

The Fall of the Holly King

Seelie resolved to spend the shortest day of the year alone, looking for fairies.

She got up early; night still cupped the morning. She put on every piece of clothing she owned, grabbed her paper bag of offerings, and tiptoed down the tiny hall.

The trailer's front half—their filthy kitchenette and makeshift living room, the gardens of mold blossoming on the ceiling—was her mother's domain. And there her mother slept on her throne, a patched old armchair surrounded by empty bottles. She snored like a lion.

Seelie crept past, terror coiled in her belly. She didn't dare invite a repeat of last night. Sneakers on, coat on, screen door squeaking open—

Her mother growled, half-asleep, "Where the hell are you going?"

Seelie's eyes flickered to the new hole in the drywall and the bottle fragments littering the floor.

She answered, carefully, "It's the solstice."

"That fucking story?" Her mother started cackling. "You're thirteen years old—"

Fourteen, Seelie wanted to hiss back, but her cheek still stung from the last time she interrupted her mother.

"—and you're too old for that shit now."

Seelie's face broke. Twisted. Hardened into a scowl. "Guess you don't want to come."

She slammed the door shut, but her mother's venom still followed behind her:

"Don't bother coming back."

Those words rattled like stones in her belly. Seelie carried them with her, deep into the woods behind their trailer park.

Once, magic had been real. Back when she would build fairy rings with rocks and cigarette butts. But those were the old days, when her mother would follow fairy prints pocking the snow and tell Seelie how the Oak King, lord of light, would finally triumph against the dark Holly King.

This is the Oak King's day, Seelie's mother would explain. Fairies are at their strongest. And we won't risk crossing one. You always know one by the scent in the air: everything will smell like holly-blood and fresh-cut wood. That is the only warning we get.

Why? Seelie would ask.

Her mother would give her a conspiratorial smile and say, *It's the scent of a battle well-fought.*

But the stories stopped when Seelie's father died, and her mother went as cold and dark as their little trailer, and the drinking started and the screaming and fighting and all the dents in the walls and Seelie's own flesh, scars of her mother's fury.

Seelie shivered.

Still. Tradition was tradition. Even if she had to do it alone.

The forest was too brown and wet to follow fairy tracks. She walked with her eyes pinned to the damp earth, looking for something. Anything. Her nose flared like a fox's, constantly testing the air for the spice of sap, crushed berries. The sure sign of a fairy drawing near.

But the forest only smelled like evergreen and car exhaust, coughed out from the nearby road.

Seelie hesitated there in the heart of the wood, so deep within it she could no longer see the trailer park buildings hunched together like the half-buried shoulders of dead gods.

There, under the sighing arms of an oak: an impossible circle of mushrooms.

Seelie scampered to it. She dumped her scant offerings in the dirt. Broken glass from the living room, wrapped in a napkin. A golden flower button snipped off her teacher's coat. A backless earring. Two coffee creamers.

She quelled the impulse to throw it away. *Just garbage*, her mother would say.

But a midwinter fairy ring was a tiny miracle, real magic. That had to mean something.

So Seelie got to work.

She pried open both creamer cups, leaving the lids attached because no fairy liked to be cheated. The button and earring she set upon a rock pedestal. Around it she erected a fence of glass teeth to keep birds and squirrels out.

Everything smelled of sickly-sweet hazelnut, of stale wine, of earth, but there was something beyond it, something—

“What are you doing out here alone, little girl?”

She shrieked and scabbled backward at the voice, nearly puncturing her palm on the glass.

A man stood behind her. A stranger. He looked scraggly enough to be a neighbor. His smile was dangerous and playful.

Seelie's heart dropped. The wood's yawning silence told her just how alone she was. Her hand slipped backward, pried a glass shard from the mud.

The man settled down on a stump beside the fairy ring and regarded her work. "You didn't answer my question." He plucked up both coffee creamers and slurped them down.

"That's for the fairies."

His brow raised, bemused. "How do you know when you've seen one?"

Seelie frowned. Couldn't admit she never had. "You just do."

Her mother's voice—her real voice, her old voice, the voice of the woman who would hold Seelie when the night drew dark and whisper entire universes into Seelie's ear—rattled through Seelie's mind: *That is the only warning we get.*

The air was hot with ash and sap. A crimson scent like Christmas, like eternal nights watching snow devour the world.

The man giggled to himself. He was pink-cheeked and swaying in place. A drunk like her mother. "It's a fine gift."

Seelie searched his bright eyes. The foxlike grin. She murmured, feeling foolish as she said it, "Did the Oak King win?"

"He always does." The man leaned forward, elbows on knees. The air between them sizzled electric. "Don't you know how?"

Seelie shook her head.

“He strikes hard and true against the darkness.” He winked and produced a bundle from his tattered coat. It was narrow, wrapped in oak leaves and bound with brown grass. The man offered it to her. “Fortunately for you, I’m feeling kind. Here. A gift for a gift. It will cut anything.” He held Seelie’s stare for a hot, needling few seconds. “Even the darkness.”

“Thank you,” she managed. When she looked up, the stranger was gone, along with her offering. Even her hidden shard of glass had vanished.

Seelie brought the gift to her face and inhaled. It was perfectly dry, but it smelled so strongly of crushed holy and tree sap, she could taste it at the back of her throat like syrup, like the way the kitchen would smell when she could still wake on a Saturday morning to find her mother humming in front of the stove, whisking pancake batter.

Dizzy with the scent of lost days, Seelie unwrapped the fairy’s gift. Inside rested a clear-bladed dagger. Silver vines twined the handle.

Seelie tucked it away and hurried through the twilight forest. Dread pulsed in her heart. But the heat of the fairy’s scent carried her like her own mother’s arms once did.

When Seelie slipped back into the trailer, her mother was passed out, sprawled like the Holly King on his winter throne. A bottle had rolled from her limp hand, the last few swallows of wine soaking scarlet into the rug. In the morning, she would find some way to make it Seelie’s fault.

Seelie surveyed their ruined home: bowls of ash and mountains of rot. She wouldn’t miss this place.

Her mother was no lion, no king. She looked like a child lost in the dark.

Blood roared in Seelie's ears as she stood over her mother. She eased the dagger out of her pocket. It was weightless as sharpened air. She squeezed her eyes shut and raised it over her head. Tried to believe she was brave.

The blade plunged down.

It sank into the cigarette pack on the table, cleaved it apart like wet dough. Seelie ran to the near-empty fridge, threw the twin bottles into the sink. The fairy dagger bit into their glass throats and let their blood pour out. The dagger tore through empty air, through the last cobwebs of memory that bound Seelie to this place.

Her mother didn't even stir.

When she was done, Seelie took the dagger and crammed her few possessions into a backpack. She hesitated there in the open doorway of her trailer. Looking at her mother. Looking at the twilight gathering outside the door.

Her mother—the mother she used to be—would believe again if she saw it. If she saw past the rage of the splintered bottles and spent cigarettes and her own devouring loneliness. Seelie could almost see her mother's grief as little black shadows, coiling all around around her.

Seelie reached into her pocket and pressed the oak leaf wrapping to her face. It still smelled faintly of the fairy and his promise: tree-blood, berry-blood, the scent like a song of a lost war.

Seelie crept to her mother's side. Her mother still snored away in the way only the drunk sleep: head lolling, body limp in the armchair. Seelie rewrapped the knife in the oak leaves and slipped it under her mother's cold hand. She fumbled on the filthy coffee table for a pen and a

piece of paper, a final notice from the TV service that cut them off months ago. Her hand shuddered as she wrote on the back of it:

Strike hard and true against the darkness.

“You need this more than I do,” she whispered.

Her mother did not stir when Seelie leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her mother’s forehead.

Seelie did not look back as she shouldered her backpack and hinged open the door. The winter looked dark and hungry, but like the Oak King, she walked proud-shouldered and unafraid, the memory of her mother (her old mother, her real mother) alongside her.

Perhaps, one day, that mother would walk alongside her again, full of light and stories once more.

Seelie stepped out into the longest night of the year toward the highway to meet the dawn.