

Under the Stars

by Kevin Hunter

There was once a girl. Her name was April. Her family lived at the edge of a village. When she looked out her second floor window she could see the forest stretch for days. At nights after supper she would lean over her bed; watch the stars in the distance and wish many fantastic things.

She was of a family of six. There was her father, mother and three younger brothers. Every night they gathered about the fireplace. They played board games and jacks. They sang songs and danced. They laughed together and tired together. When the first child drifted off to sleep, as do children, the father would take him off to bed. When the father had not returned, the mother would go looking. When the mother had not returned, the two youngest would go looking. There would only be April left. She would scamper through the house; blow out the candles and follow to bed. This they did every night, every year, every season, in similar order.

One winter a horrible sickness came. It plagued the village. Every family was effected. But only one member of each. The deformities were wide-ranging; rather random. In one poor home, a boy's tongue turned to gold. He was in no great pain. So the family chopped his tongue off. They planned to use their newfound wealth for a larger house. First, though, it was paraded through town. It was encased in a thick glass box and protected by large newly-paid guards. Everyone in town came to see it. Everyone in town connived to steal it. Eventually it was stolen; the boy left tongueless—the family still poor—and murderous with silent rage.

Little April heard by eavesdropping that an even littler girl had grown two more limbs. She was made to carry the family's heavy packages on picnics. Eventually she was made to carry the packages of the highest bidder. But then she finally died.

April heard that Jimmy-down-the-street was now of another race. She heard that Martha's hair had turned a bright luminescent blue. They used her on fishing trips at night. It saved money on oil. April

learned that a stray dying dog, whose barking kept up half the village, was now fully alive and loud again. Though, later the dog was found having been chopped by a butcher's knife by the butcher's wife. The butcher's wife, whose butcher-husband had passed after having the oddest manifestation of the plague: a heart of literal stone. (She thought it was for the better).

The plague was relentless. It swept from the furthest parts and spread and spread until it reached April and her family.

The first to be sick was her father. One day when heeding the farmland, he felt an ache in his back. He thought nothing of it. "What of an ache, for a farmer?" he'd said. He continued to tend the land, day after day. And day after day the pain grew worse and worse, until one day he collapsed in the fields. "My back," he said. "It is in twines," he said. When the family found him in the fields his spine was twisted and curled into something like the weeds he chopped while tending his fields. Doctors could do nothing.

That night there was no dancing, or jack-playing; no singing, no board-games; no laughing. There was no tiring. All there was, was the yelling and screaming of the father. Once little April braved a peak. They'd closed off her father for fear of scaring the younger children. She was curious. How did a twined back look like, she thought. She slid open the door. A chimera stared back at her. It was contorted in such a grotesque way. It called out to her. It had the voice of her father. She closed the door shut and ran to her room.

At her window, April looked for the stars. Once upon inquiry she'd received a gift from them. They'd given her added height when the other girls made fun of her stature. "Please my friends," said April, crying. "My father is ill. I am begging you for only this thing: relieve my father's pain, fix his back and I will be forever in your debt."

There was a twinkle from a star. It spit wonderful rainbow gases and leaped cross the sky. It crashed silently over the hill-top in the forest. It made the trees brighten in beautiful colors. All went silent. April felt her friends had heard. Her father's health guaranteed, she fell blissfully asleep.

When April awoke she heard the clanging of her father's shovel in the fields. The family was happy. That night there was board games, and jacks. They invited others over, intending to flaunt their good-health. No others had this same good-fortune. April thanked the stars; fell wonderfully asleep.

In the morning April woke to calamity. Her three brothers had caught the plague. They'd slept together as always. Now their legs were conjoined at the thighs, then a gap, then they were conjoined at the stomach. They were in such pain. All April heard was what must have been the pale, grumbling of Cerberus.

That night April looked for the stars. "My friends," she said, again crying. "I am so sorry to ask this of you. But my brother's have become ill. They are so young and innocent. Might you spare them. Again I would forever be in your debt."

By next morning they were cured and could run freely. It was only that now the mother had grown ill. She had fallen asleep and never woken up. She snored as do the living, but could not be woken. And she was very pale.

Later April looked out her window and searched for the stars.

"My friends," she said. "You heal one but sicken the other. And what horrible things you've done. You are not my friends! Free my mother. Release her from the spell you've lain and be gone forever!"

It was still night. There came a knock at the door. It was late and no one else had heard it. April ran down the steps. She opened the door. Standing there was a small, brittle old man. He looked as though he were homeless, she thought. He was covered in brown rags, and torn trousers. She could barely make out his face which was hidden.

"My girl," said the old man. "Why have you forsaken me?"

"What do you mean?" said April.

"You asked for your father's health, and I gave it to you," said the old man. "You asked to heal your brothers; I have done so."

April had only now realized what the old man meant.

"But I asked the stars for help," she said.

"And I am here," said the old man.

April was taken back.

"If it was you," she said. "Why have you made my mother sick?"

"I only carry out what I am told," the old man said. "One of each. 'One of every family in that selfish, decadent town.'"

"But I heard your crying at the window," he continued. "I've heard it for some time. I felt I must help you, my friend....but only so much is possible."

"If it is not your mother," said the old man. "There is only one other left. What is your choice?"

"Where would you take me?" asked April.

"What is your choice?" He asked again.

In the morning the family found the front door still open. It and the ground about it had been gravely burned. There was a trail. It led to the deepest depths of the forest, where there were many more trails. Then it vanished beneath many individual piles of scorched rock and gravel, into the earth.

