest night, one small star at the edge of the sky shone a little brighter than the rest.