

The Sweetest Stalk
By S.E. Gordon

Smira of the swampland was she; daughter of hollow, goblin princess of bog. And heinous she was, even to goblin eyes, and it seemed nothing could be done about it. Then one day she sent herself on an errand, leaving behind a trail of seeds.

"Silly Smira," said her half-brother Kamm, a radish-hued swampling with her father's cruel brow. "Celery cannot grow in swamps. Foolish are you to think one day you could be queen."

"So it shall be," said she. "You will see." And off she went, deep into the tangled wetlands where wandering eyes strained to see. At last she arrived at the spot she'd been told and thrust her claws deep. On and on she toiled, dredging deeper into the mud, kicking up sickly shades of brown in the emerald waters. As fatigue crept in, she dug in her heels, until at last she bumped across something stout. "This is it," she pawed with renewed vigor.

From the muddy pulp she fished a tattered purse, the one the faery chimed about. She filled it with seeds hidden under her dress and buried it again. "On and out they shall sprout. Till the magic binds and stalks unwind," she danced.

The aid of faery magic was a certainty, especially if she hoped to grow anything in these lands. It saddened her to think what her brethren would do if they happened upon the faery. Darklings had a keen taste for faery flesh and wings and were cruel scavengers at heart. To save her soul she did not lend an ear to their dastardly tales of faery treachery.

At last the swamp illuminated. Eagerly she scooped up her shambled host. From its feeble cloth she plucked out a single seed, unlike the hundreds she'd poured in. Closer still she peered, at the seedling that shined like a star. Something danced inside, ever more radiant still. Suddenly it hopped in her hand, bursting from its gelatin shell. She gawked at her hand. Droopy spidery leaves.

"What am I to do with this weed?" said she and tossed them into the mire. Bubble it did, all around, until the waters steamed into a fowl broth. A creature of the swamp's refuse rose, bemoaning its labored rebirth. "Slumberwort, why do you steal me from my sojourn?"

"Not I. A faery made you be. I came to her, seeking stalk for murky haven and instead she delivered you, o servant of stringweed."

"A faery? From what divine quarter?"

"Underwood."

"Underwood is fowl," it replied. "A boggie's bowl of fright found you in place."

"Indeed," she frowned. "What shall I do? A touch of celery I must find—to love, to grow with my kind."

"Must you?"

"If I do not raise stalk, these lands will forever be deemed a poisoned wasteland, as will I. No suitor of noble lore will have me."

"A goblin prince? Does such a thing exist?"

"Aye. And celery is the goblin gold that springs them from their muddy holes. A princess am I," she curtsied.

"Indeed," it replied. "Pure of heart, take mine of kale; from it all things may grow. All I ask in return is the purse from whence I came." Smira thought it a fair exchange and handed over the purse. And in her hand he placed his final offering before recoiling into the muddy stew.

Back she traced, skipping from puddle to puddle with glee. In her father's dying oak she placed the heartling and at once a stalk of celery shot into the sky. Creatures gathered from all around, gaping at the vast vegetable. Some even offered their hand, goblin and human alike. "Stalkers" her father called them. And he would have none of it.

All fared well until the giant stalk grew seedlings of its own. More and more stalks shot up and soon its legion sang. Not sweet songs of fae, but screeching rants that shattered the ear. The celery would not stop growing, nor singing.

Desperate to stave off the masses from fleeing his kingdom, King Gondegook called for Smira. He inquired about her trip to the mudlands and when she told him about the faery and the beast, his face darkened. "I warned you about playing with faeries. Now they have played us."

"But father, all the beast wanted was the purse from which it sprouted."

"Purse? From whence?"

Smira frowned. "My mother's stash. No more did I imagine its use."

"Twas not a purse, but a faery trinket," Gondegook gasped. "Reclaim gifts, faeries cannot. Duped into returning the harvest bag, have you."

"But gave me his heart did thee, this creature of the bog."

"A trick. Twas the faery all along. And how many seedlings drop thou into it?"

"Hundreds," she replied.

"Then hundredfold they shall rise. Faeries they are, forged from the singing stalks."

Suddenly, the celery sprung to life, ripping out their roots and dancing in the bog. Horrified, the king and his loyal following fled. All, that is, but one.

Smira stared in awe at the faery folk, her accidental bogling. And from them, the sweetest helping stepped forward. "Beautiful creature, art thou a princess? Surely you must be." Soon after, he offered his hand and this one she accepted. And so Smira became a queen many times over and although she was the richest goblin queen, she was also the most loved.