

Faery Tale

I have conjured a plan.

For weeks Persephone wore those simple words like armor, their inked swirls on the page of her diary confident and solid. Now, on the night of Christmas Eve, with party guests arriving and the hour of her fate upon her, the words lost their strength. Now they felt no more like cold iron armor than the green silk gown she wore.

Persephone smiled and returned every greeting with grace, though her heart raced wildly and sweat gathered beneath her ceramic holiday mask.

"Such a pity you don't have mistletoe."

So many guests remarked on it that Persephone paid no mind to one more. All her childhood, her household had two Christmas Eve rules: 1) no cold iron outside of the kitchen, and 2) no mistletoe. This year, with the advent of her sixteenth birthday and her first Christmas Eve ball, Persephone learned why.

Her family was cursed.

Generations ago, one of Persephone's ancestors insulted a faery prince. Not the faery of her picture books, with their glittering

wings and charming smiles. The faery of underhill and shadow, of magic and sharpened teeth in the night.

Each generation ever since this insult, on the Christmas Eve after the eldest daughter's sixteenth birthday, the faery prince returned. The next day on Christmas morning, the poor girl was found dead, found mad, or not found at all.

Tonight he would come for Persephone.

I have conjured a plan. Persephone whispered the words to the faltering courage of her heart.

"Good evening, my darling."

The voice shivered down her spine. Persephone's breath caught as she looked up at the new "guest." From the first glance, there was no mistaking him for human. Knife sharp ears parted his long platinum hair. His green eyes, glittering with mirth, had a poisoned sharpness as they looked at her. His fine suit and holiday mask fit modern fashions but also felt anciently regal.

Persephone's hand extended itself, floating into his grip of its own accord. He tucked her hand into his elbow and swept her toward the ballroom, where the party was starting. Her parents didn't seem to notice.

The servants had transformed the ballroom into a holiday wonderland, hung with ribbons and greenery. The Christmas tree stretched nearly to the full height of the twenty foot ceiling, where painted cherubs floated on pale clouds. Even the stone gargoyles gracing the columns along the gallery were decked in holiday greenery.

I have conjured a plan, Persephone thought fervently as the

faery prince led her to the center of the dance floor. The pair of them drew no glances from the other dancers.

The prince pulled her into his arms, taking her hand and her waist, and like a drowning current, drew Persephone into the dance. Everything but his face faded into shadow.

In the corners of her eyes, goblins crept into the ballroom. They climbed the walls and peered from between the branches of the Christmas tree, eyes glowing. Persephone opened her mouth to scream a warning, but no sound emerged.

The laughing prince spun her closer and closer to these dark minions, their claws reaching out for her, clutching for the hem of her dress and the fall of her ebony hair.

The dance went on and on without pause, until her feet and legs ached with the strain. Until with a sudden snap, Persephone fell free of the faery prince's arms.

Persephone tumbled headlong into a knot of bodies. She sprang back with a shriek, but these were human revelers, not goblins.

The ballroom was bright with candlelight and laughter once more, as if the darkness and goblins had never been. She stood on the edge of the ballroom, nearly in the boughs of the Christmas tree. Right where she'd planned.

Persephone gave a hasty apology to the dancers she'd run into and spun back toward the wall.

"Release me," the faery prince snarled, his eyes spitting fiery wrath.

It worked. Persephone could have wept with relief and laughed

in triumph at the same time. She brushed down her skirt with trembling hands.

"Did you know," she said, her voice remarkably steady, "that mistletoe was once used to keep evil out of a house? It's why we hang it in doorways."

Persephone looked up, at the grimacing gargoyle above the faery prince's head. She'd hidden a sprig of mistletoe in its mouth yesterday. It was completely worth the effort.

But now she had an angry faery prince trapped in her ballroom.

"I'll strike you a bargain," Persephone said. This was an even bigger gamble than the mistletoe.

The prince knew it as well. Immediately the wrath cooled, replaced with an icy smirk. "Very well, darling. Let's hear your terms."

Persephone took a deep breath. She'd thought this through a thousand times. "You will no longer pursue anyone in my family, in this generation or subsequent one. Nor will you allow any other faery to do so." There would be no more deaths on this account.

"What? No demands of fame or wealth?"

Persephone knew her stories. She knew how easily the faery could turn a boon into a curse. "I want peace for my family," she said firmly.

"Done." His eyes flashed. "Come seal our bargain and set me free."

Persephone faltered. "How?"

His smirk widened. "How else?" He glanced upward. Mistletoe.

Persephone's heart stuttered.

The faery prince waited patiently as she edged close. With a drumming heart, Persephone rose up on her toes and kissed him.

White-blue sparks flared as their lips touched. The prince seized her and pressed his mouth hard over hers, tasting like rain and lightning. It stole the breath straight from her lungs and left her skin buzzing.

He vanished like a clap of thunder, leaving Persephone stunned and swaying.

She stumbled a step, pressing the back of her hand to her mouth. What had she done?

One thing she knew. That kiss would haunt her the rest of her days.

(997 words)