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A Forfeit of Dreams

by [KL_Morgan](#)

Summary

"How much do you know about legends?" the man asked abruptly.

Brian shrugged. "There's lots. They involve magic."

"No, they involve fear."

Familiar Words

In the harsh light her face was pale -- weary. Her dark hair was caught roughly in a knot at the base of her neck, silky tendrils escaping to trail down the rich fabric of her dress. Her dark eyes were wide, startling in their contrast against her delicate complexion. She looked at him, and he felt as if her soul was in those eyes.

"Give me the child."

The command was soft but backed by an undeniable strength. He could see a pulse fluttering at the base of her throat. She was frightened, but hiding it well.

"Through dangers untold, and hardships unnumbered, I have fought my way here to the castle, beyond the Goblin City -- to take back the child that you have stolen."

Her eyes hardened. He could feel the anger emanating from her slim frame - she had been pushed too far. She was fighting back.

"For my will is as strong as yours --"

Knowing it was pathetic, he still wished for those adoring eyes.

She raised her chin defiantly. "-- and my kingdom as great."

"That's the line I never really got," he interrupted. "I thought she was a servant girl, or something - - what's with this kingdom stuff?"

All the defiance leaked out of her. She stamped her foot, hands on her hips. "Brian! You're supposed to be *helping* me, not providing textual analysis."

He grinned. "Sorry. Can't help it, darling -- your performance was so enthralling, I forgot to behave." He avoided her playful slap. "Ooh, such a lady, attacking her king."

"Stuff it," she said, finally smiling back at him. "You haven't got the part just yet."

He shrugged, shoving hands into his pockets. "It's mine."

"Arrogant bastard."

"What can I say? I'm good." He avoided another swat. "You better get out of that dress, babe. You're more likely to tumble off the stage than actually score a hit."

She gathered glistening folds of fabric into her hands. "It is beautiful, though."

Brian snorted. "It's immense. The material in the skirt alone could clothe the entire cast."

She smiled again, stepping into the wings. "Go away so I can change."

"I will not," he said, acting offended. "Come here and help practice, now go away -- I'm not your servant to command, you know." Instead he leaned against the wooden frame of the stage which shielded the wings from the audience's view. There was a tall mirror still left on the stage, probably from the scenery construction class earlier in the day, its frame hugely ornate and glittering.

It was to be used in the production, he knew -- somewhere in the first scene. He watched her bare back in the mirror as she slipped the dress over her head, feeling a twinge of regret that she had left her jeans on underneath. *None of that*, he told himself. "You've got it, too, you know," he said abruptly.

"What?" Her voice was muffled as she pulled a t-shirt over her head.

"The part."

She paused in the act of fastening her watch. "I'm only a freshman."

"Don't give me that crap, Sarah. You're amazing. Really."

Sarah sighed, lifting her long hair out of her shirt. She walked out from the wings slowly, a small frown on her face. "I'm not even sure I want the part."

"What?" He stared at her in amazement. "You've got to be kidding. Miss Sarah Williams, turning down a part? The *driven* Miss Williams? The one who demanded an audition before she'd even enrolled in the college?"

She sighed again. "I know. It's just..."

"What?" He turned toward her, squashing the impulse to take her hands in his. "You told me yourself you've always loved this story."

She frowned, digging one shoe into the floor. "That's just it. I was totally obsessed with the book when I was younger."

"So? It's perfect. Fulfill a childhood dream. Make the fantasy come true."

She jerked her head up with a start, eyes wide with shock. "What did you say?"

He blinked. "Nothing that important. Sarah, what is with you today?" He placed a tentative hand on her shoulder. "Is something wrong?"

She slumped. "No."

"Don't lie."

She grinned. "Really. I'm just being weird." She walked over to the edge of the stage, dislodging his hand. He followed her quietly. "When I was younger... I really lived this book."

He sat next to her on the edge of the stage. "So? I called myself Frodo when I was eight. I was convinced my parents were part of a conspiracy to keep me from reaching the ring, which," he lowered his voice dramatically, "makes perfect sense when you take into account my ridiculous bedtime hour of seven o'clock. One *cannot* save the world before seven. It isn't done."

She grinned, abashed. "Well, I was a little older than that."

"How old?"

She squirmed. "Fifteen."

He raised his eyebrows. "Well. Highly nurtured imagination. Explains why you're such a good character actress."

Sarah laughed. "I know it sounds silly. But I really believed in that book. I was convinced it was

real." She swung her feet absently, brooding. "I built an entire fantasy life on the idea that I was the heroine."

"Then what happened?"

"I grew out of it. Pretty quickly, in fact -- it's amazing how much you change between fifteen and eighteen, isn't it? And then I heard Professor Herbert was doing the stage adaptation, and I became so excited about auditioning..." Her voice trailed off. "And it feels so good to be saying those lines again," she said softly. "I'm just a little afraid I'll get lost in the part. Again."

Brian gave her a careful, brief hug around the shoulders.

"Don't worry," he said soothingly. "I'll be sure to take full advantage of your delusion, as your enticing and irresistible Goblin King."

"Don't be an idiot," but smiling all the same. "You aren't really my idea of His Majesty, anyway," she proclaimed loftily.

Brian gasped, clutching his heart. "A hit, my lady, a hit..." He groaned and toppled backwards, listening to her giggles. "Well?" he asked from his prone position. "What is your image of Jareth?"

She went very still beside him. Carefully, he sat up. She was staring into space. "Taller," she said, almost too quiet to be heard. "More -- even more arrogant." She closed her eyes. "Terrifying."

"Sarah?" She didn't look at him. "Are you alright?" Her face twisted suddenly, as if in pain. He touched his fingers to her cheek, making her look at him. Startled, she opened her eyes. Their faces were very close.

"Sarah," he whispered hoarsely. "I --" He leaned toward her.

"I have to go." Quicker than thought, she jumped off the stage and grabbed her bag from the seats in front of them. "Thanks for the practice."

"No, Sarah, wait, I'm sorry --"

"See you tomorrow!"

He sighed as she slammed the theater doors behind her, slumping. Slowly Brian dragged himself to his feet. He walked over to the mirror, gazing at his own reflection. "I'm an idiot," he murmured. He swept downstage, raising one arm grandly. "I," he announced in a ringing voice, "Brian Harr, ladies and gentlemen, am a fucking idiot."

He bowed very low, twirling his upraised hand to imaginary acclaim.

The sound of one man's slow, measured applause came from the back row.

Brian froze, listening to a voice call out: "I seem to have missed most of the performance, but declare the conclusion to be top notch."

Brian straightened. "Who's there?" he demanded. "Who the fuck is out there?"

"Such language." A figure stepped out of the darkness. "I admit I cannot understand your distress."

Brian frowned. The man was wearing a long coat and a fedora, leaving his face completely in shadow. "Who the hell do you think you are, Dick Tracy?"

The man laughed, and Brian felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. As an actor, he recognized the laugh of a villain. This guy had nailed it. Brian grinned in spite of himself.

"You're a performer, aren't you?" he called out. "A friend of Professor Herbert's?"

The man raised the brim of his hat, and Brian stared. The face was strangely compelling: all sharp, clean angles. It should have been unattractive, but some line of the mouth or jaw had kept it from being so. Instead the face had a kind of cruel beauty.

"Do I know you?" he asked, confused.

"Why?" The man grinned, and Brian had a flash of sharp, white teeth. "Do I look familiar?"

Slowly Brian shook his head. "No." He caught himself. "I mean, I'm sorry, should you? I have a terrible memory for faces."

The man simply looked at him, and it was all Brian could do to keep from squirming. "Anyway," he began, a little too loudly, "Are you here to help with the performance?"

"Something like that. I'm quite an expert on the subject matter."

"Really? On *Labyrinth*? But it's only been played once or twice, professionally..." It dawned on him slowly. "You couldn't have been *in* it. You're too young."

"Ah, but I am much older than I look."

"Really?" Brian asked, disbelieving. The man nodded slowly. He was still standing in the audience, terribly relaxed for a man on his feet. It was a kind of regal slouching, Brian decided. *Damn, I want to learn how to do that...* "You were Jareth, weren't you?" he asked. "I'm just guessing, but..."

A smile tugged at the corner of the man's mouth, revealing a glimpse of remarkably pointed teeth. Brian took that for an affirmative, jumping excitedly off the stage and striding toward him. "Could you talk to me about it?" he asked eagerly. "Auditions are tomorrow, and I'd love to get some additional homework under my belt before going in."

The stranger arched one eyebrow. "You're attempting the role of the Goblin King?"

And we discover The Ego, Brian thought. *Attempting? Jesus. Certainly fits Sarah's criteria.* The thought of Sarah made his stomach hiccup. "Yeah," he spoke with forced casualness. "Give me some pointers?"

The man fell back into one of the plush red chairs, propping one booted foot on the back of the chair in front. He was silent for a moment. His coat had fallen open to reveal black leather pants and a simple grey shirt. *Definitely a villain complex*, Brian thought.

"How much do you know about legends?" the man asked abruptly.

Brian shrugged. "There's lots. They involve magic."

"No, they involve fear." Resting his elbows in the armrests, the man steepled his black-gloved fingers in front of his face. "All legends are based on fear. It's where they begin, how they evolve. In ancient times, what do you think the greatest fear was?"

Brian shoved his hands into his pockets, uncomfortable with the history lesson. "I don't know... death?"

The stranger shook his head. "Death was a part of everyday life. Men accepted the fact of their own death. They were content with it, expecting to live on through their children. And *there* is where their weak point lay."

"I don't follow."

"Children were extremely precious then, especially boy-children. There were black markets, slave trains. The greatest fear of a man's heart was coming home one day to find his sons had never returned home that evening, or that they would disappear from their beds in the middle of the night."

"Which is where the goblins come in," Brian said slowly, beginning to understand. The man nodded.

"Magical creatures with no other joy but to snatch those precious darlings from their wee little beds," he said, "in order to create more of their own." He shrugged. "An easy explanation for an all-too-common mystery."

Brian frowned. "But the king," he said. "Why isn't he a goblin?"

"Aha." The man raised one finger. "You are quick. Goblins for the boys, a king..."

"For the girls," Brian finished in an admiring tone. "Damn."

"A king to seduce their daughters, to steal their hearts and bodies away from the home. Wives, too." The man sighed and let his hands drop, relaxing further into his seat. "The shape of the legends change, of course, as the world does. But belief is an amazingly powerful thing. And at the core, the stories are all the same."

Brian shook his head. "That's amazing. I never thought of it that way." He grinned. "I admit, I thought it was a rather silly tale. And that Sarah was an idiot for getting so into it -- course, she's cute like that."

Out of Brian's sight, gloved hands tightened on a plush armrest. "Sarah?"

"Sarah Williams, a freshman. She's got a damn good chance at the main part, though. She's a big fan of the book. Didn't you see her storming out?"

"I must have missed that. Storming out?"

Brian, in his own way, had felt as if he had bonded with the stranger, discussing a part. He threw a grin over his shoulder at the man as he walked toward the stage, ducking to the front seats to get his bag. "Yeah, you missed the drama."

"I see," the man said gently. "You wouldn't believe how sorry that makes me."

"Don't be," Brian chuckled. "It's nothing new in this world." He paused in the act of gathering the books, strewn across the floor where they had fallen. He sighed. "Ever meet one of those girls? The ones you know are completely out of your reach, but you can't help trying for, anyway?"

He looked up, but there was no movement from the stranger. Brian shook his head. "She's got a face like a fairytale princess, too, which doesn't help." He shouldered the bag, mouth twisting. "And I had to go and royally fuck it all up. Just like me."

In the audience the man pushed his hat back over his head. Pale hair fell roughly to his shoulders. Brian could see his face clearly now, and could believe the man's claims of playing Jareth. It was

the eyes. Framed by long strands of wheat-gold, they glittered with a strange knowledge. *Perfect*, Brian thought to himself, *for playing a character that has spent eternity among other people's dreams.*

As if conjured by that very thought, the image of Sarah rose up in his mind's eye. How close she had been to him. How quickly she had pulled away.

"Y'know," Brian laughed bitterly, "I wish the goblins would come and take *me* away. Right now."

"Really?" The stranger smiled. "How convenient for you, then," he spoke lightly, brushing the brim of his hat, "That I am here."

All at once, the theater went dark.

Deal With the Devil

Sarah bowed her head to the stream of blessedly warm water, letting it smooth away the tension in her shoulders and neck. Wet hair matted itself on her back and face, and she pushed it back with one hand.

Why is everything so difficult?

She relished in the feeling of hot water sliding down her face. Someone stepped into the shower next to her and she gasped as for a brief moment her own was icy cold.

Damn.

Sighing, she turned off the water and reached for a towel to wrap around her body. She shivered as the air raised goose bumps on her skin, walking quickly down the hall to her dorm room. There she dug out another towel, this one for her hair, and placed it around her shoulders as she sat down on the bed.

"Sarah? 'Zat you?" A drowsy figure stirred in the bed next to her, sitting up and blinking blearily.

"Just me, Nikki." She absentmindedly began to towel her hair dry. "You're in bed early."

There was a sleepy giggle, and the blonde girl stretched luxuriously.

"No, actually," she yawned. "I got to bed very, very late. Sometime around noon, I think... maybe later..."

"Out late again, hmm?" Sarah wasn't really paying attention as she slipped into her PJs, trying to shove the straggling strands of her hair under the towel.

"Mmm hmm." Nikki flopped back onto her enormous blue pillow, arms akimbo. "Wish you'd come with me some time."

"Not really my scene."

The girl gave a snort, blonde hair flying away from her face. "Whatever. You need to get out more."

Sarah grinned over her shoulder at her roommate, reaching towards the massive floor-to-ceiling bookcase on her side, which made the room look decidedly cramped. It was stuffed with books, some with titles to be seen, (*Winter Prince*, *Illusion*, *The Silver Metal Lover*) but most too well loved and worn to be read clearly. Deftly, she snagged a slim volume and hopped onto her bed. "You talk like I'm the one who forgets what daylight looks like."

"Aw, Sarah..." Nikki propped herself up on one elbow. "Don't be mad. It's just -- well, I feel like I find you by yourself all the time. Every time I walk in the door, there you are -- reading, or writing, or daydreaming. I know you're lovely, but you're getting the reputation for being a snob."

"Most of my friends are theater people, anyway. They know I'm not a snob."

Nikki sighed. "Yes yes, your precious theater people adore you. And all of you are always at rehearsals. What fun."

"It is fun."

"Sarah! Don't you ever go out with people? Have pizza? Have coffee, for godsake, if that will satisfy your artistic soul. Just don't stay in here." Nikki flounced back onto her pillow, making a face. "It's morbid in here."

"It is not morbid!"

"Your side is."

"Just because I don't have beer and band posters, you think it's morbid."

Nikki lifted herself out of bed. She was wearing just a flannel shirt, buttoned crookedly, as she padded over to the opposite wall. "This one," tapping a poster with her finger, "is definitely spooky."

Sarah gave a small smile. She knew that Nikki wasn't really serious. But her roommate had a surprising protective streak inside her and she wanted Sarah to get out and experience life more. The only thing was, Sarah enjoyed her life. She was never fond of huge parties where she didn't know anyone, or hanging out in clubs just to dance with complete strangers. Her world was small, but full -- talking for hours with a few friends, catching ice cream after late-night rehearsals, going with a group to see a film on the weekends. She didn't understand how Nikki would think she was lonely. But Sarah really liked Nikki, and so she played along with the semi-critical banter.

"That," she said, "is a painting by John Waterhouse. It's beautiful."

"Yeah." Nikki studied the elegant reproduction. "But still creepy. Look at those girls. They look like they're about to pull the guy down into the water with them."

Sarah grinned. "They did. It's a Greek myth -- his name was Hylas, a companion of Hercules, and --"

"Stop, stop!" Nikki waved her hands. "No history lessons! I forbid it."

"It's not really history --"

"Nuh uh." Nikki shook an admonishing finger in Sarah's face. "I didn't have enough sleep to deal with that stuff. Forbidden," she ended firmly.

"Anything else of mine you'd like to deconstruct?"

Nikki glanced at the black and white photos tucked into the frame of Sarah's mirror. One showed a lovely dark-haired woman, posed in theatrical costume. Linda Williams. In Nikki's opinion, keeping a picture of your dead mother on your dresser went beyond creepy -- it was slightly masochistic.

But she knew better than to venture her opinion. From the few times Sarah had mentioned her mother it had become obvious to Nikki that criticism would not be welcomed. She was flighty, not stupid.

Instead, she shifted her attention to the withered bouquet standing in glass vase on the dresser. "What about the dead flowers? Don't tell me they aren't morbid. They're dead."

Sarah rolled her eyes. "Dried roses, Nikki. Lots of people keep them."

"Only old people," Nikki muttered. "With nothing left to live for." She leaned in to inspect the blossoms, raising her eyebrows when she encountered their delicate scent. "How come they still smell?"

"I added rose scent," Sarah said thumbing through the pages of her book. "To keep from being overly morbid."

The crack went wide as Nikki sniffed the flowers greedily. "Mmmm. Nice. I take back my comments." She straightened. "What made you decide to keep them, anyway?"

"My dad always gives me a dozen whenever I'm in a play. I throw the old bunch out after the first performance. It's..." She raised her head from the book, thinking. "A way to remind me of what I want in life, I guess." She shrugged. "Is that all?"

"Well, give me a bit," Nikki said, throwing herself back onto her bed. "Next time something occurs to me, I'll take down a note."

"You do that."

Nikki sighed again. "Really, Sarah, you ought to make more friends. The people in theater department aren't the entire world." She watched as Sarah placed the book on the bedside table and picked up a brush, letting the towel fall from around her head. "Where were you, anyway? I thought you were going to study for a test tomorrow."

"I finished early. Brian found me, and we went off to practice together."

"Brian?" Nikki turned onto her stomach, the pillow muffling her words. "Now there is a reason for taking up acting. That hair, those green eyes... Mmmm..."

Sarah laughed. "You're such a nut, sometimes." She winced as she dragged the brush through a snarl in her long, dark hair.

"Oh, come on, Sarah." Nikki turned her face away from the pillow, blowing errant strands of hair out of her face. "Drop the ice princess act for just one second and admit he looks like a very fuckable Jesus."

Sarah blinked. "I'm not sure he'd appreciate the comparison," she muttered.

"Whatever." Nikki watched Sarah brush her sleek hair, quiet for a moment. "And he thinks you're amazing. I don't know what your problem is. Do you even date?"

Sarah was quickly tiring of the third degree. "Of course I do. I told you about them."

Nikki snorted again. "Oh yeah. I forgot. A grand total of two boyfriends." She rolled her eyes. "Honey, that's my average for a school semester. Not a good number for a knock-out like you."

Sarah got up, walking over to her dresser. She turned the hair dryer on, bending slightly at the waist as she let it blow through her wet locks. "We're different people. That's all."

"Do you have pictures?"

"In the top drawer. You're welcome to look."

Nikki jumped up before Sarah had even finished speaking, stumbling over to her roommate's desk. Carelessly she rifled through papers and pencils, triumphantly grabbing the coveted photos and hopping back onto her bed. She studied them with mock seriousness, laying them out on her blanket.

"Hmm." She continued to make "serious studying" noises while Sarah finished drying her hair. Then she sighed. "I've got it," she announced. "You've got a thing for blondes. That's why you're

blind to a marvelous piece of man like Brian. The poor, brunette man." She shook her head, expression tragic. "He's doomed by his own good looks. It's like a Greek play."

"Shut up," Sarah protested, laughing. She turned the dryer off and walked over, sitting down on her own bed. "Two guys is not a "thing," it's simply a coincidence."

"Reeeaaally." Nikki drawled. "And the fact that they're both amazingly tall -- also a coincidence?"

Sarah shrugged, feeling slightly uncomfortable.

"Oh, and of course, there are so many tall blonde boys with," she squinted at the pictures, "beautiful blue eyes. Ah yes. Totally understandable." She gave Sarah a withering look. "Who the hell is he, and why aren't you with him?"

"What?" Sarah asked, startled

Nikki raised her eyebrows. "You don't have some kind of secret fixation?" She put her head to one side. "Any movie or rock star you particularly admire... no?" She frowned, sensing Sarah's confusion. "Hmm. Why'd you break up with them?"

Sarah sighed, lying back against her pillows. She let her eyes wander among the prints she had taped to the ceiling over her bed. Her favorite hung directly above her head -- a handmade collage of woodcuts, fantasy art, and articles, all of it centering on dragons. A friend had made it as a parting gift as they went off to different colleges. Sarah had to stand on her bed and crane her neck in order to read the print of the carefully cut out blurbs and legend fragments. She had considered moving it to a more easily accessible wall space, but she loved seeing the flowing, scaled creatures flying above her as she nodded off to sleep. "Different reasons."

Nikki leaned over her, waving one of the photos in Sarah's face impatiently. "What about this one?"

Sarah shut her eyes. "That's Jason," she said. "Can you get out of my face?"

Nikki jumped back, startled. She watched as, to her absolute amazement, several tears slipped down Sarah's cheeks. She shifted over, sitting next to Sarah. "Honey? You okay?"

"I'm fine." Sarah sat up abruptly, wiping the tears from her face.

"No, Sarah, really. What's up?"

Sarah slumped, dispirited. "Brian tried to kiss me," she said. "It's nothing, really. I just... it's going to be difficult to deal with him, now." She sighed. "And I really liked him. As a friend."

"Well, whatever you do, don't tell him that."

Sarah laughed outright at her roommate's practical advice. "I just have to put him out of my mind, study a little more and get a good night's -- shit!"

Nikki jumped. "What, what?" she demanded, watching as Sarah leaped off the bed, tearing around the room to change furiously out of her PJs into jeans and a baggy shirt. "Who died?" Nikki demanded.

"Nothing, I -- dammit!" Sarah wrenched her hair free where it had tangled with a button. "I left my notebook in the theater. It has all my notes for this semester, and I really need it to get a good grade in the class, much less the exam."

"Sarah!" Nikki watched, concerned, as her friend roughly pulled faded sneakers onto her feet. "It's not the end of the world. Just wait until the morning."

"No way," Sarah replied, yanking on a light jacket. "The maintenance crew will probably find it and throw it away, that would be just my luck..." Glancing over her shoulder, Sarah was arrested by her roommate's concerned expression. She smiled. "I'll be fine," she said. "It's not that far, and the walk will make me feel better, anyway."

"Okay," Nikki said, dubious. "Just watch out for weirdos."

Sarah laughed. "I'll be back in no time!"

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Sarah jogged along the sidewalk, breath misting in the late autumn air. Her long hair bounced against her back to the steady rhythm of her steps.

*What am I going to do about Brian?*

Sarah didn't know what was wrong with her. It wasn't that she didn't like dating. She loved dancing with her boyfriends, heartily enjoyed kissing them, defied anyone to claim she wasn't as admiring and cuddly as any other girlfriend. But she just didn't understand the passion other people expressed. Boyfriends were fun. But that was it -- she didn't ever feel the need for more than that.

Sarah slowed her pace, hands thrust deep into the pockets of her jacket. Her head was bowed in concentration, a slight frown on her face.

*I didn't love either of them.*

Jason and Cedric had been like really good friends -- friends to dance with, and kiss, and to be held by when you felt lonely, but that was it. Friends. She swallowed thickly; remembered how angry they had both been with her when she had ended it. She couldn't understand why they had gotten so worked up.

*What's wrong with me?*

She shook her head, speeding up her pace. It was something to think about later. After her exam. With something like relief she realized she could see the theater building, the huge double doors for the entrance just a few feet ahead.

*Besides, she thought to herself, I'm only eighteen. It isn't like I'm under a deadline to find the love of my life. She laughed to herself, pausing before she opened the doors. I think I started dating Jason just to make Karen shut up, she thought wryly of her stepmother. No wonder I can put up with Nikki -- they're kindred spirits.*

She smiled broadly, leaning on the door handle. It swung open easily but to her surprise the house lights were down. She frowned. Maybe Brian had fooled around a little before he left... the stage lights were on. It was something he'd do -- practice his rehearsal piece with the stage all to himself, then get carried away by the moment and forget to close up properly. She felt a little chill of anxiety. Maybe he was still here... No, he'd have gone back to his dorm by now. She was being silly. Sarah stepped inside the building, letting the door swing shut. And it hit her -- the theater smelled strange. It was a dry, earthy scent... it reminded her of old clothes and toys left in the attic, but also of damp forests and dust. It was distinctive. She knew she'd remember what it was in just a second, it was right there at the edge of her memory --

Goblins.

The breath left her body and she slumped against the doors, shaken. She could feel her heart beating in her mouth, fingers clutching at the handlebar. Searching for something, anything, solid to hold on to. Something real.

She stood there for a few minutes, breathing heavily. *This is a dream*, she thought. *I'm asleep in my room. Nikki's snoring. Again.* She calmed herself, gathering her thoughts. *You're playing tricks on yourself, Sarah*, she thought. *That stupid play has gotten you thinking about this stuff again, and it's stupid. Goblins aren't real.*

She leaned over to the socket, flipping one of the switches to the house lights. Nothing. She tried another, and another, but they were all dead. She could feel panic rising in a scream.

*Stop it!* she ordered herself. *Stop scaring yourself!* But she couldn't escape the feeling of déjà vu... *Déjà fait*, she thought, absent-minded.

Then shook her head violently. *STOP IT! You made that up when you were fifteen and incredibly lonely! It. Was. A. Fantasy. Toby wasn't snatched away by goblins. Because goblins don't exist. Goblin cities don't exist. And, most importantly, most especially, Goblin Kings do not, have not, and will not ever --*

"Hello, Sarah."

She paused.

Once, she had dreamed her mother had died. She had dreamed her mother had been killed in a fire, that all the neighbors had come to the funeral, that her father had locked himself in his room and wouldn't look at her. She was being led away from her home by her grandparents when she woke up -- sat bolt upright in bed breathing fast in sheer terror. And then she had relaxed, tension leaking out of her as she realized she was in her own bed, that she could hear her father laughing down the hall. It had only been a dream.

And then she remembered: her mother really was dead, killed months ago in a car accident. The cold shock of that knowledge had been like a knife in her body, causing her to collapse back onto the bed, unable to cry for the pain that lived in every part of her. That feeling of absolute loss had felt like it would rip her apart from the inside out.

*But this*, Sarah thought, slowly moving her eyes from the floor to elegant boots, to sleek black legs and imperious stance, resting finally on that cold, mocking face: *This might be worse.*

He was on the stage, of course. His feet were braced a shoulder's width apart, encased in long, elegant boots. There was some kind of armor on his chest -- something steely-grey and yet strangely iridescent, the spotlight picking up subtle blues and purples in the textured metal. A dark cape hung from his shoulders, and it was as if the shadows themselves had peeled away from the walls to ripple around his body, as fluid as blood. His arms were crossed in front of him, waiting, slightly impatient for her response. He smiled at her, the same one-sided mocking grin. And a single arched eyebrow, like an upswept owl's wing.

It was hideously reminiscent of the first time she had seen him (as the truth of the meeting she could no longer deny to herself). He always made her felt this way -- grungy, awkward, and pathetic. Powerless.

*But that's not true.*

The thought speared through her dazed state, making her blink. It wasn't true. She had defeated

him. She had solved the Labyrinth. Toby was a preschool terror, not a mangy goblin boy. She had won. He had lost.

She rebuilt herself, standing there. She picked up the pieces of her shattered confidence; letting them slip securely into place over her naked emotions like a shield. She let out a shaky breath and let go of the door, steeling herself to meet that mismatched gaze.

His eyes widened, and for a brief moment the smile slipped. But he regained his arrogance easily, as always. "Did you miss me?"

"Not really." Sarah could feel her hands tremble, she twisted them together abruptly, praying he hadn't seen.

"Oh," he placed a hand to his heart in mock sorrow. "I'm wounded." He tilted his head to one side, eyes questioning. "But perhaps I shouldn't be," he murmured. "I heard that you had forgotten about us all, Sarah. Even your so-called friends."

She refused to show him how much that hurt. She had forgotten them all -- Hoggle, Ludo, Sir Didymus, the Fireys -- she had put them out of her mind completely. Sarah blinked back tears, hard. She'd ask their forgiveness, someday. But right now she couldn't afford to think about that. Right now she was in the middle of a battle.

"Why are you here?" she asked, grateful her voice didn't shake.

Jareth was obviously amused at something. He strode confidently around the stage, turning his back on her. She noticed, distantly, that the mirror from practice was still there.

"Curiosity, perhaps," he called back to her. "It's rare I hear my name spoken so often, so commonly, in one place."

"Your name?" she asked, confused. And then it dawned on her. "The play."

"Hmm. Yes." He paused at the edge of the stage, glancing at her through the pale curtain of his hair. "It's amazing how confidently you people have bantered my name about these past months." There was a thin thread of anger in his voice. "I began to fear it would tarnish."

Sarah lowered her eyes. "You can't really expect them to take it seriously," she said.

"Can't I?" His voice whispered into her ear. She jerked around to find him standing next to her, laughing at her shock.

"No," she said, angry at being tricked. "You can't."

His laughter stopped. Eyes narrowing, they lingered on her face. "I believe you've changed," he said softly. "Yes. There is definitely something different about you."

"Is that it?" she challenged him, gaining confidence. "The sound of your name calls you to those who speak it?"

"Something like that."

She watched as he made his way back to the bright stage. "I'll try not to mention you by name, then."

"You never have."

She shifted, hesitant. Was that all? "I... I guess I'll be going," she ventured.

This elicited no response from the Goblin King, who stood upon the stage as if lost in thought. The light gilded every strand of his hair and chased shine over the leather of his attire. There was a tiny smile on his thin lips, eyes closed -- as if he were listening to some unknown music. Waiting for something.

Sarah carefully made her way to the front seats, her skin prickling with the nearness of his presence. She didn't care how undignified it was, she was going to run for it as soon as she got through the doors. She spotted her notebook on the floor and snatched it, hurriedly stepping over scattered books and papers. *This is like a bad dream. It doesn't feel real. Why the hell is he here?*

And then she stopped, the fact of what she had just seen finally registering on her mind. She swallowed and closed her eyes, feeling a deadness of spirit as her notebook dropped from nerveless fingers.

*Not again.*

"Where's Brian?" she whispered.

"I'm sorry, my dear, did you say something?" his mocking tone carried splendidly in the empty theater, and for one delirious moment she thought to herself, *He'd make a wonderful actor.*

"Brian," she said, a little louder. Her voice was shaking, now. "His books are still here. So is his homework. Where is he?"

"And you are assuming I am aware of your friend's whereabouts because..?"

*Because you're a manipulative son of a bitch,* she bit back from saying. *And I know you.*

Breathing deeply, she turned to face his feral grin. "Am I wrong?" she demanded.

Amused, he shook his head. "But that means that you have already guessed where he is, haven't you?"

Sarah felt her mouth go dry. "No," she said. "That's not possible! You only steal children!"

"My goodness, Sarah, you make me sound like some kind of monster. I only take what is offered. You know that."

Sarah shook her head, stubborn. "No. You couldn't have taken him, because he's not a child, and you don't dare touch anything that can fight back."

He was suddenly before her, too close. She stepped hastily away only to find that he was holding her there with a black-gloved hand on her arm. His face was still, imperious and arrogant.

"I find it amazing, at times," he said, distant. "That you have managed to survive this long with that kind of insolence." He released her arm but, lightning-quick, reached out to cup her chin. "I was wrong," he said. His eyes were hard and glittering in his pale, sculpted face. "You haven't changed at all."

And just as quickly he was back on stage, leaving Sarah to wince with the memory of his powerful grip. She looked at him, uncertain. He caught her expression from the corner of his eye and laughed again, looking like a radiant dark angel.

"Did you really think that the Labyrinth was populated by infants?" He paced the length of the

stage slowly, holding her wide eyes with every step. "That everyone you met there was either a stolen child or a creation of my own?" He shook his head, eyes moving from her face to some point on the horizon. "No. It is true, I cannot force an adult to make their way into the Labyrinth. But I don't have to." He grinned, delighted with the wicked world. "Countless come of their own free will, lured by the promise of their dreams fulfilled." He brought his gaze back to her, expression unreadable. "You were not the only girl-child I offered a crystal of dreams to, Sarah. But you are the only one who refused the gift."

"I couldn't let you have Toby."

"You would be surprised," he said dryly, "at how many humans could."

"What are you saying? That Brian asked to be taken?"

"I'm sure he had no idea his wish would be fulfilled so... accurately." He ran a hand over the mirror's frame, his back to her. "But yes -- your Brian wished, and I quote, that the goblins would come and take him away."

"But why?" she cried out.

"I didn't ask." He threw her a sidelong glance. "He was extremely distressed. About you," he added. He watched with interest as the blood drained from her face, leaving her pale and wan. Something like anger warmed the ice of his expression. "I would love to find out what happened."

Sarah's mouth twisted. "That's it, then. Brian's gone, and I have thirteen hours to solve the Labyrinth and bring him home." She was furious. "Don't you ever get tired of this?"

"Oh, no." He laughed low in his throat. "Never of your company."

"Let's get this over with, then," she said through gritted teeth.

"Wait!" He held up one gloved hand. "As much as I enjoy our encounters, Sarah, I believe you're suffering under a misapprehension." He let both hands fall, clasping them behind his back. "Your friend appealed directly to me." Seeing her confusion, he continued. "In other words, you have no part in the agreement."

"I don't understand," she whispered, but she was beginning to.

"Three years ago, you asked for your baby brother to be taken away. Then, being a fickle little girl, you asked for him back, and I generously," he continued, ignoring her sound of muffled protest, "generously allowed for you to fight for him."

His pale skin seemed to shimmer, ever so slightly, in the harsh stage lights -- perfect cruelty. "But this is not between you and I, Sarah. If you wish to bargain for your friend's life, you must bring something new to the table."

She stared at him, stricken. "What will happen to him?" she asked, voicing rising in panic. "Tell me what will happen to Brian!"

He shrugged, reassuming his pacing of the stage. "He's too old to become a goblin, of course. All others who enter the Labyrinth come for their own selfish reasons. To realize their dreams. To be consumed by them." His eyes glinted with malicious humor. "Where do you think your friend's dreams will lead him, Sarah? Can you guess at their nature?"

She was very still, standing in the audience. "I have to make my own bargain," she said dully.



"Name something worth my while, Sarah," as he smiled in triumph. "Make me an offer."

She steeled herself. "Me," she whispered.

That made him pause. "Pardon, did you -- yourself?" He gave a full-throated laugh. "How amazingly conceited. What would I want with you?"

She flinched. "I... I thought..."

"What?" He stood before her, eyes fixed on her face. "That I had spent the last three years pining away in my castle for your beauty?" He arched an eyebrow, his mouth mocking. "Or that I was eaten up with desire for revenge? No," he chuckled, "Your delusions are very pretty, but I assure you that, after an eternity, one girl does not cause such vexation in a man."

He crouched on the edge of the stage. "Oh," he mourned, fingers to his lips, "Now I've gone and hurt your feelings. Poor Sarah. Life's hard, isn't it?" he sneered.

"What will you take, then?" she hissed.

He laughed again. "Certainly not you. What would I want with another lost dreamer, wandering through my Labyrinth?" He shook his head. "Something worth my while, Sarah. Try and think."

She shrugged helplessly. "I don't know. What do you want?"

He smiled. He held up one hand, fingers cupping air. It was just as she remembered -- one moment, there was nothing, and then the light in his hands seemed to shimmer and fold in on itself, and he was holding a crystal bauble in his fingertips. It shone softly, looking as if a whisper could shatter its delicacy.

"Do you remember this?" he asked. She nodded. "This is just a receptacle. No -- more like a mirror." He turned it carefully, looking into its depths. "I want the real thing."

"What do you mean?"

He stood abruptly. The bauble slipped from his fingers, and she gave a tiny gasp -- but it danced across his wrist and over his arm, only to be caught and flow smoothly back onto the other. He did this effortlessly, it seemed, as if to distract himself from total boredom.

"The Labyrinth is made of dreams. It is belief made tangible. Your little stunt three years ago did considerable damage to my kingdom, and I think it only proper that you assist in its reconstruction. Your contribution would be a little more... generous than usual, but I think it only fair, considering the part you played."

She frowned. "I don't follow."

He caught the crystal in the palm of his hand. "I want your dreams, Sarah. For that, I'll allow you the thirteen hours in the Labyrinth -- the chance to rescue your friend from oblivion." He held the bauble before her. "Is that so much to ask?"

She swallowed, hesitating. "If I fail," she said slowly, "and you take my dreams... What will that mean for me?"

"Well, for one thing, you'll cease to have nightmares."

Relief rushed through her. "Oh, you mean -- That's it? Just the dreams I have at night?" He said nothing, his gaze intent on her face. "That's alright, then. Sure."

"Deal." He grinned, flashing sharp teeth, and tossed the bauble in the air. Without thinking she lunged for it, stretching to save its fragility from crashing down to earth. He raised his arms as she moved, letting the cape fly into the air like the wings of some monstrous dark bird --

-- and she was back on the hillside again, where she had stood three years ago after begging for Toby to be stolen away. The Labyrinth lay before her.

But something was wrong.

## A Bird in the Hand...

Something was very, very wrong.

The dusty landscape burned with the late afternoon sun overhead, just as before. The Labyrinth itself seemed to writhe like a living thing as its twisted pathways coursed over the ground, like before. Sarah could even -- if she squinted her eyes -- make out the low, flowering bushes that lined the outer wall, which Hoggle had been tending when they first met. But something, something...

"Why is it different?" she whispered to herself.

"Because you are different."

Sarah jumped. She had forgotten about Jareth entirely in her sudden confusion. He gave her a bitter smile, as if he knew it, before continuing.

"You didn't think the Labyrinth was an unchanging entity, did you? It wouldn't claim so very many victims if it were. It's a personal challenge to everyone that enters its walls, reflecting their dreams and fears."

Jareth leaned back easily against one of the barren, twisted trees that covered the land outside the Labyrinth. The rich sunlight caught on its cobwebbed limbs, and he was a dark shadow against the glittering beauty. "There are constants, of course. I must claim credit for the greater part of the Labyrinth's charm. But the challenges you met would not be the same as, oh, say your boy Brian would encounter. And since you are the only person the ever travel through it *twice*," he lifted an eyebrow, "I am not surprised it has shifted to accommodate the simple fact that you are no longer the girl you were." He gave a depreciating smirk. "To a point."

She lifted her chin, stung by the remark. "Doesn't matter," with an arrogance she didn't really feel. "I solved the Labyrinth before. I can do it again."

The Goblin King closed his eyes, smiling. "So confident," he murmured to himself.

"Besides," Sarah spoke, and there was a quiet triumph in her voice. "I already know the truth of it all."

Jareth opened his eyes. "Oh?"

"Mmm hmm." She grinned wickedly, certain of her one victory. "This changes nothing between us. No matter whether I win or lose, we both know that -- in the end -- you have no power ov--"

Quick as thought a gloved hand was covering her mouth, trapping the words inside. "Don't," he said softly. "Don't even think about it." He didn't remove his hand, instead leaning in close so that he looked directly into her eyes. "If you say those words, for any reason, at any time while you are in my Labyrinth, you *lose*. Do you understand me, Sarah?" His mismatched eyes burned with some unknown emotion. "Cause my kingdom to come to pieces again, and I will not be happy. You must not break the Labyrinth's spell over you. You must play by the rules this time. Break them, and you forfeit everything." He finally pulled back, releasing her. "*Everything*."

"You didn't say any of that when we made our agreement!" Sarah protested.

"Oh, didn't I? How careless of me."

She loathed him.

"Fine," she said, inwardly seething. "Your rules. I'll still win."

She took off towards the Labyrinth without throwing him a backward glance. He watched as she half-stumbled, half-ran over the rocky landscape, tumbling towards the outer wall. The doors to the Labyrinth, to her obvious bewilderment, were unhidden -- out in plain sight for all to see. She looked around tentatively, dark hair swinging. Sarah seemed to shrug, and then pushed at them both. The Goblin King watched as they opened at her touch and she hesitantly walked inside.

The doors slammed shut.

Jareth relaxed almost imperceptibly. Some kind of tension leaked out of his stance, and he threw back his head to laugh. His eyes held a wicked mirth.

"Not this time, dear one," he promised. "Not this time."

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Dark, reaching stone that shimmered slightly, covered with gnarled vines in a withered filigree. An endless stretch of corridor on either side, like the photo-negative of a train's lights disappearing down a dark tunnel. Broken tree limbs littered underfoot, as if the walls had just suddenly appeared -- instead of being built -- where a wide forest once stood, severing branches from their ancient trunks. The shaky whispering of the lichen, eyes rolling wildly on knobby stalks as she passed by.

It was all so familiar to Sarah, and yet not -- like walking in a place you remembered from a dream. Her body moved with an assurance she didn't actually feel, her thoughts always a step slower. She trailed her fingertips lightly down one wall, shivering at the dry, dusty feeling it left on her skin.

At least she remembered how to get out of this part. She made as if to stride forward, then hesitated. *Wait, didn't I walk down for a while...* She bit her lip, looking behind her. *But I don't remember which way.* She sighed hugely. *Dammit. Well, I suppose it doesn't matter, really. It might even helped if I took another way -- I had to walk around for hours before I found the Red and Blue Guards...* She felt a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. *And it might even take longer this time.*

Sarah had to admit it -- she was scared. She felt cast adrift now that she knew Hoggle wasn't in his proper place, spritzing fairies away from the flowering bushes outside. None of it seemed quite right. Despite Jareth's warnings, it was Hoggle's absence that made reality sink in for her: this was not the Labyrinth she once knew.

I might not see any of my friends this time around. And I miss them so much... She felt tears rise and dashed them from her eyes. *Stop that. Crying won't get you anywhere.* She gave another look at her surroundings. *I'd give anything to see a familiar face right now. I wonder if that worm is still around.* She walked a little farther down, idly trying to choose an invisible opening. *I wonder how he thought I'd manage to "come inside" and meet his missus...* Sarah stopped.

"Daydreaming," she said aloud, "is not going to help me. At all," she added firmly. She stepped forward, one hand held up to feel at the unseen edges of a passageway. "Left or right? Well," she paused, "I guess it's all the same."

She went right.

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Brian groaned.

Pain. It was the first thing his sluggish mind registered: aching muscles all through his back and neck, a headache that threatened to blind him, and sharp bruises from... from...

*What the hell am I doing on a stone floor?*

Muffling instinctive yelps of protest, Brian heaved himself up into a sitting position. His hand went to his head as he winced with the rush of blood. He waited for the temporary blackness before his eyes to clear. It didn't.

*Where am I?*

He blinked forcefully. Nope, didn't help -- he was in true darkness. He waved a hand in front of his face, or where he guessed it to be... nothing. Either he'd suddenly gone blind, or he had woken up in a very bad place.

What did he remember? Practicing in the theater with Sarah, the stranger walking in, and then... Then he, Brian, had said something. Something flippant, as usual. Something... something to do with...

Brian went still. *No way.*

As if in reply a door swung open, flooding the room with light. He cowered from it, holding up one hand to shield his smarting eyes. He barely had time to realize what was happening when strong hands grabbed his arms and roughly lifted him to his feet. Still trying to adjust to the overwhelming brightness, Brian couldn't truly make out who -- or what -- they were. Their hands were strangely small, yet strong; they didn't seem to have any trouble pushing and shoving his stumbling form out the door and into some kind of corridor. And then jumped. The hands had left off of him, but someone was prodding him forward, pushing something sharp into his back. Blinking his eyes to clear them, Brian whirled, registering the grunts of protest this elicited around him, to see --

*No.*

They clustered around him in one great group, small ones and tall ones and round ones and long ones... All of them dusky-skinned, but some had round, smooth faces, some had craggy ones, others had features lost beneath a wealth of fur or grime. Some had horns, or tusks, or curious, lipless mouths that opened to reveal broken remains of teeth. A few actually had mustaches and straggly hair that wisped out from beneath their poorly made helmets and rusted chain mail.

*It's not possible.*

The tallest one prodded him again -- with a spear, he could see now. A couple of the others threatened him with sticks of rotted wood or rattled lengths of chain in his direction, but Brian could tell it was the tall one who was in charge. A large, unwieldy helmet that looked as if it had been a soup pot in another life obscured its face. There was a sickened, churning feeling in Brian's stomach as he gaped at the creatures around him, ignoring the sharp pokes of the leader. He stumbled, clutching at the stone walls around him, trying vainly to make his head stop spinning. The worst of it all was that in every jeering, cackling, taunting, snarling face that surrounded him there was placed a pair of wide, intelligent eyes.

*Human eyes.*

Brian let them lead him down the corridor, numb. His mind tried to make sense of his

surroundings, scrambled to come up with an explanation that would dispel the ocean of fear and bewilderment in which he was cast adrift. He walked onward, unseeing, simply waiting for some kind of answer. He almost didn't notice when the corridor blossomed, leading into a large circular room. Brian let his eyes wander over the scene before him. More deformed creatures hung on the walls and scampered over the stone floor, some of them dangling precariously out circular windows. There was some kind of pit in the middle of the floor, draped haphazardly with rumpled, dirty pieces of cloth. Thick, waxy candles perched unlit in various corners, and he could see a huge, ornate clock with... thirteen hours...

A feeling of dread came over Brian. It was familiar, and yet not -- familiar in that if he thought about it long enough he knew the memory would come to him. But he didn't want to remember. Brian knew in his heart that ignorance, at this point, was most definitely bliss. With infinite reluctance, he turned his gaze to the focus of the chamber.

It was a throne. As alien as it all was, some things are obvious no matter where they're found. It sat on a raised dais some three steps above the floor, set against the wall. It was a gold semi-circle with hooked ends, pale purple hangings with a dusty gold pattern draped around its edges. And there was a man sitting in it -- although "sitting" was an inappropriate description. "Lounging" was much closer, with his back against one arm and a leg thrown casually over the other. The man seemed oblivious to the commotion around him, all his attention focused on a delicate crystal bauble he was tossing into the air and then catching again with elegant motions. The man had pale hair flowing unevenly over his shoulders -- it was that which started the spark of fear inside Brian. It wasn't until the man turned his face, however, and Brian remembered those cold, cruel eyes, that the icy terror lanced through his veins.

"You're that guy..." Brian swallowed thickly, a sudden and unwelcome thought making his present situation all too clear. "You're him, aren't you? You're Jareth."

The Goblin King gestured expansively. The flourish took in everything around him -- the chickens running rampant underfoot, the cavorting goblins that bickered and fought in the corners, the general disarray and good-natured squalor. His smile might have been self-mocking -- but perhaps not.

"Welcome to my court."

Cautiously, making sure no one would stop him, Brian walked closer to the throne. His legs shook, but he made it over to Jareth without stumbling. "Why am I here?" he asked, mouth dry.

"Because I wanted you to be," Jareth replied, and for all his arrogance there was the hint of a petulant child in his voice. He turned his attention from Brian, continuing his private game with the fragile crystal.

"Can I go home now?" Brian asked, his voice very small.

Toss and catch. "No."

Brian hesitated. "When *can* I go home?"

"When I say you can." Toss and catch. Jareth grinned. "Perhaps never."

Brian gaped at him. "What -- what the hell is going on?" he asked, struggling to put some authority into his plea.

Jareth caught the bauble in a swift motion. Sighing with impatience, he turned to his prisoner. "You," he spoke, "made a very stupid wish. Stupid for *you*, that is, very convenient for me. As a

consequence, you are now trapped in my Labyrinth." Jareth unhooked his leg from the throne's arm and swung himself upright, facing Brian. "Under the usual circumstances, of course, you would be free to lose yourself within its walls."

"Under the usual circumstances?"

"You are rather..." Jareth paused, weighing his words, "unique among our visitors."

"Why?" Brian asked, bewildered. "What did I do?"

"Oh, nothing you've done," Jareth drawled. He flicked his fingers outward; the crystal perched on them like an iridescent butterfly. "It's more due to a mutual acquaintance of ours."

"Mutual acquaintance?" Brian repeated, completely lost. "I really wouldn't have thought..."

Jareth twisted his wrist to palm the bauble. Carefully, he placed his other hand over its shining surface, so that the crystal was entirely lost to sight. He smiled to himself, throwing Brian a look full of mischief. As Brian watched, amazed, feathers began to peek from between Jareth's fingers. With infinite care, Jareth removed his hand, revealing the tiniest of grey doves to be nestled between his gloved fingers.

Brian gasped in wonder. "What happened to the crystal?" he blurted out.

The Goblin King shook his head, putting a finger to his own lips. Slowly, the dove began to rouse, stretching its wings. Jareth rested his elbow on the throne, long fingers pressed against his temple.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" he asked, voice soft. "Such a precious, delicate creature. It would be so easy," and his voice held a heat that made Brian start in surprise, "to crush it here, in my hand."

There was a look in the Goblin King's eye -- some darkness, some kind of fascination -- that made Brian eerily certain Jareth was not just thinking about the bird.

"But that is not what I want. No," Jareth continued, "Let her have her illusion -- of safety, of certainty. But *I* am the one in control. And if I choose --"

He threw a look at Brian, and with blinding speed hurled the tiny creature into the air.

"Wait," Brian spoke without thinking, "It'll hit the ceiling!"

The bird tumbled upwards, trying desperately to orient itself and fly straight before barreling into the sloping stone. But the chamber was simply too low. The fledgling barely had time to open its wings when its feathers grazed stone --

-- and the bird shattered like glass. It burst into a shower of light and the air blazed, catching fire to dust motes in a glittering swirl that streamed downward, thickening, convalescing, as if the light were folding inward on itself --

-- and a crystal dropped silently back into the Goblin King's gloved hand. He smiled at Brian, a mocking twist to his lips, and inclined his head as if motioning for the boy to look into it. Brian leaned forward to catch the reflection within.

It was a girl. He could see her long hair as she twisted her head around, obviously searching for something. He could just make out her pale profile, see the expression in her eloquent dark eyes.

Brian had to force past the sudden thickness of his throat in order to speak. "It's Sarah," he said,

voice low. "What is she..?" And with horror, he realized he already knew the answer. "It wasn't a childhood fantasy, was it? She actually knew you."

"Oh, yes," the Goblin King murmured, his gaze still locked on that delicate face. "There was a time when I would have given her anything." He leaned back into his throne, looking almost regretful. "But no longer. Now," he said, "I've decided to take everything. Starting with you."

Brian was suddenly besieged by goblins on all sides. They threw ropes over him, beat at him with their tiny fists. Jareth watched them subdue the boy easily, resting his chin in his hand.

"Really," he continued, as if Brian were not damning the Goblin King at the top of his lungs, "I should have played it this way from the start."

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Sarah was hopelessly lost.

Hands on her hips, she surveyed the scene before her. Sandy stone walls every way she looked, the bricks cut in erratic patterns and covered in a web of grey-brown moss. Here and there tired-looking ivy draped itself over the walls, or scraggly branches sprouted from the stone to catch at her clothes as she walked by. The sky was overcast, streaked with smoldering dark clouds.

Whirling, she made a sound of pure vexation. Three years ago, she'd been so cocky as to think she was clever enough to solve this maze in a matter of minutes. Three years ago, she'd been sure in her knowledge that the heroine always wins, and she was *definitely* the heroine of this tale.

Three years ago, she hadn't known the damn thing shifted from moment to moment.

Somewhere, he is just watching me rot. Laughing. There was no question to who "he" was, and Sarah seethed. *Bastard.*

She strode angrily down one of the pathways, yanking her shirt free of the grasping branches. *I'll just have to walk around until I find the Guards*, she thought. *That's the way it happened last time -- I just wander aimlessly for a bit and they pop up out of nowhere. They have to turn up sometime...*

Don't they?

She stopped in her tracks. *They don't have to*, she thought with growing dread. *He could just keep switching the maze around, keeping them out of my reach...* With a tiny scream of frustration, she stamped her foot. *This is so stupid!*

She began to walk along the maze again, brooding. *There must be some other way -- some way to speed up the process.* Brow furrowing, she crossed her arms over her stomach as she walked, stopping as she came into a fork in the pathway. At her right stood a tall, smooth pillar. Its surface was scattered with brown, gnarled hands, each pointing her in a different direction.

"Fat lot of help you are," she muttered, glaring at the hands. Then her expression lightened. "I wonder..."

Grinning, Sarah stretched and grabbed one of the hands far above her head. She shuddered inwardly at the feel of the dry, chalky skin, but grimly help on. Swinging herself up, she lightly placed a foot on a hand right at her waist level. *If I can climb up and walk along the walls, I can find the Guards in no time!*

The hand beneath her foot twisted, and yet another gave her wrist a sharp slap. Shocked, she let

go with a yelp tumbled down to the ground. Sitting squarely on the stone tiles and gaping like a fish, she watched as one of the hands waved an admonishing finger in her face. Unexpectedly, she smiled a little.

"Can't blame a girl for trying," she said, and picked herself up off the ground with as much dignity as she could muster. She brushed the dirt off her jeans with a sigh. "Well, that's one good idea that didn't work. Now what?"

Hearing a small scraping noise, she turned. To Sarah's amazement, one of the stone tiles lifted right up from the pathway. As she watched the tiniest, most disagreeable-looking manling she'd even seen scuttled out from under it, clutching something greedily to his chest. She crouched to get a better look.

"I don't believe it," she said. He heard her, and turned -- definitely an ugly little creature, bowlegged and balding. He sneered at her.

"Sod orf!"

Sarah started.

"That's not very nice," she said, injured. "What did I ever do to you?"

His eyes bulged with indignation. "Remember yous!" he croaked. "Was a-writin' on the fragging walk-walk!"

Sarah blinked. "Oh," she said lamely. "With my lipstick. I suppose I was. Was that you, then, changing my marks around?"

"Eerrrghhhh."

She blinked again. "I'll take that as a yes." She leaned in closer, curiosity getting the better of her. "What have you got there?"

He tried to bluster, but it was obvious he was horribly proud of himself. With a grumble that managed to quite clearly convey the sentiment "even though you don't deserve it I'm a forgiving soul," he held them out just far enough for her to see: a pair of gold-rimmed, half-moon spectacles.

"Now where did you get something like that?" murmured Sarah.

And there was a horrible growling scream, as if the hounds of hell were loosed and angry.

With a frantic "yerp!" the tiny goblin threw the spectacles into the air, diving back into the hole he had emerged from. Instinctively, Sarah reached out and caught them. The moment her skin came into contact with the smooth glass, a terrifying apparition bounded up onto the wall in front of her.

It was absolutely hideous. Scabby, wrinkled skin covered a bulbous body and skeleton-like limbs, all ending in long, curving claws that shone like razors in the dim sunlight. Its huge head wobbled on a spindly neck, completely hairless and draped flopping, bat-like ears. Its red eyes bulged out from a craggy face, a rumbling growl coming from a huge mouth filled with broken, yellowed teeth.

Sarah screamed, falling back against the wall behind her.

The creature stared at her, and its growling abruptly ceased. "Oh," it said in quite a mild voice, "you've got them. Thank you."

Sarah watched in terror as it awkwardly climbed down from the wall-top. It half-jumped, half-scrambled over the sandy stones. Once on the ground again it brushed itself off fastidiously. It folded its long arms -- which, Sarah could see, would otherwise have trailed on the ground due to its stubby legs -- placidly over its enormous paunch and waddled over to where she was still cowering in fear.

"Much obliged to you," it continued in that well-mannered tone. "It's not that I really mind the little rascals, you see. Well, not that much. But I cannot do my research without my reading glasses, and their little games can become very tiring."

Sarah gaped at him. "What *are* you?"

He squinted at her. "That is a very rude question, young lady. I might ask the same of you."

"I'm a human being -- um, Sarah Williams," she replied, dazed. "And I've never seen anything like you before, which is why I asked." She gulped. "I'm sorry if it was rude."

This seemed to agitate the creature. "Sarah Williams?" it asked, further wrinkling its creased and scabbed forehead. "The girl who solved the Labyrinth?"

"I... I suppose so..." she said weakly, and then shook her head to clear it. "What I mean is, yes I am, but who are you? And why --" she looked down at her prize, "Why do you need reading glasses?"

"To read," he grumped. "I thought that would be obvious. If you please," holding out a razor-clawed hand. Sarah looked askance at it. The creature sighed hugely. "Just dangle them over," he growled. "I will grab at them. And do not worry yourself about being sliced. I have much experience with these things, as I have been this way for longer than you have been alive."

Without thinking she made as if to hand them over, and then paused. A spark of an idea gleamed in Sarah's eye. "You've been in the Labyrinth for longer than twenty years?"

The creature harrumphed. "Longer than that, little girl. My *glasses*, please."

Sarah grinned triumphantly and clutched the glasses to her chest, shaking her head. "Nope. Not unless you can tell me how to get to the hedge mazes, and quickly."

For a long moment those bulging red eyes measured her, and Sarah was painfully aware of how sharp those claws were, how impressive those huge teeth. Then the creature seemed to shrug, and turned away.

"Follow me, then."

~~~~~

She followed him in silence, watching his squat form nimbly navigate the twisting passages of the Labyrinth. Every now and again they would come to a dead end, but he would simply mutter in indignation and turn back around to try again.

"Are you a gnome?" Sarah finally ventured, picking her way over fallen branches.

"Do I *look* like a gnome?"

"I don't know," Sarah remarked candidly. "I've never seen one before. You're not very tall, so I assumed you might be something like that."

He threw a glare at her over his shoulder, then resumed his studious unraveling of the twists and turns around them. "I," he said, "am most definitely not a gnome. Gnomes are nasty, spiteful things. Little creatures with little minds."

"Are you a goblin, then?"

He snorted. "The very idea," he muttered under his breath.

"Well," and Sarah paused to untangle her hair from a friendly tendril, "What are you?"

"I told you before, young lady, that is a very rude question."

Sarah sighed, giving up. She then frowned, remembering. "How did you recognize my name?"

"Oho," he chuckled, rather unpleasantly. "You are quite famous in these parts. Were you not aware?"

Sarah felt a little cold with his words. "No."

"Ah, well, don't fuss yourself about it. Aha: got it."

Sarah followed him around the corner and stared. She backtracked, looking around to the opposite side of the wall.

"It can't lead to anything," she said, motioning toward the brightly decorated door the creature had found. "There's no space for a room, or even a passageway."

"Three years must do wonders for one's sense of logic, I see." He gave a disproving snort and, throwing the door open wide, disappeared inside. "Come and look, if you're of a mind," he called back.

Cautiously she walked up to the doorway, and gasped.

It was a huge chamber, filled with workbenches and tables lined with bubbling beakers, magnifying glasses, and other odd tools. Glass aquariums perched in every corner, some of them containing small, sleeping creatures, others with plant cuttings or even -- as she could pick up a whiff from across the room -- even swamp water from the Bog of Eternal Stench. And the walls were lined with bookcases, bookcases that were overflowing with parchments and huge bound volumes and loose sheets of paper that fluttered with the draft as the door slammed shut behind her.

"What is all this?" she asked in wonderment.

"My laboratory," came the answer, behind her. She turned to see him standing in a different doorway, one that led to a winding staircase. "Do you like it?"

"It's amazing!" she replied, delighted. "Where did you get all of it?"

"Mostly collected it on my own," he replied, waddling out of the doorway into the main chamber. "Course, sometimes it was more convenient to send others. In the case of the Bog water, for example. I was much happier to let someone else do the exploration."

"Can I look around?"

"Suit yourself," he replied, obviously pleased. "Just don't touch anything."

Sarah wandered around the edges of the room, peeking into the glass containers and sniffing at the

burbling concoctions. But what really fascinated her was the wealth of books in the wall-to-ceiling shelves surrounding the room. "Where did you get all these?"

"The Castle's library. I used to be the Librarian."

Sarah looked at him, eyes wide. "The Castle has a library?"

"Oh, yes. Quite an extensive one. Very impressive. I was extremely pleased with my post."

"Why did you leave, then?"

He paused in the act of feeding one of his creatures, a fluffy orange insect that cried piteously in response. Hastily he set the food down in the aquarium, dexterous despite his long, knife-like claws. "I didn't," he replied gruffly. "Not truly. I'm only on sabbatical."

"Oh." Sarah watched as he moved around the room, adding this and testing that. "Did the work wear you out?"

He grunted. "On the contrary. I moved out in order to find a proper work environment. The atmosphere in that place was *distinctly* uncomfortable after --" He caught himself, grunting. "Well. Yes. I've been gone for several years now," his expression mournful, "and I don't dare to imagine the condition those horrible goblins have reduced it to. They've probably used the books to build forts, or obstacle races..."

His expression of dismay was so comical that Sarah had to giggle, despite whole-hearted sympathy. Toby had often ransacked her library for his own amusement. Grinning at the memory, she turned her attention back to the overflowing shelves.

"So this isn't all of them?"

"Oh, no. Hardly a fraction."

She let her eyes roam over the expanse of books. "There must be thousands, then."

"Hundreds of thousands," the creature sniffed. "Librarian was no paltry post, let me tell you. Even if most of them were living records."

Sarah turned. "What do you mean, 'living records'?"

"I mean what I mean." He snorted. "Unlike anyone else around here, which can be an advantage. Here." He plodded over to a podium where a thick book lay open, its pages covered in neat script. He motioned her over. "Turn to the last bit."

She stepped up the podium as if expecting the book to leap up and nip her fingers. Gingerly she rifled through the pages, noting dimly how smooth and white the parchment was. The writing was done by hand -- a perfect copperplate script that seemed almost generic in its easy elegance. She finally reached the end, and stared. The words were writing themselves -- appearing on the page like bubbles slowly rising to the surface of a serene lake.

"That's incredible," she breathed, watching the words appear without actually reading them.

"Hmph," she heard from behind. "The mountain of paperwork it takes to inventory them properly -- *that's* incredible."

"What are they?" she asked, still entranced.

"They are the ongoing records of the lives of every inhabitant in the Labyrinth. That's why there's so many -- can you imagine? Every Goblin, every measly fairy, even worms; every one has their own volume with their entire life contained within." His voice was muffled as he called out to her. "Young lady, may I *please* have my reading glasses back? As pleasant as it is to entertain a learned person like yourself, I really must make some important notes in my research right away. I will keep my promise of aid, have no fear."

Feeling a little guilty at forgetting, Sarah dug the spectacles out of her back pocket, attempting to wipe them clean of grime on her shirt before handing them over.

He managed to snatch at them without even grazing her with his claws, even though he did sniff critically at their condition. Muttering, he slipped them on and blinked at her.

"Well?" he asked, voice crabby. "What's so amusing?"

Sarah shook her head, still giggling helplessly. The sight of such a terrible, fearsome monster looking owlishly at her through half-moon specs was just too much. She managed to swallow her laughter, trying desperately not to offend her host. "What's your research on?" she asked, lips twitching.

He grinned nastily at her. "You, in fact. Which is why it was a very good idea I left the Castle when I did. Bad memories and all that."

Sarah watched as he moved over to another podium, scribbling notes in a large blank book. "Why would you want to research *me*?"

"Hmph. Not you *exactly*." He dipped his feathered quill into an inkwell. "It's a comprehensive history of the Labyrinth itself. Your own escapade was so recent, however, that I skipped ahead in order to provide the most accurate account possible." He tilted his bulbous head to one side, eyeing his work. "Not that it mattered, much," he continued. "You'd be amazed how very little history a place like the Labyrinth accumulates. Your coming was the first interesting thing to happen around here in ages."

"Why do you want to write a history of the Labyrinth?" Sarah asked as she walked around the room, running a finger over the spines of books she passed.

"Knowledge is the true fruit of man's eternal struggle," he replied pompously. "The pursuit of such is the only noble ambition in life."

Sarah stopped. "You were human?"

He was suddenly very absorbed in his work. "Whatever gave you that impression?"

"You said, 'man's eternal struggle' -- and no one here talks about themselves as if they were human." She stared at him, open-mouthed. "You were human, weren't you?"

He sighed, and he suddenly looked very, very tired. "It was a very long time ago," he admitted. "But yes -- I was once a human mortal, like yourself."

"What happened?"

He shrugged. "I encountered the Labyrinth. Oh, it doesn't matter how," waving away her unasked question, "only that I found myself here, and I discovered quite quickly that I didn't want to leave. To you, young lady, the Labyrinth may seem like an enemy to be conquered. To others, it is an elegant enigma to be studied and revered." He fixed his glasses more firmly on his craggy nose, glaring at her over the gold rims. "My present form, such as it is, is the effect of dwelling too long

in the Labyrinth itself. It tends to shape the external to match the internal nature, or to compliment it. I am -- or was -- a scholarly man. I *appear* to be a barbarous beast. But anything," he concluded, a little bitterly, "is worth the opportunities I have gained."

*Countless come of their own free will*, Jareth whispered in Sarah's mind, *lured by the promise of their dreams fulfilled*. She sighed, hating to acknowledge he had spoken the truth.

"I'm sorry," she said, feeling awkward. "I... I don't even know your name."

"Name?" He returned to his work, scribbling with a wrinkled nose. "Haven't got one."

"*What?*"

"Oh, I suppose I had at one time," he said dismissively. "Everyone does. I simply forgot mine, after the years... None of the goblins are great conversationalists. Such things happen, when you have no one but yourself for company."

"That's horrible!" Sarah cried.

He sniffed. "Not in the least. I'm really much better off without a name. Useless things. Always lying about, getting in the way. Restrictive." He gave another dismissive sniff.

"Well," Sarah said slowly, "if you're going to help me, I can hardly walk around going "hey, you" every minute... Are you sure there isn't anything you'd like to be called?"

"I told you," he said, irritated, "I'm much better off without one." There was an uncomfortable silence, and Sarah wondered if she'd managed to truly offend him. "You may choose one for me, if you insist," the creature added. His manner was offhand, but one of his bat-like ears pricked up, as if interested.

"Alright," Sarah said. "A name." Distracted, she began to tap a fingernail on the spines of the books beside her. She started, her face lighting up. "Chaucer!"

"Who?" the creature growled, but the other ear gave a twitch.

"Geoffrey Chaucer," Sarah continued, grinning. "He's a famous medieval author. He wrote about people, this huge book full -- The Knight's Tale, The Cook's Tale..." She gestured toward the living record he had shown her before. "It's perfect!"

"Hmph," went the newly-dubbed Chaucer. "It'll do, I suppose. If you insist." But he had a pleased look on his face as he continued his scribbling. "Just a moment, now, and then we'll see about getting you on your way."

Still smiling widely, Sarah continued to explore the huge chamber, hands tucked carefully behind her back so as not to disturb anything. She stopped as a thought occurred to her. "The records," she said, "what happens to the, um, originator if the book is damaged?"

Chaucer gave another snort. "I'd like to see someone try," he muttered. Without looking up, he snagged a volume and held it over the open candle flame resting beside him. The flame parted easily around the leather binding, continuing to burn cheerfully. "Completely indestructible."

"Even the parchment?"

"Even that."

She gave him a suspicious look. "And your history of the Labyrinth -- you read all the records,

didn't you, in order to learn about it?"

"Of course." He shot her a look over his glasses. "Oh, don't look so appalled. How else could I have known so much about you?"

"It just seems like a violation of pri--" Sarah froze, her voice trailing away. There was a icy feeling in her gut. Something a little too close to fear. "What are you saying?"

"Unpleasant feeling, isn't it? Knowing you're an "open book" to others?" He sniggered at his own joke. "Not so incredible now, is it?"

Sarah reached for a stool and sat down heavily. "Why do I have a record?"

"You inhabited the Labyrinth at one time, did you not? So there's a record of your existence. It stopped when you left, but I'm sure it picked right back up again the minute you stepped back inside these walls. Here," as he jumped nimbly off his stool, waddling over to a smaller bookcase, tucked into a corner. The volumes inside were behind glass, and he opened the door carefully to make sure it is unscratched by his razor claws. His eyes scanned the books as he muttered: "*Williams, Sarah*, should be right here between *Williama: A Goblin*, and -- hmmm." He frowned, leaning away from the case. "Not here. I must have neglected returning it to the case last night. Wait here like a good little girl, I'll be back in a minute."

He made his way over to the doorway on the other side of the room to climb the staircase that probably led to his study. Sarah watched him leave, and a minute later she turned her attention back to the smaller bookcase. It inspired a kind of horrified curiosity in her, now that she was no longer removed from the process... what other lives had he stored here? What secrets were contained in those drably bound volumes? She leaned in closer, eyes skimming the spines:

*Heawook: A Firey*

*Snorth: Goblin Guard*

*Max: Cannonball*

And then one leapt into her line of sight, a title of only a single word --

*Jareth*

## Tears and Fear

Once upon a time there was a castle. No... A fortress -- with smooth, sheer walls that rose seamlessly from sandy rock as if they had been carved from it. On one side it was protected by a city, on the other by a dark, deep lake filled with insidious terrors.

The castle-that-was-a-fortress had high, far-reaching turrets. In these turrets were windows, and in one of these windows was a man. No... A prince (or a King) -- with lace cuffs spilling over elegant wrists and wicked joy in his eyes. He cast an imperious gaze over the land, *his* land, lying before him as far as any eye could see.

Once upon a time, the man-who-was-a-prince (or a King) had a hatred. No... a passion -- a dark desire, a longing he could not explain even to himself. And so, secretly terrified by this unexpected weakness, he spun a cage of lies and deception for a girl with long, dark hair and proud eyes. All that was needed was for her to take the bait.

And, after years of waiting, she did.

---

*Jareth*

It was such a simple thing, a brief name in careful script, written neatly along the spine of a slim book. But the past half-hour had taught her it was much more than that. That it might, in fact, hold the answers she had always craved.

And that wasn't all. Sarah's eyes widened as she realized it was but one of many volumes, placed side-by-side and all bearing the Goblin King's name in that elegant hand. It was clear these were only a selection of the entire set, as the volume numbers on the spines leaped all over, haphazardly -- from fifty-three to ninety one, then four to ten, and so on...

*How long has he lived?* thought Sarah in wonder. *How much has he done?*

The highest volume was two hundred and nine, and she couldn't even know if that was the latest of the series, or simply the last that was critical to Chaucer's research.

*There is one way to find out...*

Her hand was reaching for the book before she even finished the thought. It trembled, and Sarah realized she was shaking all over as she stretched to grasp it --

Only to find her hand blocked by outspread razor-edged claws.

"Don't," Chaucer said.

"Why not?" Sarah asked, shaken.

"Because, of all people, I can think of no one else he would least appreciate reading his records. As I'm sure you suspect."

Sarah lowered her outstretched hand reluctantly. "It's only a book."



Chaucer placed another book inside the case -- probably her own record that he had gone to fetch -- and slammed the glass doors shut, not bothering to be as careful as before. "Nothing is *only* what it is!" he barked. "Especially here!" But his relief that she had backed down was apparent. Still grumbling, he produced a lock from somewhere and snapped it over the door handles. "There," he said meanly. "Now let's see you try it."

She stood thoughtfully for a moment, gazing at the case. "I'm surprised he let you have it."

Chaucer gave a sniff. "He might be an... unscrupulous personage, but he's not stupid. It's too much to ask of a person, having them keep their own record."

"Where's yours then?" Sarah asked tartly.

"Jareth's got it," he returned. "Somewhere. He didn't tell me where, I didn't ask. It's better that way."

"But you were going to show me mine," Sarah kept on. "I don't understand -- where's the harm?"

"Oh, seeing your own record for a moment or two won't do any irreparable damage," he said, dismissing the notion with a wave of his hand. "But one shouldn't *keep* one's living record because... well, because..."

"Yes?"

"It's the rules," Chaucer ended peevishly. "Rules you should *respect*," he growled. His voice rose as he continued, becoming louder and louder with his growing agitation. "I can't expect you, of all people, to understand this, but the Labyrinth is a highly unstable environment! It is perched," glaring at her, "precariously, ever so precariously, between fantasy and reality! The slightest breath would send it to pieces!" he roared. "The *rules* are what keep that from happening!"

Sarah gave a small sigh, hooking her thumbs into the pockets of her jeans. "Could have fooled me."

"I think it would be very easy to do so!"

"But listen," she said. "I didn't get through the Labyrinth by playing fair! I tricked, I coaxed, I bribed -- do you call that playing by the rules?"

He had resumed working while she talked, hunched over his book. "Hmph. It all depends, you see, on who is playing the game. The rules change accordingly."

Her mouth dropped open. "But that doesn't even make any sense," she protested.

"Of course it does," not looking up from his writing. "The Labyrinth is not about which passageway you choose, or which door you walk through. It is all about how you get there."

Sarah rolled her eyes, turning her attention elsewhere. "I'm sure."

Chaucer sniffed, giving her a sharp look over his spectacles. "What a silly girl. I don't think you were changed at all by your last encounter with the Labyrinth."

Sarah turned to look him in the eye. "The Labyrinth doesn't change people," she said, soft but stubborn. "It can't. It can only alter itself. It shows others their mistakes, and their dreams, but that's all. People change themselves. If they choose." Her expression stilled, and she when she spoke her voice held something like sadness. "That was the one real thing I learned from it."

Chaucer blinked at her, surprised. With a sense of finality, he closed his book. "Well," he said, in a milder tone. "I suppose there might be hope for you, after all." He trundled off in the direction of the stairway.

"Where are you going?"

"You want to get to the next layer of the Labyrinth, don't you?" he called over his shoulder. "Follow me, then."

She followed him up the winding staircase. "You do know," she said conversationally, "that this place is a spatial impossibility?"

"Didn't we cover that?" never pausing in his ascent.

Sarah grinned. "Yup," she said to herself. "I just forgot how much it takes to get used to this place."

"Well then, do not tarry in re-acquainting yourself!" Chaucer's voice boomed and echoed within the stone tower, and Sarah started. Getting a better grip on the carved railing, she sprinted up the steps as fast as her legs could take her.

The wooden stairs led to a long corridor lit by hanging lamps that burned with cold, pale light. Through the flickering shadows she could just make out Chaucer's monstrous form, waiting for her. She sprinted to catch up.

"What?" she panted, as he seemed to have no intention of moving from the spot. "What's wrong?"

"Wrong?" Chaucer lifted his eyebrows. "Nothing's wrong. We're here."

Sarah looked around. "But... this is still your house."

He smiled, baring yellowed tusks. He pointed with one clawed finger to the wall on their right, where a huge painting hung. It was truly an incredible work of art -- life-sized and wonderfully proportioned. It was, in fact, a painting of hedges, intrinsically detailed. She could pick out the individual leaves, almost see them rustling in the soft wind...

With a jolt, Sarah realized she was looking at a painting of the hedge maze, with its high barriers of briars. And it was *moving* -- not obtrusively, but just enough for the viewer to realize that this was no ordinary oil painting. It was alive.

"Don't tell me," she said. "I just walk into it and "Voila!," right?"

"Exactly," Chaucer replied, looking enormously pleased with himself. "Isn't that convenient? The one thing you ask of me, and it's so terribly easy for me to give."

Sarah shook her head, grinning. "Where did you get a thing like this, anyway?"

"From Jareth, in fact. The rest of the Labyrinth is terribly easy to navigate for one such as myself, who has studied all its records and knows about most of its tricks. It's only getting to the second level that is a problem -- the Alph, Ralph, and company once became sulky over some chance remark I made and refused to show themselves for over a week. Jareth decided to provide insurance that such a delay would never again occur."

"He made this?" Sarah asked in disbelief.

"I've heard rumors of a portrait hall in the Castle -- very off limits, you understand, but word gets

around. Apparently he has an entire collection of such useful paintings, though I don't know whether or not he created them himself."

Sarah paused. "If *he* gave it to you, I don't know if I should --"

"Oh, don't be a ninny," Chaucer snapped. "It belongs to me, now, and you are allowed to take full advantage of my personal property. Go on, now." He made shooing motions.

Taking a big breath, Sarah squeezed her eyes shut, stepped forward... and opened them with a smile of pleasure, feeling a pleasant breeze and warm sunlight. She was in the hedge mazes, the familiar greenery and stone workings surrounding her on every side.

"Very convenient, I must say," came a voice behind her, and she jumped. There was Chaucer, beaming at her. "Oh," he chuckled, "Did I surprise you? My apologies. You see," he continued without waiting for her answer, "Since it was so terribly easy to grant your request, I thought to myself, what's the harm in helping her out a little more?"

"What do you want to help me with?" she asked, a little wary.

"Remember those records, my reading of which upset you so terribly? Well, yours was not the only volume I studied. I," he winked at her, "have knowledge of a certain acquaintance of yours. If you'll follow me..."

Bemused, Sarah watched as he made his way down one of the green passages. She followed.

They rounded the corner together, and Sarah gasped delight. There, bending over to prune the branches of an overgrown doorway, stood a familiar figure dressed in plain breeches and a leather jerkin, his diminutive form appearing even smaller as he hunched down to do his work.

"Hogle!"

Hogle started as if stung, then spun around. For the briefest of moments, Sarah thought she saw something in his eyes -- a flicker of happiness, of surprise? But it dimmed quickly, leaving his face blank and unimpressed.

"Oh," he growled. "It's you."

Sarah blinked. This was in no way the welcome she had expected. "Hogle?" she asked, now tentative. "It's me. Sarah."

"I know who you are." He turned back to the hedge, viciously clipping a few stray leaves.

"I..." her voice died, along with her excitement. "I thought you'd be happy I came back."

"Well, shows how much you know, don't it?" he said. "Now, if you'll *excuse* me." He marched off, clearly dismissing her.

Sarah turned back to Chaucer. "I don't know what's going on," she said. "He was never like this before -- well, he was, but that changed! And now..." She looked back at the doorway that Hogle had stepped into. "Should I go after him?"

"Hmmm." Chaucer frowned. "Let me see what I can get out of him," marching through the opening in the hedges.

"Wait!" Sarah called after, following. And stopped.

It was a riotous blaze of color, spilling over the tan cobblestones and burning fiercely against the thick hedge-briars. A transplanted sunset -- smoldering oranges and yellows, shocking pinks, and a landscape of red that ranged from bright blood to deep, dark wines. Here and there a clear, shining, almost translucent white blossom would flicker; drops of purity lost in a sea of glorious passions.

It was a garden of roses on fire.

"Oh, my," Sarah whispered to herself. "Are they real?"

"As real as anything in this place," Chaucer grumped. "I'll go talk to your Hog-friend."

Sarah bit her lip, watching him waddle off behind one of the tangled green hedges. Part of her wanted to rush off with him so she could grab Hogle by the shoulders and shake some sense into him, demand to know what was wrong. But she knew from experience that tactic didn't work as well in practice as it did in theory. The other part of her knew it was best to stay put and sit still.

Besides, she wanted to see the roses.

With a last glance in the direction that Chaucer had disappeared, she walked slowly toward the unusual flowers. A hand, cautiously held out, determined that they gave off no perceptible heat, and she crept even close to kneel beside them. They were breathtaking upon closer inspection -- each petal encased in a pure, steady flame that danced at her soft sigh of wonder. In each rose's center was a glowing ember of color. When a soft breeze wandered around the surrounding hedges, the rose-flames devoured each other, briefly blossoming into whirlwinds of frenzied sparks.

Not even daring to breathe, Sarah reached out toward the impossible roses. Heart beating fast, she stretched her fingers out to them, hesitant... but the flames parted around them as smoothly as water. It felt, in fact, like a gentle tickling. She chuckled, playfully trying to pinch the fire between her fingertips. Shaking her head at her own foolishness, she drew her hand away and scrubbed it against the leg of her jeans, trying to rid it of the remembered sensation.

Then, even more cautiously, she reached to pluck one from its bed. The rose was thornless. Its sunset-pink flame flared for moment when its stem left the soil, then gently died.

Sarah uttered an involuntary sound of disappointment. But no -- it wasn't quite dead. At the heart of the blossom the ember flickered with false fire.

She brought the rose close to her face, inhaling its unique scent. She frowned -- it was so strange, not really like a rose at all. Sweeter, and more exotic, yet with a bitterness that caught in the back of the throat...

*The applause was thunderous. It rolled over the footlights like warm waves of love, bathing the smiling, open faces on stage.*

*A lone figure stepped free from the row of actors -- a young woman in late Victorian clothing, dark hair caught up in an elegant style. Sarah Williams paused at the edge of the stage to drop a deep, practiced curtsy. The applause swelled, was pierced with loud whistles and calls of "Bravo, bravo!" The excitement on her face bloomed into pure joy as she fell back into line, watching as the leads took their own bows.*

*It was her first professional New York performance. She didn't have the main role, of course, that was still years in coming -- but it was a good part, one she could be proud of. She had done well, really well -- people would remember her later, start to mention her name when auditions rolled*

around.

*But that wasn't what was going through her mind. Not right now, as she stood dazzled by the bright lights and surrounded a sea of adoration and the feel of her fellow actors' hands clasped in her own. Right now, she was simply happy.*

*Later, in the privacy of her own cramped dressing room, she breathed a sigh of mixed relief and sorrow. Opening night was over, with all its terror and anticipation. It didn't mean the other nights would be any easier or any less exciting, but the first night had a kind of wonderful, horrible tension that could never be replicated.*

*Sarah was undoing her hair, carefully laying the pins that held it in place on her dressing table, when there was a knock at the door.*

*"Come in!" she called.*

*With a wide grin, her father opened the door. "Hi, Sarah," he said. "You were great tonight. We really loved it." Opening the door wider, he stepped inside, holding the hand of Linda Williams.*

*His wife.*

*"Hey, Mom." Sarah stood, butterflies in her stomach. She was suddenly swamped with a terrible nervousness, even worse than that inspired by the thought of upcoming press reviews in tomorrow's papers. She faced her mother, Tony-winner and a still-celebrated name of the New York stage. "What did you think?"*

*Linda Williams pressed her lips together, eyes shining with tears. Wordlessly, she held open her arms -- and Sarah went to them, resting her head on her mother's shoulder and wrapping her arms around her mother's waist as if she were two years old. Her mother's arms went around her.*

*"Oh, my baby," Linda Williams whispered into her daughter's masses of dark hair, "You were very, very good. My little girl." The tears slipped from her eyes, dropping onto Sarah's own cheeks. "I am so proud of you."*

*Sarah felt the weight on her father's hand on her shoulder as he refrained from intruding on this moment, this special understanding between mother and daughter. He squeezed her shoulder, and then stepped quietly outside to let them be alone.*

*"Thank you for coming, Mom," she whispered into the material of her mother's expensive jacket, tears in her own voice. "Thank you so much. I always wanted this: you to be here when this happened for me."*

*Her mother hugged her even tighter. "Miss the chance of seeing my beautiful girl on the New York stage? Never," she laughed, her voice cracking with emotion. "You made me so happy tonight, Sarah..." Her hand stroked her daughter's head, soothed her daughter's over-excited tears. "You have no idea."*

*"I love you."*

*Sarah started. She gazed blankly at the rose in her hand, now shriveled and brown. She touched her cheeks and found tears there.*

*"Was... was I dreaming?" she asked. "I don't remember."*

*She looked back at the garden of flaming roses. She wanted to remember. She wanted to define*

that unknown scent they carried. She wanted...

She reached for another.

Her tears slipped from her eyes still, unnoticed. They fell silently to the cobblestones beneath her, darkening their sandy surface.

Sarah failed to notice that, wherever they fell, the stone cracked -- very small fractures. She failed to notice that from each of these minuscule cracks grew, faster than thought, a wiry vine. Each vine was tough, brown, and bore long, slender thorns like miniature daggers. She even failed to notice as each thorn on each vine twisted of its own accord, piercing her clothing and driving themselves deeply, painlessly into her skin. She failed to notice.

She reached for another rose.

---

Brian again woke up in a dark place, and began to feel that life was deeply unfair.

With a moan he lifted his head up off the floor -- stone again, yet another sign Fate was out to get him -- and struggled to sit up. Every muscle ached, and even his bones felt fragile. And there was a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach, like he'd experience a very rude awakening of some kind, and his subconscious knew he wasn't going to enjoy remembering --

*Oh. Yeah.*

With amazing effort, he used his arms to drag his weary body over to lean against the rock behind him. It was a jagged, unpolished surface; a wall of some kind? Who knew. Who cared.

Light flared in the corner of his eye, and he turned his head. Jareth stood in one corner next to a (previously nonexistent) torch, which gave off a wavering, smoky light. The Goblin King was at ease as he leaned against the stone wall, in crushed velvet boots the color of a storm and a half-cape lined with deep purple silk. The lace on his shirt spilled from his throat in a delicate waterfall, half-hiding a gleaming pendant.

"Hello, there." Jareth tilted his head to one side, examining his new acquisition. "I wanted to see how you were enjoying your stay."

"Where the hell am I?" Brian slurred.

"In an oubliette beneath my castle." Jareth ran an elegant finger down the wall and then brought it to his face, rubbing his fingertips together. "Really must have them clean down here more often," he murmured.

"What the hell is an oubliette?"

"It's French. Roughly translated, it means 'a little place of forgetting.'" Jareth walked over to Brian and then knelt close to his side. "It's a place to put things you don't want to think about." He flicked a bruise on Brian's cheek, and the boy winced away. "Things that take only a little effort in order to forget."

Eyes still stinging from the light, Brian tried to look around. "Is there any way in or out?"

"Oh, lots, but don't worry your head about it. You won't find any of them."

Brian glared. "You're a dream," he said indistinctly.

Jareth grinned. "Flattery will get you nowhere."

Brian glared even more fiercely. "I mean, you're not *real*."

"I'm not?" Jareth shook his head. "What a pity. And you are, I suppose?"

"Yeah."

"Prove it."

Brian blinked at him. Then: "I don't *have* to," he hissed. "Because I'm gonna wake up soon, and then you'll be gone."

Jareth rested his chin on his hand. "I find it amusing," he said, "that your way of coping with the situation is based totally on denial. Very original. Very effective."

Brian sighed, trying to lean comfortably on the ragged rock behind his bruised back. "Why can't you leave me alone? Please?"

Rising to his feet, Jareth turned and walked a little way away from Brian, seeming to survey the uninteresting surroundings. "I am attempting to discern," he spoke distantly, "what is so very special about you."

"Special?" Brian looked confused. "About me?"

"That would make her decide to risk returning. It would have to be something *very* special."

"Her... You mean Sarah." Brian's head began to clear a little bit. "What do you mean... did you say, 'return?' *That's* where she knew you from? She's been in the Labyrinth before?"

"Yes, to all your terribly insightful questions."

"Wait, I don't --" Brian rested his head in his hands, trying to make it stop hurting. Maybe then he could think straight. "I don't get it. I don't get any of this," he muttered.

"In smaller words, then." Jareth turned on his heel, cape flaring, in order to face his prisoner. "Precious Sarah," sneering, "with her heart of gold, has decided to run through the Labyrinth's gauntlet once more to save your sorry existence. In order to do so, we made a bargain. She promised me something, something very nice, in the event that she fails."

Brian went very still. "What?"

Jareth said nothing, only watched him with a small smile.

"Tell me, you bastard! What did she promise you?"

"Would you care to guess?" Jareth asked. "How much are you worth, Brian-my-boy? To Sarah, that is. What do you think she'd be willing to give up, to save you? *What are you to her?*"

Brian started at the intensity in the Goblin King's voice. He struggled to swallow, mouth dry. "I don't know," he admitted.

Jareth shrugged, relaxed once more. "Neither does she, I suspect."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Dearest Sarah was a little --" Jareth paused, enjoying himself, "hasty in joining our agreement." A wicked smile pulled at his mouth. "If I didn't know better, I would suspect she didn't truly understand what she was promising."

"And what," Brian said slowly, "was that, exactly? Tell me." Then, with supreme effort: "Please."

Jareth laughed. "I'll do better than that. I'll show you." He again knelt down close to his prisoner, the gilded edges of his dark cape kicking up dust and dirt to make Brian sneeze. When he opened his eyes, Jareth was holding up a fragile-looking orb before his eyes.

"Now," Jareth said, "Make a wish."

Colors swirled beneath the crystal surface, slowly coming into focus. Brian squinted, trying to make out the perfect, tiny image inside.

"Are those flowers *burning*?" he asked in disbelief.

Jareth sighed. "She's in one of the hedge gardens. I should have guessed."

"What?"

"Sarah," Jareth said, "has a quaint attachment to one of my gardeners. I have no idea why. Then again," with a sideways look at Brian, "she has a soft spot for menials and fools."

Brian ignored the remark, instead leaning in closer to examine the bauble's vision. "Hey," a thread of uncertainty in his voice, "what's happening to her?"

Jareth turned back to the crystal, and his eyes widened a fraction. "My, my," he whispered to himself. "Little Sarah is playing with fire."

---

The rose was the color of early morning sunshine.

She reached for it eagerly, didn't even flinch as its bright fire died in her hands. Its scent was like exotic spices, like nectar and sweet wine, like...

*Sarah slumped in her seat, yawning behind her hand. Prof. Plude had a tendency pick you out and ask, loudly, if he was boring you, if you weren't careful. Sarah really didn't want to get into a spat with her math professor. Not today.*

*Someone tapped her shoulder, and she looked back to see Nikki grinning at her.*

*"Tired?" the blonde asked with raised eyebrow.*

*"A little," Sarah whispered back, grinning.*

*Nikki shook her head. "Me, too. Maybe we should have gotten to bed earlier."*

*"Are you kidding?" Sarah scoffed. "And miss all the excitement?"*



*"It's just a party, Sarah."*

*"It was a chance to be with my friends," Sarah said. "I would never pass that up for a few hours of sleep."*

*"They're your priorities."*

*"Ladies!" Both whipped their attention to the front, where a man in stereotypical brown jacket with tweed elbow patches was frowning at them. (Prof. Plude really took himself too seriously.)*

*Later they caught up with each other in the hall, giggling together. As usual, they walked out to their next class together -- it wasn't the same class, but it was in the same building. They chatted as they walked. People stopped as they passed, some waving, others actually running over to give hugs or trade the latest gossip. All of them made straight for Sarah.*

*"I swear," Nikki said, slightly irritated, as yet another guy winked at Sarah while she walked by, "you get around! You must be the most popular girl on campus! No, really," Nikki argued as Sarah laughed, "if this we high school, you'd be the freaking homecoming queen."*

*Sarah made a face. "Ugh. I hated those girls."*

*Nikki rolled her eyes. "Well, okay, you're not like that. But you are really well known and liked around here. It's amazing. How do you do it?"*

*Sarah shrugged. "I get involved with a lot of stuff, make sure to talk to all kinds of people. It's not hard."*

*"Jeez, how do you find time to work?"*

*"I don't, often."*

*"Hmph." They walked in silence for a bit. "Aren't you really into theater stuff? I'd think that'd take a huge chunk out of your time."*

*"It used to."*

*"Used to?"*

*"Well, I kinda quit. Not that I dropped the classes or anything, I'm still majoring, but..." Sarah searched for the right words. "I just chose to do other stuff, you know? I wanted to really get out there and meet people. And I did."*

*"Hey, Sarah." Warm arms wrapped around her from behind, and someone placed a playful kiss on her ear. "What are you up to?"*

*"Trying to get to class. On time, Sean," She twisted out of his grasp, but she was smiling. "You know the concept, right? Class? College?"*

*He gave a lazy smile and slouched, sticking his hands deep into his pockets. "I'm familiar with the terms," he admitted. "I find they are grossly overused."*

*"Amen to that," Nikki muttered.*

*"What were you guys discussing so intently when I walked up?" Sean asked.*

*"Nikki was accusing me of having a life."*

*"That's mean," the blonde protested. "I only wanted to know your secret, is all."*

*"Sarah genuinely likes people," Sean said. "She likes to make friends. Believe it or not, it's an unusual trait. Most of us just want to hang around people who make us feel good about ourselves."*

*"What's wrong with that?"*

*"Nothing." Sean shook his head, unruly hair falling into his eyes. "But everyone seems to make Sarah feel good about herself. Isn't that right, Sarah?"*

*Sarah made a point of examining her watch. "Oh, my," she remarked, bored. "And here I thought I didn't have Psych class until Monday. Goody." She gave them both a hard look, shouldering her bag. "You make me sound like some kind of diva."*

*"Sorry, babe." Sean gave her a contrite look. "Didn't mean for it to sound that way. You're just one of those rare people who's easy to love. Now get to class," wrapping her in another bone-crushing hug. "You've got a big heart," he whispered in her ear. "And I, especially, love you for it. Now get." He gave her a gentle push and turned away, walking off in the other direction.*

*"He really likes you," Nikki said, watching him leave.*

*"Yeah," Sarah replied, feeling herself blush a bit. "I know."*

*"But you won't go out with him."*

*Sarah shrugged. "I love Sean," she said easily. "I just don't love him."*

*"Oh, I get it."*

*"I mean it!"*

*"Mmm hmm. Ice Princess."*

*"Nikki!" Sarah protested, watching her friend laugh in the autumn sunshine.*

*"But seriously," Nikki sobered, "you're happy, right? You're not being one of those people who's friends with everybody because they have a warped need for a huge support system?"*

*Sarah shook her head, feeling her curtain of hair swing with the movement. "Nope," she said cheerfully. "Perfectly happy."*

*"Perfectly happy?"*

*"Couldn't be happier."*

*Sarah blinked, vision clearing. The rose in her hand was dying, the stem dry and curling. The limp yellow petals loosened and fell even as she watched.*

*"I do like people," she murmured to a dim memory. "I would love to get out and make tons of friends, but... I made a decision..." She let the rose drop, dashing a few scattered tears from her cheeks. "Stupid thing to be crying over."*

---

Brian watched, sickened, as wiry ropes of thorns wove themselves around Sarah's legs, driving their long needles deep into her flesh.

"What are you doing to her?" he burst out.

"It's not me at all," Jareth replied, gaze locked on Sarah's reflection within the bauble. "It's the roses."

Brian looked with horror at the image of the burning flowers, and the princess caught within their midst. "What the hell is going on?"

"It's a garden of lost dreams," Jareth said. "We all make choices in life, or life makes them for us, which we regret to some extent. Because of those choices we bid farewell to cherished fancies, hopes for the future. We force ourselves to forget and let them go. But the scent of the roses bring those dreams back to us more vividly than ever." His eyes darkened. "And those who linger -- to reminisce, to weep for lost dreams -- become entangled in their own sorrow." His mouth quirked in a mischievous smile. "Oh, dear," he said mildly. "Can our brave heroine come to her senses in time, before those wicked thorns bind her fast to the spot?"

"But she can get out, right?" Brian demanded. "It's not permanent or anything?"

"There are more than a few corpses enriching that soil."

"*Jesus*. You're a monster."

"Everyone needs a hobby."

Brian glared. "If I weren't hurting like a bitch right now I'd --"

"What?" Jareth interrupted, expression bored. "Lay me flat with your brawny strength? I'm quaking in my boots." He returned his gaze to the delicate crystal, silent for a moment. And then, ever so softly: "I wonder what it is she's dreaming."

---

The rose was hot, bleeding red: the color of desire. Intoxicated by the memory of their scent, Sarah's hand reached for another flower -- and paused. On a whim she changed her choice, picking instead one of clear, shining white. The hue of purity. The color of magic.

The bud was only half-opened, its inner petals closed tightly over the glowing ember within. Its soft scent, delicate and sweet, like... like...

*Soft candlelight catching on crystal fragments, gauzy clouds of silk and velvet. Masked revelers dressed in tattered, tawdry finery danced a spell around her, entrapping her with the weave of their movement. Their vicious, leering faces fixed on her every move, tracking her from the corners of their eyes. Like snakes with their prey.*

*She wandered, lost among them. She was searching for something, she knew that. Something so very important... she had to find it, and she didn't have much time...*

*And she saw him.*

*A thin, arrogant mouth with a cruel twist. Pale skin with an ethereal glimmer. Pale hair falling to his shoulders unevenly, falling around his eyes. Cold, fascinating eyes.*

*Was it you I was searching for? she asked him silently.*

*The crowd swallowed him, and she chased the thought of seeing him again through their midst. The heavy, rustling folds of her dress smothered movement, the pearly fabric tugging at her limbs. Even the turn of her head was weighted by the dark, curling masses of her hair. She moved languorously, as if through deep water. As if in a dream.*

*Is this a dream?*

*But the dancers were in her way, moving in incomprehensible patterns across her path, tempting her to wander with tricks and distractions. Their laughter chased her into confusion, their empty stares causing her to retreat in fear. She struggled through them, searching...*

*There.*

*He was a prince in darkness and midnight dusted with glittering stars. She was a princess in a dress the color of dawn, flowers in her hair. They belonged to each other. No questions were asked. He stepped forward to claim her, an arm drawn possessively around her waist. She surrendered to his embrace with the trust of a small child. Even the mockers made way for them, stepping aside to make space for their dance.*

*Firm hands led her across the floor, kept her safe from the hateful, suspicious eyes all around. The material of his coat was soft under her hands, the promises on his lips were soft in her ears. She had never been closer to a fairytale.*

*And then.*

*And then there was the jarring sound of a clock striking, breaking through the song of love. The room spun. There was a terrible sinking feeling in her stomach, and she was suddenly sure that she should not be here -- this was not where she would find what she was looking for. And she had to find it. She had to.*

*The other ringed her, jeering expressions frozen upon their faces like masks. She turned to him, stricken, but there was no comfort to be found. His face was impassive, his eyes distant. He didn't think that she would dare to leave his side.*

*At that moment, Sarah knew she didn't want to. She wanted to dance within the circle of his arms for as long as possible... forever, maybe. Not long at all.*

*And she would be beautiful and special and magical, because he made her so. But most of all, she just wanted to stay with him.*

*So she didn't break away. She didn't wrench herself from his grasp and fight through the mob of surrounding courtiers, leaving him to watch her with a lost look in his eyes. She didn't destroy the spell, destroy her dream.*

*Instead she stepped closer to him, resting her head on his shoulder, against the pricking fabric. She gave a small sigh of contentment, feeling his hand gently smooth her hair.*

*"I love you," she whispered.*

*Strong fingers cupped her chin, forcing her eyes upward. He ran his thumb caressingly against the smooth skin of her cheek, eyes emotionless. Then he laughed -- a rich laugh, deep in his*

*throat. He lowered his head to hers, long strands of his hair tickling her face.*

*"I know," he murmured against her lips, and then he kissed her. Gently at first, then harder, almost bruising her mouth with his cold passion. He pulled her against the line of his body, arms locked behind her back. They kissed, and the world fell down.*

... like a kiss that had never been given.

Sarah stared, numb, at the white rose in her hand. The ember had faded out, but otherwise it was intact, if a little wilted.

"I never wanted that," she said. "I had to save Toby. I couldn't stay. I didn't *want* to!"

*Did I?*

Sarah shook her head, tossing the rose aside. "No," she said. "No more, anyway. I'll... I'll go find Hoggle and Chaucer -- they should have come back by now." In preparation to stand, she looked down.

And screamed.

---

"I ain't pretending to know nuthin'," came the grumble, accompanied by the *snip, snip* of shears. "But I ain't got nuthin' to say to her."

Chaucer looked annoyed, bony arms crossed over his enormous stomach. "Look," he said. "No one is asking you welcome her home like the prodigal, er, daughter, but at least talk to the girl!"

"Dunno why I should," Hoggle muttered, not turning from his work. "I don't see no good reason to."

"Well, aren't you a bit curious as to why she's returned?"

Hoggle shrugged. "'Spose you could tell me that. You two seem to be gettin' along."

Chaucer sniffed. "The young lady's business is her own. She has not chosen to volunteer the information, and I would never presume to press her on the subject."

Hoggle snipped a few unruly briars, morose. "Guess I'll never know."

"Listen," Chaucer snarled. "I know not where this childish behavior stems from, but it is very unbecoming. *Why* are you treating Sarah like this? I know for a fact that you are friends --"

Hoggle whirled. "No we ain't!" he said vehemently. "Friends don't go off and forget about friends! I ain't *got* no friends!" He glared at the open-mouthed Chaucer. "What do you know about it, anyway?"

Chaucer's jaws shut with a snap. "Well," he said, "I had the opportunity to peruse your Library record, so -"

"Them's my personal secrets!" Hoggle roared, outraged. "You got no right!"

"Well, for simple amusement, perhaps not, but in the context of *research* --"

"HOGGLE!"

The shriek pierced the air, filled with pain and fear. Hoggle instantly dropped his tools.

"I'm comin', Sarah!" he shouted, shuffling off in the direction of which it came. After a moment of confusion, Chaucer followed.

---

Sarah sat perfectly still amid the roses, not daring to move a muscle. At the sound of Hoggle's footsteps she slowly turned her pale face in that direction. She began to tremble. Hoggle skidded to a stop as rounded the corner, horrified.

"Sarah!" he bleated

She attempted a wan smile. "At least you're talking to me again." Her legs were covered in dark vines, looping over her knees and thighs as she knelt on the cobblestone. Some had even climbed to wrap around her waist, pulling her shirt tight as they hugged her body. Now thick as ropes, the vines bound her tightly, thorns driven deep into her flesh to pin her to the spot. Her smile faded. "I don't think I can move, Hoggle," she whispered.

"You're a right idiot, you are!" he snarled. With abrupt, jerking movements he waded through the roses between them. "You just had to go pokin' your nose where it didn't belong, didn't you? Couldn't be content to go on your way, oh no. You had to look *me* up, and go sniffing in Jareth's gardens, and generally make a nuisance of yourself." He tugged at one of the vines, gently, but she winced all the same. "Yowch!" as a thorn stung his thumb. He popped it into his mouth. "S'all your own fault," he muttered indistinctly. "Maybe I'll just leave you here to rot like this."

"I know you wouldn't do that," Sarah said.

"I might!"

"It isn't like you, Hoggle. You're a good person."

He glared at her, bushy eyebrows drawn together. "People change."

"You haven't."

"You *have*!" He continued his attempts to pry the thorns out of her skin. Sarah tried to help, but the movement of her arms made muscles jerk against the sharp needles, so she simply sat as still as possible.

"What do you mean?" she asked, trying to see his expression.

"Oh, don't try to fool me, missy. You know what I'm talking about. "If I ever need you, I'll call,"" he mimicked her in a high falsetto. He straightened. "Well, you didn't call, did you? Not for months and months and months! Forgot about us, did you?" he spoke rapidly, and Sarah was astonished to see tears of hurt. "Having too much fun to bother with your old friends in the Labyrinth? Become too grown up, I 'spose," he rumbled. "Become too *independent* to have any need of any of us!"

"Ahem," Chaucer interrupted, as Sarah stared at Hoggle in shock. He held up the gardening shears in a razor-clawed paw. "I went back to fetch these," he said. "I thought they might be of some use."

"Give them here, then," Hoggle said. Chaucer obliged, walking over, and began to speed up the process with his own knife-like claws. Between the two of them they made short work separating the vines from their roots. Chaucer began to work at those still embedded in Sarah's skin, but Hoggle shook his head.

"Grab her arm," he said, doing just that himself. "We gotta get her out of here before pulling those things out. Won't do any good if she starts crying again, from the pain."

They hauled her out of the flowerbed fairly easily, and Sarah gasped as the circulation returned to her legs, setting them all a-tingle. They sat her gently against one of the hedge walls, where she looked up at Hoggle with clear eyes.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I know that doesn't really help, and I know that doesn't make me forgiven, but I'm sorry. I was wrong, I know."

Hoggle slumped, looking beaten. "What happened, Sarah? Why did you stop callin' for us?"

Sarah sighed. She reached down to rip away a length of vine, drawing a sharp breath as drops of blood trickled down her legs. "I convinced myself," she said, "that none of you were real."

"That easy, was it?"

"No!" She looked up to him again. "I wanted you to be real, don't you understand that? More than anything! But when people tell you," she returned to the vines, as if wanting the pain to distract her, "that magic doesn't exist, that they're all only stories, over and over again, you begin to believe them. You begin to doubt yourself. You can't help it."

"But you'd been to the Labyrinth! Seen it with your own eyes!"

"But I don't belong here in the Labyrinth, Hoggle," Sarah said wearily. "I belong out there. And it's hard to keep believing that you're right and the entire world is wrong. I'm sorry," she said. Curiously, it was now that she began to cry again, even as all the vines had been sliced or torn from her skin. The tears fell softly down her cheeks, almost unnoticeable. "I'm sorry."

He stared at her in soft astonishment. Then, awkwardly, he knelt down beside her, patting her shoulder with a meaty hand. She turned her tear-streaked face toward his, and he looked abashed.

"There, there," he said, uncomfortable. "Didn't mean to make you cry," he muttered. They sat together, silent. "I missed you, Sarah."

With a broken sob she threw her arms around him. He started, then relaxed, hugging her back as she wept exhausted tears into his jerkin.

Chaucer cleared his throat. Hoggle and Sarah broke apart, smiling at each other.

"Anyway," she spoke, wiping her face with her shirt, "thank you both for cutting me free. That was --" She shuddered a little, and then laughed at herself. "Maybe I should just let Jareth take my dreams, regardless. I don't fancy the nightmares I'll have about *that* particular experience."

She yelped in surprise as Chaucer's hand shot out to grab her arm. "What did you say?" he demanded. "What are you talking about?" He gave her a little shake. "What have you *done*?"

---

Brian frowned at the creature that had latched on to Sarah. "What's going on?"

"Quiet." Jareth was absorbed in the scene playing itself out in his bauble. "We're getting to the good part."

---

Sarah stared at Chaucer's intent face. "It was our bargain," she said.

His fingers tightened on her upper arm, perilously close to slicing her open with his razored claws. "From the beginning, young lady. Tell me everything."

She turned her head, including Hoggle in her narrative. "Ja -- the Goblin King. He came back into my life, and he took my friend. He -- Brian -- he wished himself away, not knowing it was real. And the Goblin King let me know what had happened," she said quietly. "I had to get Brian back. In a way, it was my fault." She shook her head. "It doesn't matter. But I couldn't get into the Labyrinth without making... a kind of bet. With him." The both knew whom she meant. "I had to make it," and her mouth twisted, "worth his while, he said." She shrugged. "So if I reach Brian in time we both go free. Which is what I'll *do*," she said fiercely. "But I had to promise him something if I failed."

"And what was it you promised?" Chaucer asked.

"He asked for my dreams."

Chaucer dropped her arm and jerked back, horror spreading over his monstrous features. "Oh, Sarah. Why? Why promise something so precious to a man like Jareth?"

"It's not like that!" she protested. "It's just the dreams I have when I'm asleep!"

"Did he say that, Sarah?" Hoggle now demanded, stepping closer. "That's what he said? Word for word?"

"Well... no..." Sarah said, "I just took it for granted --" And she stopped. The blood drained from her face. "Oh God," she breathed. She raised hopeless eyes. "Hoggle, what did I do?"

He shook his head, fear and frustration plain on his face. "You tell her," he spoke gruffly to Chaucer. "'Spose you know more about it anyway, with all that book-learnin'."

"Sarah," Chaucer stepped closer to her. "Humans can't survive without dreams. Not the real, true dreams -- the ones that carry us through bad days and cause us to strive for something better in life. You understand that, don't you?"

"Will I die?" she asked, voice shaking.

He sighed. "No."



"But?"

"If Jareth wins. If you fail to solve the Labyrinth. If your friend Brian becomes forever trapped, then..."

Sarah waited, naked fear in her eyes.

"Then you will be a frail, diminished thing, utterly hopeless and despondent. You will have no joy in life, in any of its pleasures. You will be like a ghost, only very much alive. Terribly alive -- there will be no way to make it stop."

She stared at him, lost.

"But it gets worse. Because your dreams aren't vanished, you see, they'll belong to Jareth. You will be driven -- *driven*, Sarah, as if against you will -- to plead for your dreams from him. And it will never stop, no matter how many scraps he throws you. You will return, again and again and again, desperate for his mercy. Your happiness will be dependent on his whims. Jareth's my king, but even that doesn't give him the kind of influence you have foolishly handed over. He will own you."

---

Jareth's eyes held a predatory gleam, oblivious to the world around him as he gazed into the crystal. "Come on, my love," he breathed, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Put the pieces together. *Understand*."

---

Sarah felt numb. It was as if she had suddenly detached from her body, and all her senses were misleading -- the sunlight was unbearably harsh, Chaucer's words striking at her ears.

"You're trying to tell me," she said dully, "That he'll have my soul."

Chaucer sighed. "No," he said. "But it will be something very like."

"He planned it all along, didn't he." Her voice didn't sound like her own, seemed to come from very far away. "All of it. From the very beginning. He violated the rules so that he could claim Brian. He knew I'd come. He knew I'd have to save my friend." She sank her head into her knees. "It was a trap. And I fell for it."

"Yes. I'm afraid you did."

She was shaken, torn, picked to pieces. She felt hollow inside, as if something had been stripped away to leave only a shell of her being within. She raised her head.

"It's not fair," she hissed. She slapped her palms against the cobblestones, oblivious to the stinging pain. "It's not *fair*!"

And Jareth laughed until there were tears in his eyes.



## Kiss of Life

They let her cry it out -- the few weak tears she could manage. Mostly she just sat there, head buried in her knees, hugged tightly to her chest. Her hair had fallen forward to hide her expression. She made no sound.

After a few minutes of this Chaucer lumbered back onto his feet. "That's enough," he said, firm but not unkind. "Moping about won't help. It's time we got on our way."

Sarah turned her head toward him, eyes tired and red. "We?"

"We," he repeated, firm. "A... private dispute between the two of you is one thing. Using the Labyrinth to ensnare a young girl in this manner is something else entirely. I'm a firm believer in the philosophy that to take no course of action is a course of action," he added, rather pompously. "So, I will do all in my power to help you solve the Labyrinth a second time." He beamed. "I'm coming with you."

"Whether she wants you or not," Hoggle muttered under his breath. Chaucer ignored him.

"Thank you," she said with a small smile. "I am... beholden to you, for your assistance." Chaucer grumbled, avoiding her gaze, but his bat-ears twitched. Sarah turned her gaze onto Hoggle, who was still looking sullenly at the ground. "And you, my old friend," she asked, "will you help me, too?"

"Course," he growled. "Y'didn't think I'd let Jareth get away with something like this, did you? Huh. Not that easily." He dug his shoe into the cobblestone. "Bastard's had me clippin' weeds for the past years... I'll show him."

Sarah gave a watery giggle, and her smile grew stronger, warmer. "Thank you," she said. "Both of you. I'm not sure what I would have done, if..." Her lip trembled, and she ducked her head.

"Now, now," Chaucer said, stepping forward. "No more of that, eh? Up on your feet, young lady." Sarah complied, smearing the tears from her cheeks with her palms. "Now. We'll have no more crying, it makes me tetchy." He shook an admonishing finger at her. "Let's see how good your memory is. Do you remember what I said to you, upon showing you the, er, landscape by which we came here?"

"You said those red and blue guards didn't like you, and would never let you find them when you wanted to go back to the Castle."

Hoggle gave a smothered guffaw, and Chaucer shot him a glare. "Hmph. Well, yes. Very good. But before that."

"I..." Sarah's voice trailed away, and she shook her head. "I don't remember."

"I mentioned how easy it was for me to traverse the Labyrinth, eh?" He grinned at her, broken yellow tusks filling his mouth. "How I'd learned all of its tricks and passages, after --"

"After reading all of those records!" Sarah said. "Are you saying you know how to solve the Labyrinth?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying," Chaucer said, insufferably pleased with himself. "Down to the last secret passage and trick doorway. I'll get you through it in the time it would take... well," he amended, "Jareth on a bad day. Which is a lot faster than you would have ever managed on your

own, my dear."

"That won't stop Jareth from plunkin' down surprises wherever we go," Hoggle said. "We'll still hafta stay on the lookout for any of his little jokes."

"Well," Chaucer said, "If we all refrain from accepting questionable fruits from the aforementioned party, we should do fine."

Hoggle's hands balled into fists. "You little..." he growled through bared teeth.

"Wait!" Sarah stretched her outspread hands toward them. "Let's not fight -- please. It's so very important -- now more than ever -- that I reach the center of the Labyrinth in time. We can't waste our advantage by bickering."

"Alright, then," Hoggle grumbled. "Let's have old scab-face show us where to go, eh?"

Chaucer opened his mouth, but snapped it shut when Sarah shook an admonishing finger in his face, also shooting a warning glare at Hoggle. Chaucer gave a "hmph," then sniffed, turning on his heel to one of the briar-lined passages. Sarah and Hoggle followed.

Chaucer strode forward, confidently navigating the twisted pathways. It was almost as if he could see through the thick, green hedges. If she stepped a little closer to him, Sarah could hear Chaucer muttering under his breath as they went, counting the openings they passed, saying things like, "and now we should come up on the -- ah, there it is!" and continuing on his way.

Sarah had suspected Chaucer was exaggerating his knowledge of the Labyrinth. After all, most of his "experience" was simply what he had read in books, and she of all people knew that never added up to much. But it seemed she had underestimated his fascination with the complex weavings of the Labyrinth -- his utter and absolute curiosity about how it worked, how it lived...

For it did live -- she could feel it. It wasn't truly alive, but it was sentient -- like the ancient, looming trees she had once visited with her father in California. She remembered resting her cheek against rough bark, palms to the sides pressed against an enormous trunk. The tree was completely still and silent beneath her fingertips. And yet... there had been the certainty that if only she could concentrate, shut out every other thought every other sound around her, she would have been able to feel it breathing.

It was the same with the Labyrinth.

"Hoggle," she asked as they both trailed behind the muttering Librarian, "do you really think I'll make it, this time?"

Hoggle took a moment to respond. "Don't see why not," he said. "Y'did it before, didn't you?"

"Yeah." Sarah watched as Chaucer rounded a corner. "But... this is different."

"It is?"

"Last time, Ja- the Goblin King. He wanted to keep Toby. This time, he wants me."

Hoggle gave a small sigh. "It'll be fine, Sarah," he said firmly. "We'll get you home."

*You're not sure, are you? You don't think I'll solve the Labyrinth in time!* But she bit back the words, blinked back the tears that made her vision swim. She would succeed. She had to.

Chaucer called back to them to hurry up, and they both picked up the pace.

The three of them stepped, together, into a small plaza -- a break in the angled, leafy corridors they had been attempting to unravel for what seemed like forever. The plaza was paved with smooth, tan tiles, and it was filled with fountains. Tiers of shallow basins overflowed with sparkling water, falling in a shining waterfall to the level just below them to end in a stone well that held a shining, rippling pool. The plaza was empty of any life; the sound of their feet shuffling along the tiles was accompanied only by the sound of rushing water.

"S'too quiet," Hoggle grumbled as they made their way through. "Just the place for -- for an ambush, or somethin'."

"Don't be ridiculous," snorted Chaucer. "How could Jareth possibly know where we are?"

"Well," Sarah said, "he does have magic..."

"And an army of goblins."

"And he disappears and re-appears wherever he likes."

"And it's *his* Labyrinth."

"All right, all right, you have made your point," Chaucer said. "Now would you two please be quiet while I figure out where we are going?"

Sarah sighed, seating herself at the edge of one of the fountains. "I wonder how long it's been since I started out. I'd love to know how much time we have left."

"It is not a matter," Chaucer said, pacing up and down the plaza with his brow furrowed in concentration, "of how much time we have left, but a matter of how we use the time before us." He stopped a moment, craning his neck to squint up at the sky. Then he went back to pacing.

"What 'zactly is it y'lookin' for?" Hoggle asked.

"I told you," Chaucer said. "I know every secret there is to know about this place. And here, in this plaza, there's some sort of shortcut to the forest. I know it!" His frown grew even deeper. "Now, if only I could remember where... and it does not help to have you two goggling at me like that!" he snapped.

Sarah stood up. "C'mon, Hoggle," she said. "Let's have a look around while Chaucer explores, hmm?" Hoggle muttered, but eventually followed, leaving Chaucer to muse by himself.

They wandered deeper into the collection of fountains, examining their surroundings. Each fountain seemed identical to the other -- in fact, the two lost each other a few times in that stone wilderness. Never for too long, however, and together they ventured further and further into the thicket of silent stone and trickling water.

To their amazement, Hoggle and Sarah discovered something new in what appeared to be the heart of the plaza. It was nothing special, really, just another fountain, but this one was slightly different from the others. It was a wide, shallow pool with no ornament. The water was as smooth as glass and as clear -- they could easily see to the bottom.

"Don't you touch it," Hoggle said as Sarah's hand stretched out hesitantly. "Likely enough it'll turn you t'stone, or somethin' nasty like that. Yeech."

"Don't be silly, Hoggle," Sarah said. "Why would the Labyrinth have something like that?"

"Because," Hoggle spoke sulkily, "it's a damn unfriendly place, and don't you forget it."

Sarah sighed and pulled her hand away. "I know. Believe me, I know, but... but the Labyrinth is more about tricks and riddles. Not turning innocent bystanders to stone just because they're thirsty. "There," plunging her hand into the water, too quick for Hoggle to even protest. She swished it around experimentally. "Doesn't seem to be any harm in it," she said.

"All the same," Hoggle said. "We ought'nt to go poking our nose in where it isn't wanted."

"Hoggle, don't be such a grouch," Sarah said, sitting on the stone ledge surrounding the pool. "It's just a..." Her voice trailed off, and she leaned closer to the surface, expression intent. "Wishing well. Hoggle, it's a wishing well!"

"What're you goin' on about?" he asked, moving in for a closer look.

"No, look!" she said, eyes still fixed on the tiled bottom of the pool. "There's all kinds of coins down there! Check it out!" In a swift scooping motion, she ran her hand through the water to bring up a handful of sparkling treasure. Gold glinted from between her fingers, as well as silver, copper, and baser metals. There were round coins and square ones, coins with ornamental holes in their center or serrated edges, decorated with the silhouettes of exotic faces or cryptic writing.

"Look at them all," Sarah breathed, jingling them about in her hand. "And there's hundreds more. I wonder where they all came from."

Hoggle shrugged. "From people like you, who can't seem to make their way through the Labyrinth without explorin' and meddlin'," he said. "That's easy enough to see."

"Still." Sarah examined the coins in her hand, tracing over them with her fingers. "Don't you ever wonder about the kind of people who found the Labyrinth? I mean, it's just a story in my world. I just sort of fell into it. It makes me curious how others might have found out."

"No use wonderin' about things you'll never know."

"Hoggle, that's exactly the kind of talk that makes me want to -- jeez!" Exasperated, she flung the coins back into the fountain and stood, brushing her hands on her jeans. "Let's see if Chaucer is of any more help. Chaucer!" she called over the soft sound of falling water. "Chaucer, have you found anything yet?"

"No, not quite yet," Chaucer called back, disappointment clear in his voice. "Perhaps I was mistaken," he went on. "I was so sure there was a shortcut of some kind around here... something that will take us directly to the forest! I know it is here!"

"Maybe Ja- maybe someone moved it," Sarah said. "To another place? A different plaza? The Labyrinth does have a way of shifting like that."

"The first phase of it does, you silly girl!" Chaucer's voice was still muffled by the rows of fountains between them. "But not this one! It is simply infuriating..."

Sighing, Sarah turned back to where Hoggle sat by the fountain. She hopped onto the low stone ledge, stretching out her arms to keep her balance as she walked along the narrow ridge. Suddenly, she froze.

"Hoggle," she said, eyes intent on the depths of the pool, "do you remember the first time we came to this phase of the Labyrinth? It was after you led me out of the oubliette."

"Right," Hoggle grumped, not turning around. "After the Cleaners had chased us out from underground," and he shuddered with the memory.

"We met someone right away - do you remember? An old wise man."

"Hmph. That's what you thought he was. I knew he was just an old coot with a bird for brains."

"And I gave him my ring for some advice, do you remember?" She lowered her arms without taking her gaze from the water. "Hoggle, either come over here and tell me my eyes are playing tricks on me, or that I'm looking at that ring right now."

Hoggle shuffled over, peering into the pool. "Could be," he said. "But maybe not. I never paid that much attention."

"No, it is my ring!" Sarah said, excitement rising. Her face took on a look of determination. "I'm going in to get it."

"You're gonna do *what*? Sarah," he pleaded, unable to do anything as she stepped into the water. "Sarah, please! It might be dangerous!"

"Nonsense!" she said. "Who ever got hurt by a little water? Besides, it's my ring, and I want it back. It was worthless advice, anyway," she joked, throwing a mischievous look over her shoulder.

"Sarah, please!" Hoggle said, his face creased with worry. She laughed at his consternation, sloshing through the clear, rippling water. It came up to her knees, and so she walked slowly and carefully towards the pool's center, where the ring glinted in the sunlight.

Chaucer rounded one of the other fountains, his face like a storm cloud. "Stupid worthless texts," he grumbled. "Should've known they'd be too outdated, too old, too cryptic to be of any help... Or it's my fault -- an old demon hardly worth his salt, can't even remember where a simple shortcut is --"

"I've got it!" Sarah shouted as she fished the simple band out of the water and held it aloft.

"Then get out of there!" Hoggle bellowed. "Right now!"

Unexpectedly, Sarah's eyes flashed with panic. "Hoggle, I don't think --"

"I was certain it was right around here!" Chaucer said, oblivious.

With a piercing shriek, Sarah seemed to stumble -- and her body sank quickly beneath the water's shallow surface with barely a ripple.

Both Hoggle and Chaucer rushed quickly to the fountain's rim, desperately searching the pool for any sign of the girl. But she was gone. Where she had stood, a small round portal had opened on the fountain's tiled floor. The water in the pool rushed down it into a dark, swirling tunnel.

"Well," Chaucer said. "Looks like I was right, after all."

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She was tumbling, turning, twisting, lost in an oblivion of dark water. She couldn't see, couldn't breathe -- though thankfully she'd had the presence of mind to hold her breath as she went under. She could only feel, helpless to the wild currents that bore her swiftly along. Where they were taking her, she had no idea.

Suddenly, it stopped. She was still in the water, but it was still -- she was floating. Her lungs feeling about to burst, she opened her eyes. They stung slightly with the water, but her vision was

clear enough to know she was in a lake. Vegetation writhed all around her in long, dark strands, caressing her skin with the movement of the water. She could spy the sharp, fluid movements of fish in the shadows. Above her, the sunlight glimmered on the water's surface tantalizingly, inherent with the promise of safety.

She kicked off toward the surface, straining her arms to push through the water. Remembering snatches of advice, she quickly shed her shoes to make her task easier. Muscles aching and lungs on fire, she swam upward.

There was something moving in the shadows. Something other than the fish she had spotted earlier. It was bigger, and its movement was less quick and darting, almost sinuous. As it came closer, moving further into the thin, watery light, she could see it was a person, the arms and legs clearly obvious. Her first thought was that Hoggle, or even Chaucer, has followed her foolish footsteps into the fountain and were now drifting below her. But she quickly discarded that notion -- neither had the kind of flowing grace in their movements that this creature possessed.

It neared her, cutting through the water with hardly any effort as far she could see. Now she could see similar shapes emerging from the shadows and following the first with the same uncanny speed. The first one broke free of the darkness to swim into the shifting light. It was then that Sarah caught sight of a pale, bloodless face, huge liquid eyes, and a floating cloud of hair cascading around white limbs. Her heart thudded in her chest.

Naiads.

Sarah redoubled her efforts to reach the surface, but with a sinking feeling that it was a lost cause. The naiads belonged to the water and moved through their native element as easily as Sarah would have walked on the land. Their eyes followed her attempts to get away with something like amusement. A quick glance upward, and Sarah knew she was nowhere near the surface.

In a flash, Sarah remembered Jareth's warning as she had entered the Labyrinth. She could break the Labyrinth's spell, like before. She could end the game, just like before. All she needed to do was speak a few simple words... reject the illusion...

You have no power --

Sarah squeezed her eyes tight and shook her head, a physical rejection of the very thought. *No. I can't. That way, he wins -- I lose everything: Brian, my freedom -- everything.*

The burning pain in her lungs grew with every passing second, and her arms moved far too sluggishly though the cold, resisting waters of the lake. As she kept one eye on the nearing naiads, every legend she knew about them running through her head, a little voice inside her asked: *Is it worse than dying?*

No! Sarah shouted internally. *I won't die. The Labyrinth doesn't hurt people, it only scares them!*

But what about the roses? The burning roses, whose thorns had nearly torn away her flesh... what if the rules had changed?

What if there were no more rules?

Did Jareth mean to kill her?

Involuntarily, Sarah screamed, a moment of pure panic. The air rushed out of her mouth in huge bubbles, rising past her towards the glimmering surface. Cold, smooth hands grasped her ankles, and Sarah thrashed about. More hands held her arms, her shoulders, and a terrible deadness was creeping at her limbs. She had lost.

No, no, no! Sarah wailed silently. *It isn't supposed to end like this! It can't!*

And then, feeling like a small, helpless child: *I don't want to die.*

There was a terrible stillness inside her; the yawning emptiness of defeat.

You have no power over --

Cold, terribly cold lips touched hers, and Sarah's eyes flew open in shock. It was one of the naiads -- holding onto her captive's shoulders and bending her face forward. With the utmost gentleness, she touched her mouth to Sarah's, her white lips meeting Sarah's blue ones. With that kiss, a delicious feeling spread through Sarah's body: warmth. Fingers and toes tingled as blood began to flow freely throughout her limbs. And best of all, the intoxicating relief of air.

I don't understand, Sarah thought. *Naiads are supposed to drown people... aren't they?*

Things are not always what they seem, here. Someone whispered in her memory. *So, you can't take anything for granted.*

The naiads released their hold on Sarah. Their expressions were unnervingly blank, but they kept a close watch as she attempted to resume her escape from the water. Feeling coltish and clumsy next to them, Sarah gamely struggled onward, battling the water that reduced her strength. She didn't feel the need to breathe, anymore, and even the water seemed to lose some of its biting chill.

The naiads themselves stayed close by, sometimes guiding her when her determination faltered, but mainly just following close by and letting her strive on her own. *Like adults keeping watch on an unruly, stubborn child,* Sarah thought. *I can deal with that.*

She kept sneaking quick glances at them from the corner of her eye. They were truly amazing. Their long, sleek white bodies sliced through the water, dappled with the shifting sunlight that filtered unevenly through the deep waters. Their hair trailed behind them in rippling waves, clouding in a mass or twisting into snake-like strands, depending on their movement -- like a jellyfish's multitude of feelers. And their eyes were breathtaking: huge and dark in their white faces, never blinking.

Her feet soon began to scrape along the lake's soft bottom. The naiads fell back, watching her for a moment and then diving back into the shadowy depths. Sarah's head broke the surface and she gasped with relief. Her hands twisted around slippery weeds to leverage herself out of the water. Choking and spluttering, Sarah heaved herself up onto the bank of the lake.

For a few blessed moments she just lay there, the water running out of her soaked clothes. She breathed in great gasps, letting the sweet air fill her lungs. But then she began to shiver, goosebumps rising on her wet skin when a soft breeze wandered through the trees surrounding her. She struggled to sit upright, using one hand to push the hair that was plastered along her face and neck out of her eyes. Her clothes were absolutely soaked through, even stained here and there with green from the underwater grasses. Blinking to clear her vision, she saw that she was in the middle of a clearing. The lake -- a pool, really, not big enough to be a true lake -- stood roughly in the center. All around her was a dark, heavy forest. It was ominously silent; she heard no birdsong or animals scampering in the undergrowth.

She had no idea where she was, she'd been separated from her friends, and she was an absolute mess.

Great, she thought, *just great. Now all that's needed is for Jareth to show up and sneer, and my day will be complete.*

She froze. She had seen something out of the corner of her eye -- something that glittered, something of color and light in this place of darkness. With a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach, she turned her head.

His Majesty sat, resplendent in black and silver-grey, on a rock out-cropping that hung over the lake's serene surface. One leg dangled over the edge, the other was drawn to his chest as he leaned against a boulder. His white-blond hair was shot with silver, his black boots were embroidered with it. His hands were sheathed in black.

He was impeccable and beautiful, and for that alone Sarah was willing to hate him.

But Jareth wasn't looking at Sarah. He was relaxed against the stone wall of the rock behind him, eyes closed. Countenance peculiarly serene, he sat completely still -- as if waiting. As Sarah watched, a naiad rose up from the shadows of the lake to break the surface in a glittering fall of sunlight. Muscles taut under smooth skin, the creature scaled up the rock on the lake's edge. Slick hands reached for Jareth, and he never flinched or opened his eyes, even as she guided his head to face hers. As she kissed him, his own hand traced across her wrist, and then tilted her chin upwards towards his mouth.

Sarah flushed and looked away. She felt strangely uncomfortable, seeing that - as if she had intruded upon some intimate moment. That was all.

I'm not... jealous, she seethed. Don't be stupid. She climbed to her feet, acutely aware of how close her wet clothes clung to her body. She peeled her shirt away from shivering skin, letting it hang a bit more loosely. Her jeans, completely sodden, hung heavy on her hips, but there wasn't anything she could do about that. And, Sarah realized with rising dismay, her shoes were lost. She was half-tempted to ask one of the naiads to retrieve them for her, but the creatures seemed far too... magnificent, for such a mundane task.

A quick over her shoulder, and she watched as the naiad slipped silently off the rock and disappeared into the lake in a swirl of hair and sunlight. Jareth had still not opened his eyes, and seemed to be content in sunning himself on the rock.

Fine, Sarah thought. I'll just leave, then. Careful to avoid stepping on any rocks or sticks, she made her way to the edge of the clearing.

"Without saying goodbye?"

Sarah froze at the sound of that voice, remembering...

("You're trying to tell me that he'll own my soul.")

"No. But it will be very much like.")

She shuddered, an icy feeling of panic blossoming in her chest. No. She wouldn't allow that to happen.

Sarah walked back into the clearing slowly. Jareth was still poised on his rock, eyes still shut beneath the graceful sweep of his eyebrows.

"That was the idea," she said.

"I'm hurt," Jareth said. "Really." Opening his eyes, he turned his head in her direction. He blinked. "It's a bit nippy for a swim, I thought." A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "You always were an impetuous child."

"I'm not a child, anymore," Sarah said.

Jareth's eyes traveled slowly over the length of her body. It wasn't exactly insulting, but it was obvious he wasn't missing a single detail. Sarah flushed again and hated herself for it, crossing her arms over her chest. "No," Jareth murmured, "I can see you're not."

"Bastard."

"Oh, come on," Jareth chuckled, swinging his other leg over the edge of the rock in an easy movement. "You set yourself up for that one."

Sarah ignored that. "Is Brian okay?"

A flicker of annoyance passed over Jareth's face. "He's fine. He stood up extremely well to both the rack and the dunking stool. We expect to graduate him to the iron maiden any day, now."

"That wasn't what I meant, and you know it."

"But it was what you were thinking, dear heart." He jumped to the ground, taking a few steps closer. Sarah fought the urge to cringe away. Being this close to him, knowing what was at stake - it terrified her.

"Your friend is fine," Jareth continued. "Do you really think I'd let any serious harm come to him? Honestly, Sarah."

"I almost came to harm," Sarah said. "I almost drowned."

Jareth went very still, then gave a shrug. "Yes, well. I told you the Labyrinth was different from your last visit, simply because you are different."

"How is this *my* fault?"

"Last time you were with us," he said as if speaking to a very small child, "you were only, what, fifteen? You had no concept of your own mortality. You're older now, and you know that death is a reality. You can die. My Labyrinth has shifted, changed to incorporate this new knowledge." He raised his hands in a defensive gesture at her glare. "I know what you're thinking, Sarah, but I really had nothing to do with it. It's simply the way things are. Besides, you're no good to me dead." He grinned, sharp teeth peeking from between his thin lips. "The dead don't dream."

"You lied to me," Sarah said, voice low. "About the dreams."

"I? Lie to you?" Eyes mocking, his gaze never left her face. "I did no such thing."

"It's the same thing!" Sarah hissed. "Not telling the whole truth is exactly the same thing."

"Don't be an idiot." He drew himself upright, suddenly cold. "We made a bargain. Do not blame me for your own mistakes. I have shown you nothing but kindness, allowing you to trespass within the domain you once destroyed -- and do not think you can twist out of fulfilling our agreement with protestations of ignorance. This is my realm, and while you are in it you will keep your promises!"

Something in Sarah snapped.

Since the beginning, she had been living in different degrees of fear. Ever since realizing the stuff of her nightmares for the last three years was, in fact, not mere fantasy, she had been jumping out of her skin and cowering at every shadow. The knowledge about the truth of her bargain with

Jareth had nearly finished her off, filling her with a yawning dread as she realized she had sold herself into a kind of slavery. To Jareth, the creature who had stolen her brother, who now threatened the life of her friend. But staring at him now, self-righteous and assured of his eventual victory, that changed. For the first time in what felt like a long time, she wasn't afraid. Sarah was angry.

And so, filled with the kind of confidence only searing fury can bestow, Sarah did the one thing she'd been longing to do since she was fifteen. She lunged forward, and Jareth actually took a step back, as he must have been certain she was going for his throat. But Sarah didn't even try to attack the Goblin King.

Instead, she kissed him.

Flirting With Disaster

It wasn't much of a kiss. Sarah didn't so much fling herself into Jareth's embrace as rush him, head-on. As a result it was less of an actual kiss and more of Sarah mashing her mouth up against his.

Which was fine with her. She wasn't here for romance.

For a full breath, Jareth did nothing. He stood there. frozen. Eyes squeezed shut, Sarah felt a tremor of fear in her stomach. She'd gotten this far... what next?

Jareth recovered, of course, hands reaching around to the small of her back, and even through the layer of her sodden clothing she could feel the demanding heat of his skin. He pulled her against him, deepening the kiss. One hand rose to cradle her head, gloved fingers tangled in the damp masses of her hair. One kiss, two kisses, three — gentle as summer rain, warm breath tickling along her chilled flesh. He kissed her as if she were a wild animal he was careful not to scare away, tender and torturous in his restraint. His mouth was soft. She was shivering, shaking so badly she could barely stand, finger digging into Jareth's shoulders to keep herself from falling at his feet. She clung to him, and for all the chaos in her body and heart, something inside her sighed with contentment, whispering to her soul: This is right.

He pulled her even closer into his warmth, arms enfolding her protectively. Lips met and parted, caressed her cheek. His hands caressed her back, and he buried his face in the curve of her neck.

And laughed.

It was soft, insinuating laughter, low in the throat. She froze, feeling it reverberate in her bones, so close were they pressed together. It was the sound of complete triumph, the mirth of a conqueror enjoying his latest acquisition. It was a statement, as clear as if he'd spoken aloud.

I've won.

She tried to jerk away but he held her fast, arms tightening around her body even as her muscles protested. He drew his mouth along her throat, lips smiling against her skin as he straightened to meet her eyes. It was the same mocking smile her had always shown her, with a glitter of wicked delight in his eyes. It was a shock to her senses, like plunging into freezing water. It reminded her.

(She wasn't here for romance.)

The velvet darkness of his clothes was soft beneath her hands. Cutting into her palms were the sharp edges of pendant curving against her skin. Eyes still locked with Jareth's, she twined both her hands around the silken cord from which it hung. Quickly, before she could think, she gave it a vicious yank, snapping the cord from around the Goblin King's neck. With the tiniest grunt of pain and surprise, his eyes widened. Sarah seized that opportunity to twist out of his grasp, tripping and stumbling over her own feet until she fell to the ground some distance away, safely out of reach. The pendant, golden horns gleaming in the pale sunlight, dangled from her clenched fists.

She climbed to her feet unsteadily, adrenaline leaving her shaking. Her hands were trembling, grip unsure on the prize she brought close to her, sheltering it with her body, flinching from anticipated attack — but there was none forthcoming. The clearing was silent — a silence that stretched out between them, blanketing the clearing, making her heartbeat thunder in her ears. Slowly, fearful of what she would see, she looked up at Jareth.

Cold eyes. Cold and hard and crystalline — like the sharp, glittering edge of a blade frosted over in the snow.

“That,” he said, and she shivered that he could be calm with eyes like that, “was a very dirty trick.”

“Maybe.” She swallowed past a dry throat. “Maybe I’m just getting better at playing.”

“Hmm.” He touched gloved fingers to his thin lips, expression thoughtful. “Here I thought you were coming to your senses.”

“Not likely,” Sarah muttered. Not that it wasn’t — no, she thought. That wasn’t the point.

“Oh?” He crossed his arms. “Pity. I have to admit, I prefer that way of playing the game — certainly more pleasant than listening to your shrill whining.”

“This isn’t a game!” She shot back, pendant biting into her flesh as her fingers tightened around it. “Brian’s life is at stake, my freedom — don’t you ever call it a game!”

Clouds raced across the previously clear sky, throwing a whirlwind of pale shadows over them both as the sky readying for a tempest of its own.

“I’ll continue to do so as long as you treat it like one,” he said. The breeze picked up, pulling frost-blond hair away from the stark planes of his face. “Kisses and trinkets — fine stakes for you to pit against your friend’s life.”

“Do you think so?” The breeze was now growing into a gale, whipping her own dark, matted hair, errant strands blowing into her mouth. “But I know the way the Labyrinth works. Trickery, deceit, and lies.” She took a deep, steadying breath, forcing herself to ignore the sudden electricity in the air, the scent of impending rain. “So. I have something you want.” She leveled her gaze at the Goblin King, who rested so carelessly against the rocky outcropping beside the lake’s edge, the eye of the storm. “Make me an offer.”

The wind died as suddenly as it had been born.

Jareth’s eyes widened, lips parting in delight. “Humor me, dearest,” he said. “What did you just say?”

“You heard me.”

“True, but the lovely lilting sound of your voice thrills my very being. Say it again.”

“Make me an offer,” she returned. “Some service you can provide in exchange for your possession returned to you. Return my friends to me, maybe. Or offer to guide me the rest of the way. Make it *worth my while*,” she ended harshly, throwing his earlier words back into his face.

His grin faded, leaving a grim expression that made him look strangely tired. “This ceases to be amusing,” he murmured. He held out a hand, palm up. “Give it here.”

“No!” She clutched the pendant to her chest childishly. “Not until I get what I want.”

He looked at her. “And what,” he asked with an air of infinite patience, “do you want?”

Sarah forced herself to calm down, to think. “Well,” she began, “this is very important to you, isn’t it?”

“You have no idea.”

“And you’d be willing to give me anything for it, right?”

“In theory,” he responded. “But I’m curious as to what you would ask.”

Sarah contemplated the pendant, its weight cupped in her hands. “What *is* it? I mean,” she continued, “I know it’s important, because I’ve seen you wear it constantly, and it... changes.” She studied it, frowning, thumbs tracing the convoluted insignia stamped on its surface. Curious at his reticence, she looked up, only to find him with an expression she had ever seen on his face before... It was, she realized, wistful.

“What did you promise me,” he asked, “should you fail to solve my Labyrinth in time?”

“What has that got to do with anything?”

“Pay attention and you might learn something. Answer the question.”

“My dreams,” she answered, glaring. “And I was tricked into it — I had no idea what I was really bargaining with.”

“As you wish.” He gave a small smile, one that failed to reach his eyes. “Though I wouldn’t debate trickery, if I were you. You aren’t taking the straight and narrow path this time around, as evidenced by your damp entrance.” The smile widened. “How is my Librarian, by the by? Did he find the studious life so very dull that he felt compelled to risk my... extreme displeasure... by aiding your attempts?”

“You leave Chaucer out of this.”

“I would love to,” he said. “But he seems determined to embroil himself.” He threw her an amused look from beneath lowered lids. “Your recruitment powers are truly amazing, you know. Every time I turn my back, you’ve suborned another hapless creature to your cause. I almost feel it unfair to loose you upon them.”

“That’s rich,” Sarah muttered. “You, talking about fairness.”

“Touché.”

“But what does this have to do with your pendant?”

He looked at the horned shape, still clutched tightly in her hands. “That... well,” he murmured. “Well...” His thoughtful expression shuttered. “You don’t need to know.”

“Fine,” Sarah said. “But you still haven’t made me an offer.”

“Ah.” He nodded his head, as if she’d made a critical point. “Is that the way you expect it to go? I perform some trifle, and get back what is rightfully mine?”

“It worked that way with Hoggle, and with Chaucer. Why not you?”

Jareth smirked. “Yes, well. As honorable as those creatures are, I’m sure they cannot do — this.”

And he disappeared.

Sarah whirled, eyes darting around the clearing as she searched for a glimpse of his silver and black. Her heart felt like a fluttering bird trapped within her chest -- throwing itself against her ribcage as it strained to escape.

He wouldn't just leave, she thought, straining her eyes for any movement in the clearing. There was none. But I still..! She gripped the pendant to her chest with both hands. *No way, she thought. No way in hell did he just up and leave. It's a trick.*

The sound of her labored breathing filled the clearing. She couldn't afford to panic. Jareth was probably watching her this minute, watching her, tucked into the corner of a shadow. Invisible to the world. She couldn't afford to close her eyes, either, or relax. He was waiting for her to let her guard down, and then... what?

Trying to calm herself, Sarah breathed deeply. *Think Zen. No, wait a minute, this is way too important for Zen. Close your eyes, and open your senses. Try to figure out where he is.*

Sarah let all the air out of her lungs slowly. Feeling as if every nerve was on fire, she slowly, ever so slowly, let her eyelids drop closed. Blind to the world and hypersensitive, Sarah was acutely aware of the smallest details: blades of grass tickling her feet... small currents of air brushing against her back... and there, right behind her, the whisper of —

Arms wrapped around her, quick as a snake striking. Sarah screamed, caught off guard, and stumbled badly. He yanked her upright and hard against his body. He laughed, and she could feel his chest rumbling against her back.

"Silly Sarah," he chided. "It's only me." She could feel him smile into the masses of her tangled hair.

"Let go," she said, attempting to twist out of his hands. He only tightened his grip, and she cried out in surprised pain.

"Oh, no. You have something that's mine. Give it to me — then I'll let you free." She only clutched the pendant to her chest, almost bruising her hands against the gold. Jareth sighed — she felt the rise and fall of his chest, the passage of breath against her cheek.

"Sarah, Sarah," he said. She froze. He was too close — way too close. She could feel his lips move against her throat, ever so soft, as he spoke.

"Why," he continued, apparently oblivious to the sudden tension in her body, "must it always be so difficult with you, hmm?"

He loosened his arms, sliding them back across to encircle her waist with his hands, long fingers resting across the bones of her hips. "Drop it," he whispered, "and I'll let you go." He kissed her where the line of her throat met the curve of her jaw. Just a small touch, but Sarah hissed in surprise. "It's that simple," he murmured. His hands slid just under her shirt, resting against the skin of her waist.

"What the hell are you doing?" Sarah asked, voice strained.

Jareth laughed again, velvet-clad hands smoothing the skin of her stomach. "You really are a child. I'm seducing you, of course."

"Stop it."

"No," Jareth said. "Not until I get what I want." He ran his thumbs over the curve of her hips, and then he bit her — gently, but hard enough to make the heat rush through her body. Sarah gasped, feeling her bones turn to water. The pendant fell from her nerveless fingers.

It hit the grass and then vanished in a flash of iridescence.

“Thank you,” Jareth said, stepping away. Sarah whirled, almost losing her balance, to see that it hung back around his neck.

“What,” she said, trying to ignore the trembling in her limbs. “The hell. Was that?”

“Standard procedure,” Jareth said. “It’s my job to distract those who enter the Labyrinth from their task at any cost. Being seduced is very distracting. As I’m sure you’ve found.”

“Not exactly how I remember it,” she muttered.

Jareth’s lips twitched ever so slightly. “Well. You were a bit young for us to play it this way last time.” His gaze lingered on her disheveled clothes, the fading mark on her neck. “Isn’t it wonderful, the delights that come with age?”

“Not really,” she returned.

He looked at her. For the briefest moment, Sarah thought she saw — no, his gaze was perfectly dispassionate. She must have imagined it. He shrugged, the shining silk of his clothes rustling with the movement. “Your loss,” he said, and began to turn away. “Good thing for me, anyway — might catch something.”

“Wait!”

He paused, but made no movement to face her again. Sarah drew in a deep breath, trying to steady the last quivers in her legs. “I... I’m alone. Without my friends.”

“Really?” Jareth asked. “That’s a shame.” He was turning away again when Sarah lunged for him, just catching herself before she grabbed his sleeve

“Wait!” She called again, hating the desperation in her voice. “Please...”

And then Jareth did stop — not only stop, but turned on his heel to face her. His face was carefully blank.

Sarah swallowed past the lump of panic in her throat. “That isn’t the way it’s supposed to work,” she said, but stumbled a little over the words. “You know it isn’t.”

“Oh?” Jareth asked in a low, dangerous tone. “And how is it supposed to work? Please,” and his eyes glinted, “I am always eager to be disciplined in how to run my own kingdom.”

“I... I’m not supposed to *lose* companions on the way to the castle,” she said. “It never happens that way. In stories.”

Jareth grinned. “Funny thing about those stories — all about how the plucky heroine manages to save the day. The versions where, say, she’s torn apart by ogres and they use her bones to make dollies for their children never became quite as popular. That one was always my favorite.”

Sarah was unamused. “This is about my freedom,” she said. “And Brian’s life. I deserve another chance.”

“You had one, sweetling,” he said, turning away yet again. “And you let it slip through your fingers. Not even for a proper kiss, neither.” His glance darted over his shoulder. “You need to learn to play your hand better.”

She watched him, clamping down on the sudden, burning rage that made her hands shake. The nails of her clenched fists dug into her skin, and the pain was unexpectedly calming. “I’m going to

win," she said.

"What's that?"

"I'm going to win," raising her voice. "I told you that when we started this charade, remember? It still stands. None of this has threatened that -- not one bit. I'll play your stupid games, endure your silly traps, defeat the Labyrinth, and *win*. And you," she concluded, "Won't be able to do a thing to stop me."

He regarded her from the forest's edge, dappled shadows cascading over his figure. "Childish posturing doesn't suit you," he said. "I like it even less than your classic observance on the world's lack of justice. Really, Sarah," he chided, "Try to develop a certain sense of maturity."

And he faded away into nothing.

Sarah gave a shout of pure frustration, kicking at the turf with her bare toes -- which resulted in her hopping on one foot and swearing for a minute or two. When the pain had eased, she gave a sigh and plopped down on the soft grass. "Bastard," she muttered half-heartedly. Her shoulders slumped as she assessed her current situation: no shoes, no friends, and no idea where she was.

This was not good.

Re-arranging herself until she sat cross-legged, Sarah rested her chin in her hands. *What can I do? I can't go on without Hoggle or Chaucer -- I'll get hopelessly lost, I know it. But I doubt I can climb back up the water-tunnel... Damn.* She closed her eyes. *And I nearly had him for a moment. It would have made things so much easier if I hadn't -- if he had --* She felt her face grow warm. *It's too embarrassing to even think about.*

A watery bleat startled her out of her reverie, her eyes snapping open. She blinked as a sodden, dripping mass of water weeds and mud stumbled its way out of the lake, muttering furiously to itself...

"Hoggle!" Sarah cried, leaping to her feet. She ran to his side, stepping carefully as the grassy bank bled into the sandy, stony shore. "Are you okay? Hoggle?"

"Mmmrrphmrrphh," came the frenzied reply as the creature waved its arms at her, soaked sleeves flapping. Sarah used her fingers to comb the slick leaves and vines of lake vegetation from his face and clothing.

"Are you okay?" she asked, pounding him on the back as he coughed up water. "Hoggle, whatever made you follow me?"

"Couldn't just leave you there, could we?" he said. He tottered onto the safety of the dry bank, sitting heavily. "Not that your book-readin' friend was all that excited about it. Took me a while t'convince him -- s'why it took so long for us to get here."

"My God, *Chaucer*!" Sarah looked around. "Where is he? Did he make it?"

"Him?" Hoggle snorted. "Be a cold day in hell when that one rolls over. He's fine. Just wanted to talk to them water-creatures a bit longer before comin' up. Not that I think he'll get that far with them. Weird-lookin' things."

"Naiads," Sarah corrected, eyes still scanning the surface of the water for signs of movement. "And they saved our lives."

"Didn' ask them to," Hoggle said, but Sarah had already spotted the stumbling shape of Chaucer

rising out of the water. With a yelp of joy, she splashed out to meet him, throwing her arms around his skinny neck as soon as she reached his side. Chaucer's bat-like ears slapped wetly against his head, and he smiled.

"Now, now," he chuckled. "No use getting excited. Just a little dip into the pond -- nothing out of the ordinary."

"Huh. Not what you said on the other side, was it? You big coward," Hoggle jeered, and Chaucer's pockmarked face turned a mottled red.

"Yes, well," he blustered, "I felt it necessary to, um, collect my thoughts (yes, that's it) before embarking on a potentially fruitless enterprise... er, work out the specifics of where the tunnel would lead us... and so on..."

"It doesn't matter," Sarah broke in. "What matters is that we're all together again, and that everyone's all right. Really, it doesn't." As Chaucer stepped onto dry land, Sarah smiled, working her tangled hair into a makeshift braid as they dried off. "You wouldn't believe how scared I was when I thought I was all alone. Chaucer, you know how to get us out of here, right?"

"Yes, I do in fact," he said. "It's really no trouble at all to get to the castle from here, just a few hours walk at most. Er..." he ducked his head down, mumbling, "through the Forests of Endless Night."

Hoggle groaned, head falling into his hands. Sarah paused.

"Why do I not like the sound of that?"

"Because it's a bad idea!" Hoggle roared, not even bothering to lift his head.

"What makes it so terrible, may I ask?" Chaucer blustered.

"Oh, nothin'. Just the Fireys, and the Snaketrees, and the Wallowing Pits," Hoggle said. "The rest we won't even be able to reach, so why fuss?"

Sarah paused. "Fireys? Wait... is this the same forest that --"

"Ah, yes!" Chaucer said, turning to her. "I believe you have had some experience in this area of the Labyrinth." His massive brow furrowed. "Only a trifle, as I recall, as your misanthropic friend here quickly led you out of it."

"Didn't lead her nowhere," came a dark mutter. "She got us both dumped into the Bog of Eternal Stench." He shuddered at the recollection.

"But that wasn't such a bad place," Sarah said. "And it wasn't, um, nighttime there, either. I don't think I understand."

"Well." Chaucer clasped his hands together, razor-claws rasping against each other. "That was only the forest's outer edge. To reach the castle quickly, we will have to, ah... ahem." Suddenly, he frowned, looking around him. "Dear me, I seem to have lost my reading glasses during our swim..."

"What he's tryin' t'tell you," Hoggle said, "Is that the forest gets darker the deeper you go. And the middle, it's midnight. And everythin' goes to hell."

"Oh." Dismayed, Sarah sat on the slightly damp grass. "Oh. That bad?"

He shot her a long-suffering look. “Worse than even you could imagine.”

“Ah.” She thought for a moment. “Chaucer, I’m not sure I’m comfortable —”

(*“Really? That’s a shame.”*)

Sarah blinked. “What I mean is, I know it sounds like a wonderful shortcut, but I really feel —”

(*“You need to learn to play your hand better.”*)

Sarah closed her own gaping mouth. *Shut up*, to the nagging inner voice. *Who asked you, anyway?*

But she sighed with something like defeat, shoulders slumping. “All right,” she said. “Let’s get my shoes and Chaucer’s glasses back from the naiads — then we can head out.”

(*“Here I thought you were coming to your senses.”*)

Quiet. She watched, thoughtful, as Chaucer bounded happily to the lake’s edge, and Hoggle gave her a look of sheer, soggy misery.

I am going to win. And then I’ll make you eat every word to come out of that smirking mouth. I will.

Laughter, faint and mocking, echoed with the rustling of the trees.

Into the Woods

The forest was filled with magic. Sarah could smell it -- it tickled and teased at her nose like the beginnings of a sneeze. The very air seemed to shimmer with it; lazy golden streams of sunlight cutting through the thick canopy overhead, setting the dust motes on fire. The trees they walked amidst were as she remembered them: thick, gnarled limbs that swung low to the ground, draped in thick tapestries of soft leaves. Wide, sticky cobwebs were spun between the spaces of fallen branches, and the barest wisps of fog tugged at their ankles. Sarah stepped carefully amidst the verdant undergrowth; large, star-shaped plants whose long leaves danced over the carpet of fallen leaves. Everything around them -- withered golden leaves underfoot, the thick, irregular bark of the trees, the very air they breathed -- seemed to glitter with magic.

"I'm glad you were able to get our stuff back," Sarah said, ducking beneath a low-hanging branch as she followed Chaucer's lead. Her shoes squelched slightly as she walked, and her feet were definitely going to remain damp for a while, but those were small worries.

Chaucer chuckled. "The naiads are a very friendly bunch, my dear. I was delighted to have the opportunity to finally meet them in person." He sighed, a trifle forlorn, as his bulbous body nimbly navigated the forest floor, cluttered with undergrowth and broken branches. "I only wish we had more time," he said mournfully.

Sarah laughed. "Sorry, Chaucer. Next time I'll get his Majesty to lengthen the time limit."

"And how would you propose to do that?"

She smiled. "He deducted hours last time. I want a refund."

Chaucer chuckled in response, but Hoggle, trailing behind them, groaned in frustration. "Wish you to would stop jokin' about him!" he barked, face like a storm cloud.

Sarah sighed, eyes on the ground as she continued to pick her way among the fallen leaves. "It's only play, Hoggle. Sometimes it helps if you joke about the things that scare you."

"Right," Hoggle barked. "I'll remember that, next time I meet th'bastard. I'll be laughin' all the way to stinkdom."

Sarah smiled at the image -- Hoggle sniggering in the enraged Goblin King's face -- but ducked so that her hair hid her face.

"Whatever you say, Hoggle," she demured. "Chaucer," she spoke up before Hoggle could deliver his indignant retort, "last time I was here with Ludo... he disappeared on me. Luckily, we met him back at the bog, but --"

"And you are afraid the same might happen to us -- or yourself -- as your very large friend?" Chaucer nodded absentmindedly, red eyes scanning the area before them thoughtfully. "Fear not. Those are the Wallowing Pits, as Hedwig here --"

"HOGGLE! Damn you people, it's not hard!"

"-- previously mentioned. And they are most predominant on the far left side of the forest, while we," he tapped a shining claw to this scabby cheek thoughtfully. "While we... seemed to have entered on the far right."

"Is that okay?" Sarah asked, catching the hesitation in his tone.

“Of course.” Chaucer smiled, yellow tusks formidable. “With myself to guide you, there is really no wrong way to go about it. Just, er, ways with unforeseen circumstances.”

“Such as?” Sarah asked, while Hoggle made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a whimper.

“Well,” Chaucer said, skeleton-like arms folding over his enormous paunch as he waited for them to catch up, “It appears we will not be traversing through the Goblin City on our way into the Castle. Which will certainly alleviate some difficulties.”

“What?” Hoggle paused. “But you have to go through the City. It’s either that, or...” A look of horror blossomed over his features.

“You wouldn’t!”

“Our primary concern here is time!” Chaucer snapped at him. “I am merely bowing to that necessity! If you can figure another option, be my guest!” He stomped off, line of his back stiffly furious as he led them onward.

“Um, Hoggle?” Sarah asked, disentangling a strand of her dark hair from a particularly grasping twig. “What are you guys talking about?”

Hoggle scowled at the ground as he trudged past. “Nuthin’.”

With a sigh of exasperation, Sarah simply yanked her hair free and ran to catch up to Chaucer. “So, there’s another way to get into the Castle?”

“Yes,” Chaucer said primly. “That is, if certain members of our party,” shooting the dismal Hoggle a really nasty look, “are not completely averse to it. He sniffed. “Then again, even if they are, I doubt there is a feasible alternative.”

“To what?” Sarah asked.

“The Castle is completely surrounded by defenses, naturally, in case of attack. The City on one side, so that the goblin army can move quickly into defense mode. On the other side is a moat.”

Sarah paused. “A moat?” She frowned. “That’s it?”

“Yes.”

“Oh. Well, did you ever read the record of someone who had crossed it?”

“Many, in fact. Up until the point where they fell in.”

Sarah blinked. “They... they all fell in?”

“Inevitably.”

“... and then?”

“And then, well...” Chaucer licked his lips with a black tongue. “Then the records became very... strange. To be honest, I could never quite figure out what had happened to them, after that. It was very strange... yes, very strange indeed...”

“Hoggle?” Sarah looked over her shoulder at the belligerent dwarf behind them. “Do you know what happened?”

Hoggle looked at her, and the fear was blatant in his eyes. “No,” he admitted. “No one does. But they never came back up.”

Sarah swallowed, mouth suddenly dry. “Okay, then,” she said, gamely trying to smile. “Note to self: don’t fall in the moat.”

The forest was slowly becoming darker, the late afternoon sunshine relaxing into a shady twilight. The sky above them was turning a dusky lavender, stained by hazy grey clouds. Every now and again, if she strained her eyes through the canopy of leaves above their heads, Sarah could see the last, dying rays of the setting sun.

“He created the Labyrinth, didn’t he?” she said, breaking the uneasy silence that had lay over them for the last few minutes. “It all sounds like something he would do.”

They knew, of course, who “he” was.

Both Hoggle and Chaucer opened their mouths — judging by their expressions, to launch into another warning tirade or a pedantic lecture, respectively, but Sarah beat them to it.

“Chaucer, what exactly is the Labyrinth?”

That inestimable personage frowned; stooping to disentangle a loose root from his foot-claws and throwing her a disdainful look in the process. “I’ve spent centuries trying to decipher exactly that, young lady. It’s not an answer you can memorize between meals.”

“Oh. I forgot about that... how about the Cliffs Notes? A summary,” she amended at his bewildered expression.

“Hmph. A summary. And why, pray tell,” he asked peevishly, wrinkling his nose, “should I be required to boil down my life’s work into a few sentences?”

“Because,” Sarah answered. “A lot’s at stake here. Things might go better if I had a better idea at how this game works.”

“Ah.” Looking properly abashed, Chaucer smiled. “Good enough. Well, then... Hmmm. A summary. Well, to begin with, I doubt your assumption of Jareth’s omnipotence is entirely correct.”

Sarah looked curiously at the former Librarian. “But he keeps on — you know, “my Labyrinth” this, and “my Labyrinth” that. I always assumed he made it in the first place.”

“I sincerely doubt that,” Chaucer remarked candidly. “The Labyrinth is very much its own entity. To be sure, being its king, Jareth has almost immeasurable control over the domain. But,” and here he paused, “from my extensive research, I had always imagined His Majesty as more of a caretaker than a creator... a very, very powerful caretaker. With enormous responsibilities. In fact,” he continued, pointedly ignoring Sarah’s attempts to make her own reply to his theories, “I would even venture to say that he is almost a part of the Labyrinth itself.”

Sarah’s mouth, which had been open in her attempts to get a word in edgewise, snapped shut. “What?”

“The Labyrinth, as far as I can discern, is more of a human creation than anything else. I believe Jareth was an integral part of that creation.”

Sarah gave him a disbelieving look. “Unless anything in those records proves humans once had magic, I doubt we had anything to do with the Labyrinth.”

Chaucer returned her look with a disapproving one of his own. "Belief is a very powerful thing, young lady. And your people have always placed incredible faith in their myths, legends, fireside stories... They have shaped the way mortals view the world. The Labyrinth, if one is to examine it closely, reveals itself to a kind of culmination of those stories: a collection of primal fears and wonder. And in most human cultures, the image of a maze, or a labyrinth, can be found in at least one story." He nodded to himself. "Yes, I believe that the Labyrinth is merely the personification of humanity's dreams." He frowned. "Or perhaps it goes deeper than that, and it is their origin..." He shook his head, disgruntled. "There is a reason I've spent several lifetimes on this very subject — it is not an easy riddle to answer."

"Is that what makes you so certain humans created the Labyrinth?" Sarah asked doubtfully. "Stories?"

"You used to put very great faith in them yourself, didn't you?" Chaucer chided, and Sarah blushed. "But no, it is not only for that reason. I am also greatly influenced by the fact that the Labyrinth alters with each new mortal that enters its gates."

("Why is it different?"

"Because you are different.")

Sarah hesitated, hand placed on the rough bark of a sparkling tree beside her. "That's right," she whispered. "I knew that."

"Take, for instance, your first journey through its boundaries," Chaucer continued, unhearing. "That impressive staircase room in the castle — that was not there before you arrived." He looked thoughtful for a moment. "Interesting, that. Usually a mortal's influence doesn't overlap into Jareth's private realm. But to continue — the staircase room was your own contribution. As were the Fireys, I believe, and the Bog of Eternal Stench."

"What?" Sarah gasped. "Alright, I understand the Escher room, and the Fireys, even — but the Bog? How did I have anything to do with that?"

Chaucer smiled. "You had a baby brother at that time, did you not?"

"I still do — well, not so much a baby, anymore. But yes."

"And as a very capable — if temperamental — young woman, I'm sure you were expected to perform diaper duty every once in a while?"

"I..." Sarah's eyes widened.

"Didn't enjoy it much, did you?"

"That's what it reminded me of!" Sarah yelped. "But it was much, much worse..."

"That would be the Labyrinth taking liberties. It takes the ordinary and transforms it into the extraordinary — yet still somehow familiar. Like any myth."

"But Hoggle knew about the Bog! Like it was infamous, or something."

"Stuff like that doesn't take long to get infamous," Hoggle muttered. "Word gets 'round pretty damn quick."

"And Sir Didymus lived there!"

“Oh, there was always a bog in that particular section,” Chaucer dismissed her protests airily. “It just recently became the Bog of Eternal Stench. Thanks to you.”

Sarah shook her head wonderingly. “That’s incredible.”

Chaucer smiled.

Sarah was silent for a few moments, taking it all in. Suddenly, she spoke up. “Where does he come into all of this?”

Chaucer shrugged, bony shoulders protruding. “Every story has an evil magician, an enchanted prince, etc. Every tribe has a King of Dreams — or Nightmares.”

“Not anymore,” Sarah murmured to herself. “We’ve forgotten most of it.”

“Perhaps. But they are still fascinated by the old stories, I would be willing to bet.”

Sarah thought of a small red book that had had a permanent place on her dressing table for so many years, until she had firmly shut it in a drawer. “That, I can’t deny.” She was silent for a moment more, and then decided to take a risk. “I stole his pendant.”

“You what?” Two voices chorused together, and then the owners took a moment to exchange glares.

“How did you ever manage that?” Chaucer continued.

“What were y’thinking?” Hoggle said, a beat later.

“I was desperate,” she admitted. “I was lost and alone, without you guys. He was there to make fun, of course.” She shrugged. “It was very much a spur-of-the-moment thing, I promise. Never to be attempted again.”

“Sarah, did you have any idea... no, I supposed you didn’t,” Chaucer finished grimly, while Hoggle’s simply struggled to deal with this new development, opening and closing his mouth like a frantic fish. “You took an incredible risk, my dear.”

“See, that’s the thing,” Sarah continued. “I mean... he was angry at me, obviously. And I was really frightened there for a moment --”

Hoggle snorted in disbelief.

“ — but he didn’t... attack me, or anything. He simply asked for it back.” She thought about it. “Come to think of it, he never actually touched it.” She turned to Chaucer, who was watching, with great amusement, Hoggle turn a mottled red with impotent rage. “What is it, exactly?”

“Hmm?” Chaucer responded, still distracted by Hoggle (now turning an unbecoming shade of purple). “Oh. The pendant? Ah, yes,” he said nervously. “Perhaps we should pick up the pace. Time is of the essence, of course.”

“Chaucer,” she said in a threatening tone. “What are you not telling me?”

“Please keep in mind, young lady,” he answered testily, “that Jareth is still my sovereign, and I still owe my first allegiance to him.”

“You betrayed that alliance the moment you decided to guide me through the Labyrinth,” Sarah replied. “And don’t think he doesn’t know it.”

Chaucer's pockmarked face blanched unbecomingly, and Hoggle sniggered. "Oh. Mentioned that, did he? Aha. I believe I shall lengthen my sabbatical."

"You do that," Sarah said grimly. "It's probably a very, very good idea. But before that," whirling around to face him, "I want you to tell me everything you know about that damn pendant. Right now."

Surprised, Chaucer halted in his tracks. His bat-like ears flapped against his head, almost questioningly. "And why," he asked, scrutinizing her face, "would it be so important to you? And how exactly," he continued, overriding her attempts to speak, "did you get it from Jareth? And if he didn't ever touch it with his hands," tilting his bulbous head to one side, "how exactly did he get it back, pray tell?"

Sarah sighed, knowing she was beaten. "You tell me, and I'll tell you. Deal?"

Chaucer nodded. "Indeed." He resumed his path through the forest, waddling sedately ahead of the rest of them. "I must admit, I do not know as much as I'd like to. But," and he looked over his shoulder in her direction, "you remember the living records?"

"Couldn't ever forget them."

"Of course. Well, Jareth keeps his own records as they develop, you see. He has his own private library, and although I have, regretfully, never been granted access, I believe he has quite an impressive collection of both living records and mortal literature. Forgive me; I stray from the topic at hand — ahem. Yes, well, after a volume has completed itself, he decides whether or not to give it to my keeping. Needless to say, I have always been deemed trustworthy by his Majesty — ever since I assumed the post of Librarian. And when I began to compile my research in writing about the history of the Labyrinth, he was very gracious in making sure I received all the records from before I became Librarian." He paused. "All but two."

Sarah quickly looked up from the ground she was treading so carefully, almost tripping on a thick branch. "Two? Which two?"

"The first volume, of course, as it is natural to assume. Otherwise we wouldn't be able to indulge in these delightful philosophical debates about the Labyrinth's — and Jareth's — origins. However, the other book... The only other record I am missing is the thirteenth volume."

"Oh." Sarah hopped ahead over tangling vines in the undergrowth until she walked abreast of her friend. "I see... should I think there's something significant about that?"

Chaucer shot her an amused look. "Perhaps, but with you, I would never expect too much."

Sarah smiled, recognizing the teasing for what it was. "Alright, so you have all volumes except the first and the thirteenth. What does this have to do with his pendant?"

Chaucer smiled, a trifle smugly. "There is a significant disparity between the volumes before the missing thirteenth record, and those that follow."

"What disparity?" Sarah asked, still concentrating on her footing.

"The pendant in which you are so interested." Sarah stopped in her tracks, turning to face Chaucer in amazement. "In volumes two through twelve," Chaucer continued, "there is no mention at all, even in the slightest detail, of its existence. And believe me, I have looked."

"So you're saying..." Sarah trailed off.

“That the thirteenth volume concerns how he acquired that most interesting trinket. And he wants no one to see it; not even myself, his trustworthy Librarian.” Chaucer grimaced. “Well, formerly trustworthy.”

Sarah walked along beside him, introspective. “So he didn’t always have it.”

Chaucer gave her an exasperated look. “No, not to put too fine a point on it! But there is so much more to it than that, so much room for speculation. Where did he get it? Did he take it off a victim of the Labyrinth? Did he create it himself, using his ever-impressive powers? Or perhaps...”

Chaucer mused to himself. “Perhaps the explanation is even more convoluted than one might think.” He sighed. “All we know is, it is an artifact of incredible power.”

“And... how do ‘we’ know that?” Sarah asked.

Chaucer sniffed. “It says so. In all the records.”

“All the records after the thirteenth, you mean.”

His pockmarked nose twitched in annoyance. “Well, yes. But those have absolute authority, of course. No one can alter the records, or in any way influence their narrative.”

“Do the records have a bias?”

His ears stood up on his head in pure indignation. “Do the records have a — what are you implying, young lady?”

“I’m not implying. It’s a simple question.” She tucked an errant strand of dark hair behind one ear as she walked. “For instance: the account of my first trip through the Labyrinth in my record, and the one in his. Are they different? Do they echo our viewpoints? Or are they completely dispassionate?” She noticed, abstractly, that talking to Chaucer had the same effect on her as writing English papers in the wee small hours of the morning: the scholarly tone got away from her.

Chaucer sputtered for a moment, “Well, of course — I mean, I can’t see any reason why —” His ears drooped. “To tell you the truth, I am not completely sure.”

“Well, you’ve read my record,” Sarah remarked dryly. “Don’t you remember if there was any difference?”

“Yes, I have had the opportunity to peruse your record. I have not done with Jareth’s.”

“Why not?”

“Well, er...” Chaucer ducked his eyes to the ground. “To be perfectly frank, he hasn’t given it to me.”

“Oh.” Sarah thought about it a moment. “Well, maybe it hasn’t completed itself, yet.”

If anything, Chaucer managed to look even more dismayed. “No, no... I’m quite sure enough time has elapsed.” He hesitated. “To be honest, enough time has elapsed for several new volumes to be delivered to my care — but Jareth has not been handing them over. He hasn’t given me a new record, in fact, since you first entered the Labyrinth’s gates.” He turned his dark red eyes to her face, which was thoughtful. “It was one of the many reasons why I decided a vacation from life at the Castle was in order — in general, too much bad feeling around the place.”

“Hmmm.” Wishing to change the subject, she began again. “So all we know is that it’s supposed

to have incredible power. And we only know that from his own records, which may be prejudiced.”

“Huh. I know it’s dangerous,” Sarah heard Hoggle mutter behind them. “And I don’t need no book t’tell me so.”

Sarah stopped to turn and face him. “Hoggle? Is there something you know that you’re not telling us?”

Hoggle shoved his hands deep inside the pockets of his jerkin, scowling. “Doesn’ matter, anyways. Though you two’d forgotten about me, chatterin’ away up ahead.” He glared at the ground. “Besides. Some things don’t bear repeatin’.”

“Hoggle.” Sarah knelt in front of him, forcing him to look her in the face. “Hoggle, it’s important.” He only scowled further. “Please?”

Reluctantly, Hoggle lifted his head, eyes pleading. “I used to live in the Castle,” he began gruffly. “Ain’t got no family. So I stayed there.”

Sarah’s forehead wrinkled as she thought back. “But you said you couldn’t take me to the center, that time.”

Hoggle laughed, a bit harshly. “Don’t know how to work the maze, if that’s what you’re askin’. But there’s ways to get quick from the Palace to the Gates, or anywhere else you need to. Magic and stuff.”

“He’s right about that,” Chaucer broke in, appearing near Sarah’s shoulder. “I told you about the rumors of a portrait hall, filled with paintings like the one we used together. Jareth has ways.”

“Go on, Hoggle,” Sarah urged.

Hoggle hunched inside the material of his jerkin, as if trying to disappear from sight. “S’only one big punishment in the Labyrinth,” he muttered. “I mean, really big — kind where Jareth don’t even get angry. He just goes cold.” He swallowed nervously, eyes darting everywhere except Sarah’s face. “It’s banishment. If y’ever do something to make Jareth go cold, he banishes you. For good.”

“Banished where?” Sarah asked, making sure to include Chaucer in the question. “The lands outside the Labyrinth?”

Chaucer was the one that answered, shaking his head slowly. “That would be punishment enough, I’m sure. The lands that borders the Labyrinth are harsh and barren — though I hear one may travel beyond that, and find a habitable realm.” He frowned. “But what your loyal friend has just reminded us of... yes, I’d forgotten about that. I’d heard of it done, but never seen it. Those unlucky creatures are not abandoned to the mercies of the elements, or simply cast out of the gates. They vanish completely.”

“When Jareth banishes you,” Hoggle said, voice hoarse, “you stop existin’.”

Sarah looked at Hoggle a moment, taking in the stark terror in his eyes. Wordlessly, she wrapped her arms around him, hugging him close for comfort.

“I saw it done, once,” he continued, speaking softly into her ear. “Magsley the bogwitch had done somethin’ — nobody wanted to say what. She was crawlin’ in front of the throne, begging for forgiveness. Jareth just looked at her. He didn’ say nothin’ — just held up on of those crystals he’s always tossin’ around, up in front of his chest. Right in front of his medallion. And the medallion shone, and it went through the crystal like a ray of light, and it hit Magsley --” He squeezed his

eyes shut tight, and Sarah could feel him shaking. “She screamed, and was gone. There was nothin’ left of her.”

He pulled away from Sarah, gnarled hands clenched into fists and held tightly at his sides. “I was afraid he do that to me, if I didn’ follow orders,” he said shortly. “That’s why I done what I did — givin’ that peach, and all. I know that’s no excuse.” He raised his eyes to hers. “But that’s what I thought. And then, after you’d left, I was afraid he’d do it to me ‘cause you never called for us, and he knew you wouldn’t care...” He shook his head slowly.

Sarah just sat there, open-mouthed at his air of defeat. Unexpectedly, tears stung, her eyes. “Oh God, Hoggle.” She lifted a hand to her mouth to muffle a sob. “I’m so sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

He patted her awkwardly with one hand. “S’okay. He didn’t. And now you’re back.” He gave her a shy smile, and it was all she could do to keep from dissolving into tears.

“Ahem.” Behind them, Chaucer was giving his reading glasses a vigorous rubdown, careful not to intrude. “I do not mean to be indelicate, but perhaps we should be moving along. Whenever you are both ready.”

Hoggle and Sarah smiled at each other in acknowledgment. Sarah climbed to her feet, brushing off the dark dirt that had collected on her jeans, and they silently formed their usual procession through the trees. There was a companionable silence between the three.

Until Chaucer broke it.

“By the by, Sarah,” he said as they trudged amidst the glooming forest. “How did you get the pendant away from Jareth?”

“I kissed him,” she said.

Two voices roared in perfect agreement: “You did WHAT?”

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The ground underfoot had become suddenly loamy, sinking deep and soft beneath her feet. The rich, darker earth lacked the sharp glitter of before, and instead had the subdued quality of velvet underfoot. Kneeling momentarily, Sarah scooped up a bit into her hand, and it crumbled feather-soft between her fingertips, falling noiselessly back to the ground. She looked up, and found that the sky had also changed: it was now a calm, dark grey-blue, graced with a sprinkling of perfect stars.

“This is such a strange place,” Sarah murmured to herself.

“What’s that, my dear?” Chaucer asked, squinting his red eyes into the darkness ahead.

“Your Labyrinth,” she laughed softly, feeling a bit silly. “It’s so...”

“Fascinating?” Chaucer chirped.

“Treacherous,” Hoggle muttered.

Chaucer frowned at him. “Captivating, you mean.”

“Damn dangerous, I mean.”

“Unpredictable, maybe?”

“Threatenin’ — definitely.”

“Absorbing!”

“Yeah, it’ll swallow you up, alright.”

“Full of surprises!”

“Full of shi--”

“It isn’t that,” Sarah interrupted. “Though those are definitely all true — well, maybe not all of it,” shooting a disapproving look at Hoggle, who grumped and refused to look apologetic. “It’s just...” She looked around her, that the trees that had changed, in the blink of an eye, from gnarled trunks and low-hanging branches to straight-backed sentinels. They loomed high against the dusky horizon, fir-edged filigrees in the sky. Sarah stood a moment, breathing in their peaceful silence.

“There’s so much of it,” she said finally. “Layers and layers and layers of — of different worlds. Like Narnia,” eyes sparkling. “I feel like Jill and Eustace, braving the Underground to...” her voice faltered, then resumed. “Well, I suppose I am rescuing Brian, but he’s hardly a prince.” She cast a challenging look at both of them, voice dangerously light. “Think I’ll meet some genuine royalty on the way?”

Hoggle, suddenly, was very interested in the way his feet shuffled in the soft earth. So was Chaucer. Neither made the obvious point.

(The aftermath of Sarah’s kissing bombshell had been, of course, spectacular, with both Hoggle and Chaucer attaining new decibels in admonition. This had eventually degraded into some very pointed teasing, which Sarah had promptly put a stop to with the statement that, since she was bigger than both of them, neither love nor wisdom would keep them from being thrashed if they continued.)

“Right,” Sarah said, satisfied. She breathed in the musky scent of the dark earth. “Onward, then?”

Chaucer, as always, strode forward in what seemed a random direction, Hoggle grumbling discontentedly behind him, Sarah bringing up the rear. They walked together, talking a little, seemingly lost in perpetual night. Chaucer had backed up Hoggle’s claim that the darkness would increase, slowly, as they reached the heart of the forest — and with it, midnight. From there, he assured Sarah, the going would be easier and day would eventually break above their heads. Until then they would have to wander in ghostly half-light, haunted by an ever-darkening sky.

Sarah was spooked. The tall trees, like decisive brush strokes, seemed to watch them walking by, and she had a constant itch on the back of her neck from the feeling of unseen gazes. She shivered slightly, crossing her arms protectively over her chest. Subdued rustlings and whistles followed their silent steps; rusty croaks and muffled growls.

“Um, Chaucer?” she called. “Is there anything is this part of the forest that’s, um, particularly dangerous?”

Hoggle shot her a dark look from beneath spiky eyebrows. “Take your pick.”

Chaucer glared at him. “Nothing too strenuous, my dear, I promise. As long as we stick close together.” But his clawed feet never paused in their speedy stride.

“Gotcha.” Sarah picked up the pace, trying to shake her feet free from the treacherously yielding loam. The forest swallowed up the word, whole, and continued to watch.

They sped silently along the forest floor, surrounded by shadows and creeping sound. Their pace grew to a run — Chaucer waddling frantically, as Hoggle huffed grimly along, Sarah struggling as her sneakered feet seemed to sink deeper into the earth with every step. Behind, ripples of movement followed them: a shivering of leaves that hinted at something hiding, just beyond the trees. It was slowly gaining on them, drawing every closer, gaining speed and confidence as they ran.

Sarah was badly winded, breathing heavily as they raced beneath the fir treetops. With the rasping gasp of sand, the dry, shifting earth beneath her feet gave way, and she sank down in it up to her knees. It made a cold, slithering sound as she struggled to find firm ground — like the coils of a twisting snake. Behind her, something screamed in predatory triumph.

“Hoggle! Chaucer!” she shouted, falling backwards as she tried to pull her legs free. As one they turned, not even pausing as they ran back to help her. Each grabbed one of her hands, wrenching her free as she finally was able to stumble onward. They ran, hands still clasped, as enraged yowls and gleeful chitterings pursued their flight. They ran, feet pounding and breath tearing at their lungs, blindly fleeing through that dark forest of sentinel trees. Sarah could hear the movement of fur and feathers right behind them, feel hot breath as jaws snapped at their heels like steel traps. Something brushed her back —

-- and the moon burst free in the sky. A pale globe, it flooded the forest with pure, white light that cascaded over the trees, gilding their bark with silvery luminescence and chasing away the shadows. There was a sound: as if something was sizzling, frying in a pan... and the rank smell of burned meat. A terrified howl...

... and they were safe.

“Well,” Chaucer said brightly, as the others collapsed with relief, panting for air. “I think we handled that well enough, don’t you?”

“I’m gonna kill him,” Hoggle said hoarsely.

“No,” Sarah gasped between breaths. “He’s the only one who knows the way out of here.” She patted him reassuringly. “Wait until we’re at the Castle. Then you can kill him.” She pushed herself into a sitting position, still breathing rather heavily. “Chaucer, what was that?”

“I have no idea — isn’t that fascinating? It must be new.”

Sarah groaned, while Hoggle muttered darkly about dwarf recipes involving Librarian.

“Now then,” Chaucer continued, oblivious, “are we all ready then? This next part is very easy going.” With that, he waddled between two enormous slabs of rock right ahead of them; slate-grey guardians that rose high above their heads, almost as high as the treetops. On either side of them were wide, high-reaching rocks, scaling almost on a vertical slope. It seemed like they were now going to travel along the rift between two huge rocky hills — small mountains, even.

There was the thinnest opening between the slate slabs, small enough so that Chaucer has a tad of trouble wriggling his massive body through.

“Come on then,” he shouted from the other side. “We have successfully triumphed over our first obstacle! Isn’t this exciting?”

Hoggle wheezed with rage. “Dead. He’s dead.” With a murderous look, he got unsteadily to his feet. Although he made as if to charge toward his target, he hesitated and turned back to Sarah. “You alright?”

“Yeah.” She was exhausted, just reveling in the fact she didn’t have to run anymore. She waved a hand at him. “Go on, I’ll catch up in a minute.”

He looked doubtful, but was too motivated by the prospect of chewing out his favorite Librarian to really give pause. He forced through the slender opening between the two slabs of rock, the muffled sounds of their argument could be heard.

Sarah breathed deep, relaxing, feeling the cool strands of grass tangle with her fingers. After a moment, she jumped to her feet, briskly dusting herself off. She walked over to the two slabs of stone, finding they parted just wide enough for her body to fit through easily. Hands braced against the cool rock, she peered through to see Chaucer and Hoggle just ahead, highly animated and shouting at each other as they walked along the ravine floor. It was, she was surprised to find, almost like a slender strip of valley laid between the two small mountains. Instead of being so totally sheltered from the elements as to become sparse and barren, the ravine had instead blossomed. Soft grass grew underfoot, and the tall trees growing on the mountains spilled down to the very edges of the ravine. The moon, shining softly in the sky, dappled the ground with patterns of light and shadow. Sarah looked up —

-- and gasped in perfect wonder.

The trees that grew on the mountains were huge, leafy things; their wide branches reaching almost close enough to touch over the gap of the ravine. They formed a soft, rustling ceiling that whispered gently with every breeze, waving with the wind. Between them were spun webs: huge, silvery webs that formed an intricate, lace-like pattern between treetops. The strands that formed them were as thick as Sarah’s smallest finger, and looked to be as tough as wire. They sparkled beautifully in the moonlight, glimmering like precious metal with every twist of the tree branches they rested upon. But they moved a bit strangely, as if they were weighted. Squinting, standing on tiptoe, Sarah could just about glimpse the elegant forms of scaled, silvery creatures, curled up contentedly in their hammocks of silver webs.

“Dragons.”

Sarah started. There, nestled in the shadows, was her favorite Goblin King. He was leaning comfortably against the solid line of a tree trunk, head tilted upwards. He was watching the webs, as she had been, and didn’t turn in her direction as she continued to study him. He was wearing a strange outfit, a cloak of rags and tatters and lace, all in different shades of red: vermilion, scarlet, and ruby. It swathed his slender form in color and shapelessness, though, as he stood away from his tree, she could see the rags parted easily to allow movement. Beneath, a silken outfit the color of bone gleamed in the moonlight.

“Oh.” She swallowed. Another look at the creatures above them. “They’re beautiful.”

“I think so, too,” he said. Then he finally turned his gaze to her. “Are you enjoying your second trip though my Labyrinth, Sarah?”

“Sure,” she said. “It’s always a blast.” And then, a little unnerved by the intensity of his gaze: “How’s Brian?”

But unlike last time, the question failed to faze his Majesty. “Fine,” he said, linking his hands behind his back and standing with his feet apart. “I’ll tell him you inquired.”

Sarah blinked, still standing uncertainly in the entrance to the ravine. “You... you see Brian?”

“What,” Jareth asked, “you expected I had him locked up in the oubliette? Don’t be silly, Sarah. Brian is well taken care of. And we chat quite often.” He smiled to himself.



Sarah, on the other hand, was suddenly furious. “If you’ve done anything to hurt him,” she threatened, “I will make sure you feel it.”

Jareth laughed. “Really, Sarah,” he mocked. “I say one thing, you assume the opposite is true. One would think you suspect me of duplicity.” He chuckled again, the loose patches of his cloak fluttering. “But then,” he drawled, “Brian informs me — he and I are quite good friends now, did you know that? — that you are not the most trusting of souls.”

“I’d think you’d want to avoid me, if I’m such a brat,” Sarah muttered. “But you keep popping up everywhere.”

Jareth smiled widely. “Yes, well. What is it they say in your world? ‘Women: can’t live with them —’”

“No fun stealing babies without them?” Sarah finished brightly.

“Something like that. You see, your friend is giving me quite an education about the mortal realm. Information I hope will come in handy, some day.”

Sarah’s blood chilled at the very thought.

Jareth walked a pace, eyes again on the silver strands above their heads. “He adores you, you know.”

“What?” Sarah asked, caught off guard.

“Brian.” He was quiet for a moment, contemplating the shining splendor. “He thinks the world of you.” His tone was a strange mixture — regret, bitterness, and condescension — but Sarah was too bewildered to take much notice.

“That’s nice,” she said shortly. “We can deal with that if we get back home. When we get back home,” she amended firmly.

Jareth began to laugh, almost wearily. “Ah, Sarah.” He leaned his shoulder against a tree on the opposite bank of the ravine. “Three years, and you still haven’t learned any grace in accepting the affections of a suitor.” There was a deep sigh from beneath the trees, but the shadows were so thick that she couldn’t see his face. “I would have given you your dreams,” the disembodied voice drifting across the expanse between them. “Anything you wanted -- you only had to ask. Was that so terrible a fate?”

*(“I ask for so little — just let me rule you.”)*

She wished she could see his face.

“I didn’t want to go through my life frightened of the Goblin King,” she finally answered, voice as soft as his own.

“If I remember correctly — and I do — that was hardly all I asked of you.” He lifted away from the trees, and the moonlight shone on his angered beauty. “Or have you chosen to forget that inconvenient detail?”

*(“Just fear me, love me, do as I say...”)*

“Fearing someone you care about isn’t love!” She protested, hands clenched into fists at her sides. “It... it’s worship! It isn’t *real*!”

“Ah.” His eyes glinted dangerously. “Then perhaps this will be real enough for you.”

One hand lifted, motioned the dragon webs above them. “You’ve been here long enough,” he said. “They’re coming awake, now, ready for the newest hunt. And if they find you here, they will savage you for trespassing upon their territory.” He let his arm fall, turning his cruel eyes upon her. “That is, if you don’t escape.”

Sarah swallowed, heart thudding in her mouth. “Wait a minute,” she said. “This is the only way through the mountains!”

Jareth smiled.

Sarah stared in him in shock. “I’d have to turn back around, wouldn’t I?” she asked, voice quiet. “I’d have to backtrack... lose all the ground I’ve covered.” Her eyes blazed with rage. “You bastard.”

Jareth shrugged. “I play this game to win, Sarah. I always have.” “But what about Hoggle and Chaucer?”

“They have the scent of the Labyrinth’s magic on them. As do I. You do not, and are therefore an intruder. An interloper. A *threat*.” He smiled with his so-sharp teeth. “And don’t think you can just run quickly through their territory — it continues for several lengths down the ravine, and they would be upon you quicker than thought. No,” shaking his head in mock dismay. “I’m afraid you will have to start all over.”

Sarah stared at him, and in her stomach she felt the sinking feeling of despair. She felt numb, empty — faced with the fact of her inevitable defeat. For it was inevitable, if she had to backtrack — there was no way she could make it to the Castle in time. She closed her eyes against the pain, and whispered: “I hate you.”

More laughter.

She opened her dry, stinging eyes, glaring at his mirthful face. And made a decision.

She took a step onto the ravine floor, passing the slate-grey slabs that guarded the entrance. She stood firmly upon the soft ground, facing him, ready to fight.

“Give me the child.”

Jareth blinked. “What?”

“Give me the child,” she repeated. “Through dangers untold,” she continued, with the barest of smiles, taking another step along the soft carpet of the ravine floor, “and hardships unnumbered - \_”

“Have you gone insane?” Jareth asked, obviously bewildered.

Step. “— I have fought my way here to the Castle, beyond the Goblin City --” Step.

“Sarah, did you hear me?” The Goblin King asked, a terrible intensity in his voice. “This is not a game. They will *kill* you. And I won’t be able to prevent them!”

Step. “— to take back the child that you have stolen. For my will is as strong as yours --” Step. Step. Step.

“Sarah, I am not lying to you.” He reached out, almost as if to touch her, to push her back, but

pulled away at the last moment. “Chaucer has already explained to you the limits of my rule — I command, I do not completely subdue. And dumb beasts like the dragons — I cannot prevent them from doing what is in their natures to do!”

“— and my kingdom as great.” One step more... and she was so close to him, almost touching. If she took one more step, the line of their bodies would meet. Distantly, she realized how much taller she had grown in three years. Her forehead was just about level with his eyes. She looked up into those eyes and saw amazement.

“And then the next line,” she said softly. “That all-important next line... the one you made me promise not to say. Or — what would happen? I forfeit everything. Not just my dreams.”

“It’s been three years since that battle,” he said. “Try to keep your mind on the present danger, and let it go.”

Her own eyes blazed with anger. “I might say the same of you.” Overhead, she could hear the sibilant rustling and musical trills of the dragons, coming awake. Her heart beat faster. “Do you know what I realized? If I lose, if you get my dreams — that last line won’t be true anymore. In fact, things will have so altered as to be the exact opposite... but then you already knew that, didn’t you?” The sounds were growing louder, less sleepy — warning of danger in their midst. “In fact, that’s the entire point.”

Jareth nodded slowly, eyes on her face. “Congratulations,” he said. “I always said that you were a very perceptive girl.”

“But I have to wonder,” she continued, and the higher pitch of her voice indicated how afraid she really was, “-- *why*? After all, I’m just a mortal girl, and it was only one loss — why go to so much trouble? Why do you care?”

“I don’t, really,” he said. “But it helps to pass the time.”

Sarah took a deep breath, hyper-aware of the movement above their heads. “See,” she said, “that’s where I think you’re lying. So I’m going to stand here,” voice a trifle strained, “and wait for the dragons. To savage me, as you said.” Her dark green eyes looked steadily into his crystalline ones. “But I don’t think you’ll let that happen.”

Eyes narrowing. “And why not? If you turn back, I win. If they kill you, I win. Why would I thwart such a sure chance for victory?”

Sarah laughed, the nervous giggles bubble up inside her. “I have no idea,” she admitted. “But my options aren’t nearly as attractive. So I’m going to take that risk.”

He broke away to turn his back on her. The patches of his cloak brushed softly against her face, he was so close. He strode away, almost defiantly, moving several paces away to watch from the shadows.

“Die, then,” he said. “Throw away your life.”

She couldn’t find anything to say to that — in fact, she was too terrified to move at all. She simply stood there, holding his gaze with her own. His mouth hardened. His face filled her vision, the only thing she could see as she waited. Above her head, she could feel the currents of air moving as the dragons sprung into flight, shining bodies streaking against the night sky. Their calls were sharper now, almost flute-like; musical shrills in their intent to attack. Through it all, she watched Jareth, her eyes locked on his. She could see them now, out of the corner of her eye: twisting, scaled forms with delicately clawed wings, flowing down from the webbed canopy. They were

coming for her, shrieking as they fell to earth, faster than falling water, keening with their descent. Terror seized her and she couldn't help it — she cowered, falling back and screaming as a wingtip grazed her face.

She was consumed, enfolded, enveloped. Strong arms lifted her up, cradled her close. Color blazed before her eyes — crimson and garnet, tongues of flame-colored fabric. He pressed her against his chest, one arm under her knees and the other supporting her back; as if she were a small child. Around them, the dragons spiraled and unfolded along their silvery lengths, an unbelievable spectacle of wings and fire and jeweled eyes. One of them passed close enough to touch the fluttering patches of Jareth's cloak, screaming for its victim. Jareth's hand came up and pressed against the back of Sarah's head, forcing her to bury her face into his shoulder, away from the danger. So she didn't see the dragon pause in midair, see it arrest its serpentine movement. She didn't see reptilian eyes meeting his cold ones. She didn't see the dragon bow its head in reverence, respect — and not for any notions of sovereignty. It was responding to the blatant aggression, the attitude of possession, in the imperious stance of the Goblin King.

The dragon knew the rules of the world. It acknowledged, and apologized, that it had dared to hunt another predator's prey.

Unconsciously regal, Jareth swept through the mass of swirling silver bodies, and they parted like water. Still cradling Sarah in his arms, he walked the length of the ravine. The dragons fanned out behind him, following in a respectful escort, their wings and fire leaving a path of iridescent beauty in his wake. From the shelter of his arms, Sarah watched. Their leader keened, once, and they soared as one towards the sky, crying for the pure moon above.

And the beauty ended.

Sarah hardly noticed as Jareth placed her, ever so gently, back on her feet. She sighed, a little forlorn. She was abruptly aware that she was huddled against his still form, and she stepped away quickly. He had sheltered her.

He had saved her.

She risked a quick glance at his face, still a little unbelieving of what had just happened. He stood as silent as stone in his graceful hangings of scarlet, beautiful face turned impassively away from her. His profile was expressionless, as if cut from glass.

"Thank you," she said. She opened her mouth again, and then closed it. What else could she say? She was frightened of him again. All the courage she had before had leaked out of her with that frenzied attack — like a shattering of stars. She turned to escape.

"Sarah."

She caught herself, heart in her mouth. "Yes?"

"If I ever need to do something like that again..."

Slowly, dreading what she would see, she turned around. He was looking straight at her — eyes blazing in a too-pale face.

"Yes?" she whispered.

"I won't."

And then, in a swirl of darkness and shining dust, he disappeared.

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Brian shifted against the jagged rock wall of the oubliette, trying to get a little comfortable in order to sleep. He had just managed to twist his back enough to avoid bruising when the Goblin King strode in.

Brian didn't even have time to think. He blinked, and the next thing he knew Jareth had picked him up by his ragged shirt, slamming him into the stone behind. Jareth pinned him against the wall, a gloved hand resting easily at Brian's throat.

Jareth could crush his windpipe without hesitation. Brian could feel that, could feel the hideous promise of strength in those slender, elegant fingers. He froze like a cornered animal, breathing shallowly through his mouth.

Jareth's eyes held his, crystalline blue filled with hatred. And something else.

"She's mine," the Goblin King said.

Brian paused. "What?"

"Sarah," the King said casually. "She's mine." Then the anger returned and he leaned in closer, applying just enough pressure to make Brian gag slightly. "Do you understand that?" Jareth asked, too softly. "Is it possible for me push that fact far enough into your brain that it actually registers on your adolescent mind? Hmm?" He tilted his head to one side. "She's always been mine. From the moment she called on my goblins I've owned a piece of her soul. I don't care," with a quiet intensity, "If she somehow, miraculously, manages to solve the Labyrinth again. I don't care if she rescues you. Takes you home. Cleans you, feeds, you, tucks you into bed. Even if it's *her* bed." His gloved fingers tightened, black spots swimming before Brian's eyes. "If you marry. If you manage to have a handful of brats and a lovely little *puppy*," he ended viciously.

"None of that will change the fact that she. Is. Mine." He rested his cheek against Brian's. "And you, my fine feathered," he whispered into Brian's ear, "will live always with the knowledge that the one you love belongs body, mind and soul," he pulled back, looking directly into Brian's eyes, "to me."

He removed his hand abruptly, watching as Brian slumping to the floor in a violent coughing fit. Jareth waited until the boy was breathing normally.

"Stay away from what's mine," he said.

He turned and left.

~~~~~

Sarah spotted her friends just up ahead, running to catch up. Her heart was still thudding frantically in her chest like a caged animal, but she managed to smile as she reached them.

"Any trouble?" Chaucer asked, brow furrowed. "You took a little while — we almost decided to go back for you."

"No, nothing," she lied. "You know me, always off in a daze, wandering feet." She laughed nervously, avoiding Hoggle's curious gaze.

"By the way, Sarah," Chaucer resumed in a quite tone, he and Sarah falling back to talk as they walked onward. "I have been pondering your Hog-friend's revelation about the power's of Jareth's pendant."

“Really?” Sarah asked, distracted. “How nice.”

Chaucer frowned. “Well,” he said huffily. “Never mind then. In future, I’ll remember to keep my observations to myself.” He waddled ahead, expression sulky.

“Wait! Chaucer,” Sarah lunged to catch up. “I’m sorry. I’m... please, tell me what you were thinking.”

“Hmph.” Looking as if he refused to be placated, Chaucer said: “Oh, nothing of great importance. It’s just,” and here the façade fell away to reveal his deep interest in this new theory, “there’s really only one way you can negate someone’s existence — if we are to believe that’s what really happened.”

“Hoggle says so, and I believe him.”

“Yes, well. I would like to observe the process with my own eyes. But barring that possibility,” he said hastily, “I assume that we may hypothesize that Jareth used the exact opposite power of that which fuels the Labyrinth and its creatures. If this is true, then it’s no wonder he reigns with such terror. He holds the greatest threat to the Labyrinth around his own neck!”

“But what would be the exact opposite of the Labyrinth?” Sarah asked.

“Not the Labyrinth itself — but whatever created the Labyrinth. Although I admit, we have no way of knowing what that is for certain. But, for instance, if we were to go with the theory that it was formed from mortal dreams and fears, we could trace back--”

“But what would be the exact opposite of that?” Sarah interrupted. “Mortal nightmares?”

Chaucer thought about it. “No,” he said after a bit, “that would not follow, as the Labyrinth is made up from as many terror as wonders. Perhaps the dreams of one who... is not mortal?”

“Oh my God.” Sarah froze in her tracks, remembering.

(*“What is it?”*

*“What did you promise me, should you fail to solve my Labyrinth in time?”*)

Sarah closed her eyes, feeling dizzy with the sudden shock of revelation. Chaos flooded her mind, a barrage of hints and clues she should have paid attention to coming at her all at once. Through the confusion, only one thought was clear:

*It’s his dream.*

## Heart of Stone

“Aha!”

A wall, rising a few feet above Sarah’s head, made of worn dark stones — that was Chaucer’s triumphant discovery. He grinned, tusks bared in the moonlight, tapping it with one sharp claw.

“What is it?” Sarah asked, stepping carefully through the tangling underbrush to reach his side.

“A barrier,” Chaucer said significantly, “which means there is something of import behind it.”

Hoggle snorted. “Oh, give it up — you’re lost, and won’t admit it!”

Chaucer frowned at him. “Lost, I am not,” he said firmly. “Deterred, perhaps. The Labyrinth is not a static environment; you can’t expect me to know every square inch of it. Hmph.”

“Hmph yourself,” Hoggle muttered. “We’ve been wandren’ around this damn forest long enough. We’re on a time limit, here!”

“I know that,” Chaucer snapped. “This will help!”

“Is there a gate, or some way to get inside?” Sarah broke in. “I suppose we could climb over it...”

Hoggle crossed his arms adamantly. “Nuthin’ doin’.”

“I’m sure there’s an entrance somewhere,” Chaucer said hastily. “Give me a minute,” as he began to run his claws over the wall’s surface, “and I’ll — ah! Here it is!” He delicately pried a low door — almost indiscernible from the smooth stones surrounding it, disguises as it was with grime and clinging ivy — away from the rest of the structure. The door creaked complainingly on its rusted hinges, forcing Chaucer to tug rather sharply in order to wrench it free. With a groan, the low door — barely coming to Sarah’s hips — opened. Beaming, Chaucer waved them inside.

Hoggle and Sarah looked at each other, and then shrugged. Hoggle fit easily through the entrance, as did Chaucer, but Sarah had to crawl through on her hands and knees, ducking away from dislodged dirt as she scampered through. Shaking herself off, she rose unsteadily to her feet on the other side. She could hear Chaucer shutting the gate, now more compliant, behind them with a satisfied click as she brushed the dust off her jeans and shirt. Satisfied, she looked around at their surroundings for the first time — and gave a low whistle.

Paradise was on all sides. That was the only suitable word for it: paradise. They were surrounded by greenery, lush and verdant. Trees sprang up around them, but not the blanketing, glittering trees of before, or even the straight sentinels they had just left. These trees were comfortably gnarled and bent, with wide, low-hanging branches perfect for climbing. Their broad, thick leaves whispered together with the soft breeze. Against their dark softness were flowers, opening delicate and curving petals into wide blossoms and shining like pale stars. Amidst the trees other flowers bloomed: on climbing ivy, their miniature buds clustered closely together, pale pinks and yellows in the moonlight, or on tall, proud stalks as thick as Sarah’s arm, tear-shaped petals striped and freckled with exotic hues. They clustered at her feet in the thick grass, dainty steams bowed with the weight of their bell-like blossoms. To the right, Sarah could hear the steady rush and murmur of a stream — turning her head, she saw it cutting across the far border, running alongside the wall as velvety-dark moss bordered either edge. Her sneakers scuffed at a path of pale, pebbled stone that was born under her feet and wandered, idly, around the garden, only to suddenly split apart and run wildly in all directions.

“Where are we?” she asked, voice muted in astonishment. She watched Chaucer turn his head towards her, eyes shining in the bright moonlight. His head was curiously bowed — as if he were trying to hide between his shoulders.

“Oops,” he finally said.

“Oops?” Hoggle roared. “OOPS? That’s what you’ve got t’say for yourself? Oops?” He lunged, grabbing the squat demon by the shoulders and shaking him frantically. “Do know what’ll happen if he finds us here? With her? He’ll cut off our noses! He’ll make it so our legs are on top of our heads! He’ll drop us in the Bog of Eternal Stench! Well,” he said grimly, firming his grip on the abashed Chaucer, “I won’t have any nose after this, and walk around like I’m two days in the bottle, and stink like a pukin’ cat, BUT I’LL MAKE SURE HE DOES IT TO YOU FIRST!”

“Hoggle, Chaucer, what the he -- what is going on?” Sarah demanded. “Put him down, Hoggle. Hoggle!” With a surly thump, Chaucer was set — firmly — down upon the ground again. He shook his head as he sat, looking a bit dazed. He smiled weakly up at Sarah, waving one clawed hand dismissively.

“Nothing at all, m’dear,” he croaked, still looking a bit worse for the wear. “Just a teeny mishap.”

“What? Will someone tell me what’s going on?”

“The genius book-learner, here,” Hoggle growled, “has taken us straight into His Majesty’s private gardens. That’s what’s happened.”

“Oh.” Sarah deflated a little, losing a touch of her confidence. “Um... why don’t we just walk out?”

“Oh, no, that’s not possible,” Chaucer shook his head, a bit dizzily. “Jareth never makes things so simple. You should know that.”

“What do we do, then?”

“Oh, there’s an exit here, somewhere, I’m sure of it.” Chaucer gestured with razored claws airily, taking in the entire area in swirling loops. “Just have to find it.”

“Chaucer, are you all right?” Sarah knelt down next to the flummoxed creature, peering anxiously into his bemused face. “Hoggle, I think you shook him too hard.”

“We could leave him here?” Hoggle asked hopefully.

“Hoggle.”

“Sick people shouldn’t be travelin’!”

“No.” Sarah climbed to her feet. “He should be alright in a few minutes. You stay here with him — I’ll go look for someway out. When he gets better, you can both find me.”

“Sarah!” Hoggle reached up, placing one hand on her arm. “I’m sorry I messed that fat idiot up, I swear! Only don’t go explorin’ a place like this yourself. Please?”

“Hoggle, I’ll be fine.” She smiled down into his face, creased with worry. “I promise I’ll be careful — but we should get out of here as soon as possible.”

“You don’t understand, Sarah,” tugging on her arm. “There’s things in here... things I wouldn’t want you to see.”



“What do you mean?”

“Oh, nothing dangerous, I s’pose.” He withdrew his hand, tucking it nervously behind his back, and avoiding her gaze. “Just... spook stuff. Creepy. This place used to be in the hedges, where you found me workin’ before. I saw it then.”

“It... moved?”

“Oh, yeah. Stuff does that all the time, here.”

“Oh.” Sarah looked around her, more wary than before. “Then I’ll be double careful. Listen, just come find me when Chaucer feels better, okay?” And she sprinted off before he could say anything, waving as the shadows swallowed her up.

Hoggle sighed, watching. “Don’t say I didn’t warn her,” he muttered.

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Sarah trotted impatiently through the thicket of trees, pushing back branches bearing wide, soft leaves with her arms. A slender wand escaped her, hitting her softly across the face. She batted at it, spitting a leaf out of her mouth.

“Damn,” she muttered. “I have no idea where I’m going.”

She had been so eager to leap out of Hoggle’s anxious grasp that she hadn’t even bothered to follow one of the nicely plotted paths. She simply run straight for the trees — the result seeing that she could see little in front of her besides trees, trees, and more trees. It was annoying, and made her feel very, very silly. This was no way to combat the forces of darkness.

Or of whatever, she thought to herself. Forces of baby-snatchers? Nah. Forces of highly annoying, arrogant, better dressed than I am, overly-tall goblin lords? She grinned. Sounds about right.

But Sarah was whistling in the dark, and she knew it. She could laugh at him, yes — when he wasn’t in sight. When he wasn’t standing right in front of her. When he wasn’t holding her, protecting her...

“He saved me,” Sarah said softly. A leaf became tangled between her fingers as she pushed her way through, and she rubbed its smooth surface absentmindedly. “He saved me.”

She had counted on it happening. She had hoped for it, taken a terrible chance. And it had worked. But why had it worked? He had wanted her to fail — had pushed her into that fix, had laughed at her when she realized the terrible danger. But then she challenged him... and he saved her.

Why?

And the look on his face, when he had released her... Sarah shivered. No, it didn’t make any sense. And that frightened her. An infuriated Goblin King was bad enough. An unpredictable infuriated Goblin King... that was the stuff of nightmares.

Lost in her thoughts, Sarah had ceased to pay strict attention to where her feet were wandering. Still frowning with concentration, her feet suddenly tangled in the creeping undergrowth — and she pitched forward with a graceless “oomph,” just managing to catch herself before falling flat on her face.

“Ow,” she said distinctly. Struggling in the dirt, she brushed cobwebs out of her hair angrily. “Pay attention, Sarah,” she muttered to herself. She crouched, inspecting her knees, and hissed in pain when she found she had scraped them. They were just grazed, but her knees were bleeding, and her jeans were ripped. “Damn!”

Suddenly she heard the low, soft call of a bird, and her head snapped up. To her surprise, she found the trees — in the direction she had fallen, a little askew of her raggedy path — were thinning, allowing silvery shafts of moonlight to sift through the thick canopy overhead. In fact... she squinted, ignoring the pain in her knees, trying to get a better look... Yes, the forest definitely ended somewhere ahead. Spurred with new purpose, she struggled gamely to her feet and wrestled anew with the stout branches that blocked her path, which seemed to consciously wriggle out of her grip. Leaves thwapped her smartly in the face, and whippet-thin saplings clipped her sides as she walked on, but she simply scowled and trudged doggedly onward.

Eventually, she broke free of their tenacious grasping, almost stumbling into a secluded clearing. She pulled herself short just before falling on her face again, arms outspread to maintain balance. When she was sure of herself, she looked around.

This garden was very like the first she, Chaucer, and Hoggle had ventured into — shadowy and quiet, filled only with the sounds of grass and leaves rustling faintly in the gentle breeze. Flowers grew in wide, overgrown banks: oversized tiger lilies, silken orchids and the tiniest, most delicate rose blossoms she had ever seen, all entwined in overgrown plots scattered randomly over the grounds. The short, pale grasses were crushed beneath her sneakered feet, releasing a sweet scent. Over the entire scene the moon hung low in the sky, a gigantic glowing orb that cast a glistening sheen over everything in sight. It was, Sarah thought dreamily, lost in the wild beauty of it all, like a place from a fairytale... incredibly romantic.

She laughed softly, and whispered, “‘Lady, by yonder moon I swear, that tips with silver all these fruit-tree tops’...”

Suddenly, a loud rustle started in the bushes to her right and she yelped, ducking into the safety of a nearby tree’s shadow. She clutched desperately at the trunk, hands scraping against the rough, ragged bark, eyes darting wildly to see what — or who — had made the noise. Her breath froze in her throat as she caught sight of someone amidst the far trees: a slender figure in white, frozen against the darkness. Sarah crouched low to the ground behind her tree, heart thudding painfully in her chest.

When, after a few more anxious moments, no more sounds were heard, Sarah tentatively turned her gaze back to the intruder. He or she stood with impossible stillness, upright and poised in the moonlight. Squinting to see better, Sarah kept watch for a few minutes, hands trembling slightly in anxiety. When the figure made no more movement, she stood, a sigh of relief carrying almost all the breath out of her body.

“It can’t be him,” she whispered to herself. “He would have done something by now... said something...” She shook her head minutely, thoughtful gaze lingering on the motionless stranger. “Well,” she murmured, “can’t hurt to say hello, I guess.”

She tentatively picked her way through the garden paths, made of the same smooth, pale stone as those in the first garden. Although her steps were cautious, eyes constantly trained on the silhouette of her strange companion, she knew she was being reckless. She was completely out in the open, the moonlight making the clearing as bright as day. She was alone, with no way to defend herself. If this person was an enemy, she was in trouble.

But they made no movement at all, not even as she drew closer and closer, even when she called a soft “hello,” or whistled to get their attention. Frowning slightly, she abandoned caution and strode

over casually, leaning slightly forward as to see their face. "Excuse me," she said politely as she began to make out their face, "but I..."

The words stuck in her mouth, clattering against her teeth in shock. She stared a long moment at that white, expressionless face, then collapsed where she was standing. Pulling still-trembling legs to her chest, she buried her face in her knees and giggled helplessly until tears leaked from the corners of her eyes.

A statue. That was what she had been so afraid of — what had sent her running like a deer into the shadows, shivering in terror. She fell backward into the soft, fragrant grass, still laughing weakly. What a silly girl she was.

Shaking her head, Sarah climbed to her feet. Her mouth was twisted in a wry smile as she circled the figurine, leaf-shadows flickering over her form as she traveled. She had to admit to herself, it was a damn good statue. No wonder she had mistaken it for a real person: the detail was incredible. Her eyes widened as they followed the lines of what was truly a work of art.

The statue was crafted from pure white marble, the moonlight softening its harsh brightness until the pale mineral looked almost soft to touch. The figure was a girl — a young girl, barely coming up to Sarah's chin. She was dressed in Grecian robes, folds of fabric falling gracefully around her sandaled feet. Her hair was schooled into careful ringlets that brushed her smooth shoulders, banded by a circlet that settled firmly on her brow. Her hands were clasped, beseechingly, before her — hands clenched so tightly that Sarah could almost see the strain. Her delicate, oval face was slightly upturned, as if begging favor from some invisible lord.

"Amazing," Sarah said to herself. She laughed a little. "So beautiful... who'd think you'd find something like this in *his* gardens?"

The silence surrounding her gave no answer, and Sarah shrugged. Reluctantly, she turned away from the demure Greek girl, instead finding her feet on one of the smooth paths. Shoving hands deep into her jean pockets, she walked slowly, gaze intent on her surroundings for any hint of... well, of anything. Not exactly a happening scene, she thought.

The path took her deeper into the garden, further into the dappled darkness beneath the weeping-willow trees. The silvery strands floated gently across her gaze, curtaining the shadows beyond, and she pushed them aside as if stepping into a magical realm. She grinned at the thought, and then froze in her tracks as her eyes took in the scene before her.

Here, within the circle of willow-trees, was a wonderland. The moonlight poured down from the sky, gliding over rampant wild flowers and slender lemon trees, leaking even into the most shadowed corners. And it was filled with statues.

They were everywhere. Sitting by tree-trunks, resting on stone benches, paused in flight with laughing glances thrown backwards over one shoulder, all frozen in time, captured in pale marble. All kinds of young women: English ladies with stiff, unyielding collars, Japanese princesses with the ends of their kimonos fluttering about their embroidered slippers, Colonial girls with wide aprons and hair tucked under starched caps. To her right, an African girl wearing skins and a proud, noble profile knelt behind a tree trunk, spear tucked against her side. Ahead, Sarah could see a young woman wearing the straight, patterned garment and elaborate headdress of the Incan civilization — dead for hundreds of years.

Sarah drew a long, unsteady breath as she threw her gaze across the enormous clearing. There were dozens of them, she could tell, each and every one standing alone and apart from her company. There were probably dozens more she could not see, hidden behind leafy curtains and solid trunks. Who knew how many there really were...

“This is just bizarre,” Sarah muttered to herself. She hesitantly kept to the path, which wound aimlessly amidst the stone menagerie. She could see that each statue was constructed from the same flawless marble as the first, each imbued with the same faultless detail. She could even pick out the threads of embroidery, the single hairs that were braided into a natural crown. Lost in her amazement, she nearly ran into a statue that stood directly on the path she traveled. Springing back from colliding with the still figure, Sarah gave it a passing glance as she walked around... And then her head snapped back, eyes intent as she whirled around for a second glance.

This girl was different. She was small, probably younger than Sarah, with hair cut short to frame a heart-shaped face. Her posture was submissive, almost dejected: shoulders slumped, feet paused in scuffling the earth, lips caught in a childish pout. The sculptor had captured the delicate shadows of lashes against her full cheeks, the fragile veins of her lowered eyelids. Strangest of all, she was not — like all the others — dressed like a fairytale princess of some lost and hallowed time. She was an ordinary girl, dressed in jeans, tennis shoes, and a ragged sweatshirt.

Sarah paused, one hand lifted in the air. Hesitantly she reached out, traced the subtle curve of the girl’s cheek. “So strange,” she murmured. Why would anyone want a statue of, well, a normal girl? True, it was still a beautiful work of art — life frozen perfectly in a sliver of a moment — but it wasn’t stunningly lovely or exotic, like the others...

Sarah stepped closer. The surface was wonderfully smooth and cool beneath her roughened skin, an almost hypnotic sensation as she ran her fingertips along the flawless marble. Sarah smiled, to herself, contemplating the statue’s sulky countenance, the slight downward turn of the bottom lip. *She reminds me of myself, before...*

Sarah’s fingers halted in their light tracing of the smooth, glass-like features, smile fading to a sickened expression. This close, she could... she could... Sarah took a step back, hand suspended, as if forgotten, in the air, emotions of disbelief and horror warring across her face. For a moment she simply stood there, breathing lightly through her mouth, gaze trained on the statue’s immobile stance. Then, with the suddenness of a bird alighting, she stooped slightly, placing one hand on the statue’s cold shoulder, pressing her own warm cheek against the statue’s chill one. She looked, for all the world, like an older sister comforting the younger. Desperately, Sarah shut her eyes, and *listened...*

... to the soft, petulant crying of an abandoned child, echoing inside the statue’s lifeless marble frame.

Sarah sprang back, almost falling over her own feet in her eagerness to gain a few steps of distance between herself and the statue. She was shaking, heartbeat loud in her ears. *He wouldn’t*, she thought, mouth dry. *He couldn’t*.

And a familiar voice inside her chuckled: *Ah, Sarah. You are such a child.*

A twig snapped and Sarah ran to the shadows without thinking, survival instincts forcing limbs frozen in shock to move, to hide, to get away from danger. She leaped off the path and into the trees, ducking beneath swaying strands of slender leaves. She crashed through the underbrush, prizing speed instead of stealth. She could hear footsteps behind her, coming closer. With a last burst of speed, she spotted a group of willows grown too close together, trunks entwined and twisted around each other. She dashed for them, using an outstretched hand to snag their trunks, papery bark rasping against her skin as she swung herself behind them. Her sneakers slipped in the soft loam and she sat abruptly, huddling behind the barrier of malformed trees. Her hands grabbed at the slender trunks in a white-knuckled grip, straining for purchase as she nestled in shadow. She pressed one cheek against the peeling bark, eyes shut as she listened intently for sounds of pursuit.

The footsteps had continued, unhurried, stepping deliberately off the smooth stone path and onto the soft grass. They were followed by a sinuous whispering — the sound of soft fabric being dragged across stone, and then softer strands of grass. Sarah pulled her knees even closer to her chest, pressing her back against the willow trees, desperately trying to disappear. The trees formed an adequate barrier between herself and whoever followed, but she still felt horribly exposed to whatever danger her pursuer presented. She didn't, however, trust in her ability to outrun them, so she must stay put.

The footsteps stopped.

They had sounded very, very close before ending... Sarah waited, shaking slightly from anxiety and exertion, breathing as soundlessly as possible through her mouth. She waited for the duration of one, measured breath... and another... and another... Nothing. No sound at all, except the soft trills of night-flying birds, and the breezes ruffling the willow leaves.

Slowly and carefully, Sarah relaxed her cramped muscles, allowed them to support her weight. Barely moving, she angled her head so that she could peer through a slender, almost indiscernible gap between two of the twisted tree trunks, straining to see if any danger waited. When her eyes focused, sudden shock froze the gasp that would have given away her hiding place.

In her reckless flight, she had failed to notice another statue which dwelled in the shelter of the trees, white marble shining like a muted pearl in the shifting darkness. Tenacious as her view was, Sarah could only see that the statue was that of a young woman, like all the rest, with her head held proudly, graceful arms falling to her sides. Her back was straight, the line of her body, clothed in flowing garments, was strong and poised. She stood so that Sarah could see her profile, delicate features and a thick braid of hair thrown over one shoulder.

Before her stood a shadow: a tall, proud figure dressed in deepest black velvet (her pursuer, Sarah guessed). The figure wore a robe that fell in graceful folds about its feet, face obscured by shadow inside the deep hood of the garment. It stretched a graceful hand towards the statue, and that too was sheathed in black velvet, long fingers almost tracing the line of the young woman's cheek. The darkness of its attire seemed to eat up the light; a figure of midnight in a world of moonlit shadows.

With a graceful movement, the figure stretched out both hands to throw back its hood. Pale skin gleamed, almost as pale as the marble before him, feathery hair falling about dark, intense eyes.

Jareth, of course.

Sarah squeezed her eyes shut, swallowing down the sudden panic that rose in her throat like bile. She gripped her clothes tightly, folds of her jeans caught between straining hands. *If he finds me here*, she thought with bleak certainty, *he'll kill me*.

Once, she would have never thought of such a thing. Taunt her, yes. Threaten her, certainly — but before, she had never considered him capable of cold-bloodedly removing the annoyance that so plagued his kingdom. Before. Before she had seen his face. Before he had said...

("If I ever need to do something like that again..."

"Yes?"

"I won't.")

Why wait for such good fortune? She thought bitterly. *He could just kill me and get it over with.*

It was her own fault. She had provoked him, deliberately, not even half-expecting it to work. The results had eclipsed her wildest expectations... and frightened her with their implications. And Jareth had been most displeased, but whether with his own actions or the fact that she had witnessed them, she didn't know.

I just won't take any chances, she thought, the taste of fear bitter in her mouth. She huddled even further into shadow, feeling the fragile bark scratch lightly against her cheek as she leaned against a tree trunk. She waited, eyes wide open in the muted darkness, waiting for some sound to tell her he had left. None came.

She frowned. *What, is he just standing there?* Another thought sent a chill through her. *Or maybe he knows I'm here... maybe he's just waiting it out...* She bit the inside of her cheek thoughtfully. *Maybe I should look — damn.* She shook her head slightly, expression rueful. *I'm gonna get myself killed this way. Just like a little kitty cat...* Mentally, she shrugged. *Hell. Damned if I do, damned if I don't.* She twisted her head around again, neck muscles protesting, and squinted through the unobtrusive opening.

He was just standing there. He hadn't moved from the time she'd looked away, relaxed and motionless before his lifeless marble conquest. His eyes roamed intently over the still, white features, as if seeking the answer to some unspoken question. He stepped forward, one hand reaching to catch at the statue's delicate one, lowering his head to touch her cold mouth softly with his own.

Sarah stared. At the statue's hand, her face, where Jareth's robe slid against her feet — everywhere he touched her — a slow, flickering flame of warmth and color was running through her body. It caught at her, licked its way through her, igniting every part of her with life. She was alive; warm brown skin and soft dark hair replacing white stone. She was dressed in the elegant folds of a sari: rose silk and silvered embroidery, beautiful even in the washed-out light of the full moon. The tiniest of silver bells whispered a sweet melody at her ankles, a filigreed circlet of the same metal around her forehead. She opened her eyes, still in the kiss, and pulled away in surprise. With a cry of delight, she threw herself back into Jareth's arms.

She was weeping, Sarah realized -- softly and joyfully, shoulders shaking as she buried her face into the folds of his robe. She wrapped her arms around him, tightly, and he let her. His gloved hands smoothed her hair as she wept, face expressionless.

Soon she recovered herself, stepping back to look him full in the face. Her cheeks glistened with tears, but her large, eloquent eyes were clear. "I am sorry," she spoke quietly, her voice musical. "But I was so happy to see you." Smiling, she lifted her arms and placed them around his neck, possessively, hanging on him as she laughed. "You came back," she said triumphantly. "You came back for me."

Jareth's lips twisted, whether with humor or distaste, it was difficult to tell. He caught her wrists in a strong grip, hands like steel sheathed in velvet. He said, mockingly, bringing her arms down from around his neck: "You're half right."

She froze, eyes locked on his face. Her mouth had fallen open in shock, and her lips trembled slightly as she tried to speak. "No," she finally whispered, pleading, "you wouldn't!"

He gave her a wry look.

"No — please!" she begged, fingers grasping at the folds of his robe. "You said we would be together!" she wailed. "Forever! You promised!"

He paused in his attempts to disentangle himself from her grip. He gave a low laugh, and reached

out to cup her chin in one hand. She subsided in her struggles, dropping her hands at that velvet caress on her tear-streaked face. “But don’t you see,” Jareth spoke, soft voice rich with amusement, “that we are?”

She stared at him, confused. With another twist of those thin lips, he gave a small shrug. Slowly, deliberately, he slip his fingers along the base of her chin, drawing away his touch. When the velvet hand ceased to touch her dusky skin, her eyes widened and she reached for him, screaming a denial —

-- which faded into echoes as she became, once again, a figure of lifeless marble.

For a long moment, there was silence amidst the trees as Jareth simply stood, his eyes on the imploring gaze and outstretched hands of the statue before him. A small explosion to his left didn’t turn his gaze; the tangled, leaping, rustling, pounding sounds of someone emerging from a hiding place, running as if the hounds of hell were on her heels. For a long time afterward, even after those sounds of flight had faded into the distance, Jareth stood as still as the statue before him.

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Sarah ran. She ran as fast as her feet would take her, leaping over fallen branches or severed tree stumps, ducking hurriedly beneath swaying willow leaves, and of course, avoiding any flash of marble whiteness that she was threatened to encounter. Her side was a mass of burning pain, but she kept running, lungs on fire, blood pounding like drums in her ears. The force of her fear carried her far, far away from the garden of willows and statues... or so she hoped... she had no idea where she was going, how this garden worked. She could only run.

Eventually, though, she had to stop. She didn’t want to, but her feet stumbled in her flight and she lost her balance, sitting heavily to keep from falling flat. Her legs felt too weak to stand, and so she gave up — leaving against a stone wall covered in thick ivy and drawing in huge, gasping breaths of sweet air.

*Oh my God. Oh my God. Ohmygodohmygodohmygod...*

He was a monster.

She bowed her head, eyes shut in pain as her body protested loudly at the abuse it had just endured. One hand rested just below her throat, rising and falling with her heaving chest.

A fucking dyed-in-the-wool, sadistic, baby-eating, torturing *monster*.

A dry sob shocked her throat, and she shuddered against the cool, almost velvety feeling of ivy leaves sliding along her back. *I have to get out of here. I have to get Brian, and get out of here.*

“Hey hey, wot ‘av we here?”

Sarah started, head flying up as her eyes darted to catch the speaker. When they landed, her mouth fell open in surprise.

“What are you guys doing here?” she asked in amazement.

Four grins and eight wagging ears were her response. Before her were the open, grinning faces of all four Red and Blue Guards. They hadn’t changed — each a tangle of dangling legs and clutching hands behind a broad stone shield, painted in a symmetric design of reverse colors: a tessellate of opposites. Four small heads with cat-like muzzles peeked out at her, adorned in the same red-or-blue motley with a golden spike on top.

“Slummin’” One cheerfully replied as the others snickered, peering out at her from his position beneath the red shield decorated with a diamond.

“Question is, what’re yoo doin’ here?”

“Trying to find my way out again,” Sarah said ruefully, standing and brushing herself off. “What happened, did your little door riddle get boring after a while?” she smiled.

“And you’re one t’talk!” Another growled, rolling his ‘r’s in the curious brogue they all adopted. “S’y’ou’re fault we’re here, y’know! Never stopped t’tink wot you’re little stunt would cost us, now, did’ja?”

“Now, now,” another of the creatures said in a soothing tone. “No use cryin’ over spilt milk, is there?”

Sarah paused, gaze lingering on each of the creatures. “I forget,” she said, “Which one of you tells the truth, and which...”

“Ach, we’re done with that nonsense,” the first scoffed.

“I thought it was a rule.”

“Rooles, smooles!” One of them barked. “We none of us d’not tell the trooth, anymore. Unless we choose.”

“Um,” Sarah stalled, looking a bit uncomfortable, “Then I really did get you, er, transferred?”

“Summat,” the last acknowledge, blinking at her from over the top of the shield with blue designs. “No purpose hangin’ ‘round when the riddle’s answer is out, is there? So we got new posts,” he finished comfortably.

“Oh,” Sarah said, pointlessly. “I see.” She stood for a moment, lost, as four pairs of bright eyes regarded her intently. “Well,” she ventured, “could you tell me how to get out of here, too?”

Instantly, they each ducked behind their respective shields, sibilant whispering filling the clearing. Sarah waited; shifting nervously from foot to foot as her eyes constantly scanned her surroundings. Did Jareth know she was here? It felt naive to suppose otherwise. Would he allow her to get out of these gardens, unharmed, without incident? Paranoia was like the tickle of fingers on the back of her neck.

“Ahem,” one coughed, drawing her attention back to their mischievous faces. “Y’want some help getting’ out of here, d’ye?”

“Yup. Could you help?”

They smiled at her, and the picture they presented was eerie, and slightly sinister: four demonic faces, smug with unshared knowledge. “What exactly d’ye want to know, now?”

“Well...” She turned a helpless gaze across the clearing. The section that lay before her was bare, compared to the previous gardens. There were no exotic flowers, or whispering streams: just a smooth, perfect expanse of grass. The walls that surrounded it, though, were of a haphazard construction, with some sections rising above other, or shaped slightly different... one slab of wall even had a tiny turret, perched precariously. They were pieced together messily, without care or concern for aesthetics, so that the line of wall zigzagged wildly around them. Every stone of every wall, however, was completely concealed by thick curtains of vibrantly green ivy. “I don’t suppose there’s an exit anywhere around her,” she finished glumly.



“F’course there is!” one of them snapped, his brassy helm falling into his eyes with the violence of his speech. “Wot’s the point of us bein’ here if there isn’t?”

“Oh. I didn’t think of that.”

“Sh’never does, this ’un,” one of them muttered darkly, and the others snickered beneath bushy mustaches.

“Well, what can I do, then? Another riddle?”

“Nope,” another spoke cheerfully. “Try again!”

Sarah blinked. Her eyes darted between their identical faces, momentarily taken aback. “You’re going to make me stand here until I guess what the challenge is?”

“Right!” One said happily. He grinned cheekily. “Yoo’ll never guess.”

Sarah sighed, slumping where she stood. “I don’t have time for this, guys. Really.”

Her response was only gleeful chuckles.

Sarah swallowed her anger, her sense of utter helplessness. “Fine,” she spoke through gritted teeth. “I have to find my friends, anyway. We can play your little game later.”

“Hoo, hoo, hot-headed gel!” one of them caroled from beneath his blue shield. “Those friends over there?”

She spun around, half-expecting it to some kind of joke — but there they were, two bedraggled and weary figures stumbling along one of the paths and into the very clearing where she stood.

“Hoggle! Chaucer!” She bounded across the distance separating them joyfully, as if it had been years since they’d last seen each other. She was just ridiculously relieved to see them both — to see a friendly face.

“There’s a way out of here,” she said excitedly as she finally pulled away. “I stumbled into this place and met --”

“YOU!” Chaucer roared, baring his tusks. The Red and Blue Guards wagged their ears in response, grinning widely. “All of you! You... you putrefied weanlings!”

The two top Gauds exchanged glances.

“Do y’know what that means?”

“Jimmied if I do.”

“Sarah,” Chaucer growled, “I would be highly suspicious of any information these... characters... have imparted to you.”

“Ach, go shake yer ears, old fart.”

While Chaucer trembled in indignation, Hoggle marched up to them, obviously determined.

“Right,” he barked. “You’ve got a job, we all do. She,” jerking his thumb towards Sarah, “is tryin’ to get through the Labyrinth. Help her,” he ended curtly.

The bottom Red Guard wrinkled his cat-like face in a parody of hurt, ears wiggling. “Awwww. Y’don’t let us have our fun?”

“Not today,” Hogle returned grimly.

A collective sigh from all four Guards.

“Right, then.”

“F’that’s th’way yoo want it!”

“Spoilsport.”

“Whatcha do is,” the top Blue Guard began confidently, “see that fountain over there? Drink from it.”

Sarah whirled around, straining her eyes. There was nothing to alter the smoothly manicured lawn they stood on.

“What fountain?” she asked, distressed.

They snickered as one. “Over there, y’ninny!”

Frowning, Sarah stepped over in the direction to which they had jerked their heads. There, nestled in the corner of two ivy-covered walls, a stream of water was piped in through the bricks. The water sparkled, dripping over the glossy ivy leaves and eventually falling into a small, round basin. The water was overflowing... however, where it fell to the ground was not soggy and muddy, as one would expect. Instead, the purest white blossoms, dainty and perfect, grew against the dark ivy.

“Oh. I found it,” she said, a bit uncertain.

“Give the gel a prize!”

“Now drink from it,” another added, impatiently.

“Wait, wait just a minute!” Hogle interjected. “How do we know this ain’t some clever trick? What’s the water for?”

“S’th’Water of Trooth,” one of the Guards said succinctly. “Or summat like that. Drink, an’ y’see the way out. Trooth revealed!”

“All kinds of trooth,” the bottom Blue Guard added, obviously enjoying himself. “Secret desires! Disgustin’ fantasies! Y’better watch yourself, mate,” he stage-whispered to Chaucer, who made to lunge at the grinning Guard. Hogle pulled him back, firmly.

“I don’t like it,” he said, loud enough for Sarah to hear. “It’s too easy!”

Chaucer calmed himself, though he glared at the still-snickering Guards. “No, it sounds just about right,” he muttered.

Hogle looked at him in dismay. “You’re crazy! Nothing’s that easy in this damn Labyrinth! Especially not in *his* garden!”

“Well, perhaps not under normal circumstances,” Chaucer expanded. “But I know of this Water of Troo- erm, Truth. I’ve read about it,” he said, ears twitching with self-satisfaction. “And I believe what we may proceed without fear.”

The expression on Hoggle's face was one of utter bewilderment. "You want Sarah to take a chance like that — because of something in a book?"

"Yes."

"What about the people who didn't get out, eh? Don't they read books?"

"Perhaps not the correct ones," Chaucer answered stuffily. "But I am well acquainted with the situations of those unfortunates, as you must know. And I can confidently say that Sarah is a special case."

"Don't do it, Sarah," Hoggle warned. "It don't feel right!"

Sarah hesitated, caught between the two of them. Finally, she turned to the Guards. "Are you sure it's the only way out?"

"Sure as puddin' pie!"

"Well..." She turned back. I'm sorry Hoggle, but I think I have to try it."

"No!" Hoggle wailed. "Sarah, think about this a minute! Think whose gardens these are!"

Moonlight and marble. And a figure in black.

"I know who they belong to, Hoggle," she returned, determined. "That's why we have to leave. Now."

"Off y' go, then, lassie!" They Guards whistled and catcalled, encouraging as she knelt beside the shallow basin of water. She dipped both hands in.

Sarah hesitated, the water in her cupped hands leaking through her fingers. She turned her head to Chaucer, heedless as the cool water escaped her grasp. "You're sure about this?"

"Positive," he said assuredly while Hoggle looked on, miserable.

Sarah took a deep breath and plunged her hands back into the fountain, scooping up a mouthful of clear water. Lowering her face to her hands, she sipped the shimmering liquid tentatively, swallowing its sweetness with trepidation. She waited, empty hands dripping, for some horrible consequence to fall on her head.

But nothing happened.

Sarah smiled, looking over at the confident, beaming Chaucer. "I guess you were right," she laughed. "I feel fine."

"Of course you do! Now, look around you... that's it, take your time..."

She straightened, absently shaking the water from her fingers as her eyes roved over the surrounding walls. The stones were obscured by rampantly growing vines, leafy filigrees etching a spinning, chaotic pattern that teased the eye and muddled the brain. The wind rustled through their layers gently, tossing shafts of dancing sunlight amidst their green depths, exposing secrets. Revealing...

"There!" She shouted excitedly, pointing. In a corner of intersecting walls, to her right, she could glimpse the faint rectangular outline of a door. "Up there! Do you see it?"

They both started, bulky bodies swiveling wildly as they turned every which way. Finally Chaucer stopped, shaking his head, discouraged.

“It truly is a magical thing,” he said. “We won’t be able to find it ourselves. Take us to it, Sarah.”

Sarah laughed joyfully, grinning with pure delight. “No problem! This is so much easier than I thought it would be...” She walked easily over to the doorway, kneeling on moss thick with pale starflowers with unconscious grace. She beckoned to them, attempting to clear away the thick, encroaching ivy with her hands as they scurried to meet her. She turned to them, face lit up with excitement.

“Here, put your hands on the stone... Can you feel it? The edges of a doorway!”

They both followed suit, Hoggle’s gnarled fingers batting at errant leaves, Chaucer’s claws slicing through them like butter. Both of them turned to look at her in puzzlement.

“Nothing?” They shook their heads. “Alright. You’ll have to take my word for it.” She bit her lip in concentration, tangling her hands in the growth as she searched by touch. “And I can’t seem to find... and way to open it...” She frowned with frustration, glaring at the shifting curtain of impervious leaves. Drawing a great breath, she pounded hard on the soft wood she could feel, but barely see, beneath her hands. “Hello! Can anyone hear me? Can you open the door?”

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On the other side of the wall a shadow stirred, lifted, and became solid. A breeze ruffled through soft fur like Spanish moss, the color of autumn leaves. Moonlight shone in large, gentle eyes set in a broad face, patiently seeking. Ears pricked attentively, a lumbering body tensed as faint strains of a familiar voice. Familiar -- and dearly loved.

“Sawah?”

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Her cries were greeted only with riotous guffaws, and she turned her head to see all four of the Guards positively hooting with laughter. She grimaced, admitting to herself that she probably looked foolish.

“You guys stay here,” she muttered, “keep trying to find a doorknob, or knock it down, something. I’ll go talk to those bozos.”

She marched over to her mockers, jaw set in anger. “Is that all you’re good for?” she demanded. “Laughing at other people?”

“Well, s’fun,” one guiltily confessed.

“How are we supposed to open the door if they can’t see it?”

“Yoo can’t open th’door. Yoo can only find it.”

“Who can, then?”

“Those on th’tother side, f’course!” one chortled. “Who’d yoo expect?”

“Well who are they?” Sarah demanded. Without waiting for an answer, she spun on her heel in order to look towards her friends. “Try banging and calling for help!” she shouted to them. “There’s someone on the other side!”

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On the other side of the wall, the lumbering shadow, still listening like a small, patient mountain, was joined by another figure. This one was much more slight, spring in its step as it scurried over to its companion. Its shadow, faded and dancing in the moon's light, had small, bowed legs and a distinctively fox-like muzzle.

"Prithee, did I just hear..."

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"Will they let us out?" Sarah turned back to the Red and Blue Guards, her curtain of hair swinging with her movement. "The people on the other side?"

"No reason they should!" One spoke cheerily. "I s'pose they've got strict orders about that sort of thing."

"What?" Sarah cried, obviously distressed. "But you said... but you promised --"

"That th' water would let yoo see th' way out," one of them returned, peevishly. "Nothin' more!"

"But..." And Sarah stopped. She blinked, swallowing heavily... for just a moment, the world had... spun, almost... or shifted...

"Th' problem with yoo, y' know," she heard them speaking as she struggled to regain her equilibrium, "Y' too headstrong! Always jumpin' into situations b'fore you know what they're about."

It felt hard to breathe... not as if anything was preventing her from drawing breath, but... her lungs heavy in her chest... as if they were made of lead...

"Y' haven't changed a bit, have yoo? Oh, maybe yer a bit more mature around th' edges -- lost that pesky sense of entitlement. That's pretty good, can't have none of that, 'specially in a place like this. But in the end, yoo're still too innocent --"

In fact, her whole body felt strangely weighted.

"-- too naïve--"

As if she were drenched, her clothes sodden with water.

"-- and far too trustin'."

As if she were made of stone.

She fell to the ground, letting her dizziness carry her down to the soft, yielding grass. She shuddered, feeling strangely sick. *I'm cold... why am I so cold?*

"And that nancy-pancy demon of yours, thinkin' he's so smart," a Guard sniffed. "Show's wot 'e knows."

"What's happening?" Her voice was choked, struggling to escape a body that wanted to forsake movement, and life. Her hands. She gazed at them, blankly. They were tangled in long strands of grass, fingers splayed to support her weight. They looked strangely white and bloodless. Too pale.

"Wot always happens to foolish young gels who poke their noses where they down't belong."

*Pale as marble.*

“You lied,” and her voice was also thick with fury. “You *lied* to me.”

Strangely, their expressions were, as one, not triumphant. Instead they seemed regretful. One of them sighed, red-banded ears drooping with discontent. “Seems like yoo’ve been lyin’ to yourself, little ‘un.”

“Aye. Nasty thing, trooth is. Kinda sneaks up on yoo.”

She staggered to her feet, desperation fueling sluggish limbs and clouded mind. She almost fell again but managed to catch herself, leaning into the ivy-covered wall. She breathed deep, trying desperately to think past the screaming panic in her head. “Hoggle!” she croaked, as it was becoming harder and harder to speak – to even move her mouth. Her lips felt stiff, and cold. She licked them, and tasted mineral: the cool, clean taste of virgin marble. “Keep shouting! Maybe...” her voice faltered, growing weaker. She gasped, losing her balance and pitching forward. She managed to stagger a few steps closer to her friends before collapsing into the grass again. It was an unguarded fall, as her legs just gave out from under her and her unresponsive simply toppled over. She landed on her side, head thankfully cushioned beneath one outflung arm. She gasped, fire racing along her body. Whatever was happening to her, whatever was transforming her into a statue like the others, it *hurt*.

She lay there, panting and half-crying, helpless as a half-drowned kitten. The hem of his dark, fathomless cloak crossed her vision, but she was too far gone to even care. He knelt gracefully beside her, sitting comfortably on his heels to watch her suffer. His gloved fingers touched her hair, brushed aside the strands that had fallen forward to obscure her face. She cast her eyes, dark with pain, up at him. Her voice was gone. She couldn’t speak, but she moved her lips, barely: “Please.” Begging him to take away the hurt, to make it all better.

And Jareth simply watched.

~~~~~

Hoggle was still pounding on the wall, shouting his throat hoarse as he felt his gnarled fists slide against the slick ivy leaves, when he heard Chaucer gasp.

“My liege,” the demon whispered, barely audible. He spoke, however, almost directly into Hoggle’s ear, and the dwarf whirled immediately.

Sarah lay collapsed on the lawn, looking strangely pale and lifeless in the moonlight. Kneeling — too close to her — was a sinister figure cloaked in depthless black.

Hoggle was running before he could think, panting as he raced over to his defenseless friend. “You get away from her!” he bellowed. “Get away!”

The shadow looked up, revealing the face that lay in the deep hood.

Hoggle gasped, blood freezing in his veins. He hadn’t laid eyes on Jareth since... since the Goblin King had given him the enchanted peach. Jareth had never again called him into a private or public audience; his new post and all other orders had been delivered by courier. He hadn’t changed at all, of course: same cruel, pale eyes, the same ragged-cut platinum hair — the same look of latent malice, ready to rise to the surface whenever needed.

Hoggle’s breath was ragged in his throat, and his hands clenched into fists. “Get away from her,” he said, voice hoarse with fear.

Or you'll what?, the sudden uplift of a sweeping eyebrow seemed to ask.

“Or I’ll box your ears!” he shouted, knowing it was foolish, knowing the danger – not caring. He had failed her once. Never again.

A smile tugged at the corner of Jareth’s mouth, but he rose gracefully and stepped away. His gaze lingered a moment longer on Sarah, still wracked with silent pain. It was a look of distant interest – as one might regard a work of art in passing. He turned on his heel, edge of his cloak whispering sibilantly against the cool grass. The night consumed him.

Hogle crouched down beside Sarah, laying a gnarled hand on her white cheek. “Sarah?” he asked, eyes desperately searching her face. “Sarah, come on, get up... He’s gone now, you can get up...”

Her eyes were closed, dark lashes forming delicate shadows against her pallid cheeks. She didn’t respond to his voice.

“Is she alright?”

Hogle looked up to find Chaucer fidgeting nervously a few feet away. “Did he hurt her?” the demon asked, ears drooping at the thought.

“No,” Hogle said dully. “I dunno. She won’t wake up.”

Chaucer started, red eyes bulging as he stepped closer. “Oh lord,” he whispered, finally catching a glimpse of her ashen skin. “Oh, Sarah...” His tone was incredibly sad. “Oh, my poor girl...” After a moment of shock, he quickly pulled himself together. “I have miscalculated,” he said finally, as if the words pained him. “It is my fault to bear, but it is Sarah who will suffer, so for now we must work together.”

Hogle nodded. “You, my friend, must find a way to open that damn door. We must leave this garden as soon as possible.” He touched a razor-like claw to her cheek, ever so gently. “We still have some time — but precious little. Hurry!”

Hogle leaped to his feet, running over to the corner where Sarah had insisted there was door. It was easy to find again, as the ivy was slashed and flattened by their previous attempts. He began bellowing again, banging his hands hard enough to bruise against the solid stone wall.

Chaucer stooped next to his human friend, bandy legs kneeling in the grass. With infinite care, he used his claws to sweep an errant lock of hair away from her face. “Poor child,” he murmured. “Ah, but it will be harder for you, because of this.” He sighed deeply. “If only I had known.”

“But y’didn’t, did yoo?” One of the Guards jeered from the top of a shield. The rest peeked out, checking to make sure the coast was Jareth-clear. “Heh heh — stoopid demon, thinks he can know everythin’ out of books! Little pieces of paper!” They chortled together.

“You shut up. All of you,” Chaucer said quietly. They hesitated, then shrank from the rage that shone in his red eyes. “If she dies,” he continued, snarling through yellowed tusks, “I’ll undo everything Jareth did the day he soldered you together. And I won’t be half as gentle.”

After that he paid no attention to them, his eyes constantly on the bloodless face of the girl on the grass.

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The wall remained impassive and unyielding beneath Hogle’s fists, and deaf to his shouts. The

muscles in his arms were afire, and he was breathless from shouting. Weary beyond belief, he slapped uselessly at the unmoving stones. And then —

“Good sir, cease your uproar!” A shrill, oh-so-familiar, if muffled voice came from the other side of the stones. “I command you to stop, for such noble knights as ourselves require slumber!”

Hoggle’s mouth dropped open in shock. “Didymus?” he whispered to himself. And then, shouting: “Didymus! Didymus! It’s me, Hoggle! Open the door!”

A slight pause. “Forsooth, if it is thee, Sir Hoggle, how canst thy prove thine identity? For many would attempt to deceive our peerless intellect in order to escape His Majesty’s justice!”

A lumbering voice spoke a beat later, in a deep tone that made the rocks tremble. “Hoggle?”

“Ludo!” Hoggle yelped. “Ludo, old buddy, it’s me! It’s Hoggle! Open the door!”

A chaotic response followed, Didymus’ shrill protests and admonitions mixed with Ludo’s slow, baffled questions. Hoggle, making a mental note to apologize to Didymus’ wounded honor later, decided to get straight to the point.

“LUDO!” he shouted, desperately trying to be heard through their din. “It’s Sarah! She’s in danger!”

Their mingled discussions cut off abruptly, giving way to startled silence.

“Sawah?”

And the wall fell in.

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She was cold. She was terribly cold, the kind that made one feel numb and boneless. She felt as if she was drifting in an icy lake. Which was buried beneath a snowdrift. That was lost in a dark, smothered forest...

Suddenly, pain broke through. Huge arms lifted her up, disturbing the equilibrium of her existence, and she cringed. The arms cradled her into feathery softness, kept her safe... but it hurt. She whimpered slightly, but the arms continued to lift her up, and carry her. She was rocked along as gently as if she were floating, but every movement sent crippling shivers through her body.

And then the person carrying her stepped down — as if crossing a threshold, exiting a doorway. The cold began to melt away, agonizingly slow, leaving her shaking and trembling. Her teeth chattered violently, and she attempted to curl up, to preserve warmth — someone held her close, a massive hand stroking her forehead and other, smaller hands tugging at her limbs, her clothing. She inched her eyes open.

Hoggle and Chaucer stood by her, watching her face anxiously. They breathed identical sighs of relief when she opened her eyes, only to turn and glare at each other as one. At her feet a prancing, impatient figure was jumping erratically in order to see her face, demanding the others move aside so that he get a better view.

“Sir Didymus?” she asked, voice still weak.

The fox-like creature beamed at her with his one good eye, tattered plume draping artistically across his head. “My lady! I am overjoyed to see you again! And, of course, Sir Hoggle also, and er, the Castle Librarian, certainly —”

“Sawah?” The gentle question cut through Sir Didymus’ prattle, and Sarah craned her neck upwards. He still held her protectively in his gigantic arms; fur the color of autumn leaves brushing against her clothes. His huge, friendly eyes belied the enormous yellow tusks that protruded from his wide mouth.

“Ludo!” Sarah cried softly. She wrapped her arms around his neck, burying her face into his feather-soft fur. “Oh, Ludo...”

She began to cry quietly — whether from happiness or exhaustion, she couldn’t tell — and the sympathetic heavens answered with a rain of their own.

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Sarah and Chaucer huddled together under the cover of a large oak tree, its outstretched branches a decent cover from the gentle downpour. A fire blazed before them, providing warmth and light in the midnight forest. Sir Didymus and Ludo, being provided with the particulars of their journey, of course insisted on accompanying them. Didymus, however, insisted on going back to their home in order to “collect appropriate weaponry!” Ludo had been drafted to carry it all, and Hoggle had gone along, grumbling about making sure Didymus didn’t get carried away and recruit an entire army on the way there. Sarah had pleaded near-exhaustion, and remained behind to wait for them. Chaucer had stayed with her.

They watched the flickering flames together, backs against the wide tree trunk. Sarah waited before the last rustlings of everyone’s departure faded into the distance before breaking the companionable silence.

“What happened?”

Chaucer started. “My dear?”

Sarah let the movement of the flames hypnotize her, lull her away from remembered terror. “In the garden.”

“Ah.” He dug out his half-moon spectacles and began to clean them furiously. “That. Well. Ahem. You see, there are certain, er, statues in Jareth’s garden, which...”

“I saw them.”

He dropped his glasses. “You did?”

“Yeah.” She swallowed, concentrating on the muted colors within the fire. “And I saw him there. Who are those girls? And why... why did they come back to life when he touched them?” She turned her body towards him, twisting where she sat. “Why did the Guards lie to me?” she demanded. “I mean, the water was what did that to me, right?”

Chaucer sighed deeply. “Not exactly. Let me begin from the beginning — and please, do not interrupt me. What I have to say might distress you, I know. But you must hear it all.

“Jareth’s gardens are much like himself: mysterious, tricky, and even vicious. They are also like him in the respect that they offer the fulfillment of a person’s dreams.”

“What --” Sarah’s mouth snapped shut. “I’m sorry, I forgot. I’ll be quiet.”

“No,” Chaucer shook his head. “I suppose it will be inevitable for you to have questions. But please do not argue with me. Not until I am finished.”

“Alright.” Subdued, Sarah settled against the rough bark. “So, why would hundreds of girls dream of being turned to stone?”

“I told you the gardens could be vicious, did I not? Of course, no one wishes to spend eternity as a statue. But all of those girls did wish to spend eternity with Jareth.”

She gaped at him, and he chuckled.

“You underestimate what a rare girl you are, my dear. You may find it surprising, but I feel that if you look at him objectively, you will find my king is quite a captivating person. And not a few women have fallen for his charms.” He sighed sadly, pensive. “As you have seen for yourself.

“The garden maliciously twists this desire into something nightmarish. Jareth is an immortal. Those girls were not. In order to be with him, they would have to be transmuted into a material that could withstand the ages: stone.

“But not all is lost. If Jareth chooses he might simply lay his hands upon these young women in order to turn them back to flesh and blood.” He hesitated. “But, being Jareth... there is little sign of life within the garden.”

Sarah sat in silent horror, staring into the fire.

“You were safe, my dear, for obvious reasons. You are not an infatuated child — and for that I thank the gods above.”

“Then what does the Water of Truth have to do with anything?” she demanded. “And why did I...”

Chaucer closed his eyes, as if he wished not to see her face while he spoke. “The Red and Blue Guards, as you called them, spoke the truth, as they are required. The Water is there for any who make it safely to that end of the garden, revealing the hidden door, though I suspect we are the first to make it through. But they warned us — do you remember? — that the Water reveals all truth, even hidden ones.”

Sarah stared at him, uncomprehending. At her silence, Chaucer reluctantly continued.

“What that means, Sarah,” he spoke gently, “is that somewhere within your heart, you are drawn to Jareth.”

A freezing silence was his only reply.

“I do not believe you even knew this yourself,” he hastily amended. “Otherwise, you would have become a marble statue like the others, long before the ever-capable Ludo could carry you to safety, out of the gardens. The spell would have consumed you if you were actually conscious of your feelings.” There was no reply, and he nervously began to scrape his claws through the soft dirt beneath their tree. “I understand how this may alter your feelings about this quest, now that you know you love--”

“So what?”

Chaucer jumped at the harsh words, stilled in his fidgeting. “I beg your pardon, my dear?”

“I said,” Sarah enunciated clearly, “so what?” She turned her face to him — jaw clenched tightly and eyes bright with emotion in the fire’s light. “So I’m attracted to him. So he’s gorgeous and mesmerizing and makes me feel...”

So what? It doesn't change the fact that he's a monster. A beautiful monster, but a monster all the same."

She turned her gaze back to the fire, flames throwing deep shadows over the bones of her face. "He plays with people the same way children pull the wings off insects."

Chaucer hesitated before speaking. "Humans don't always love wisely, I've observed."

Sarah laughed harshly, shaking her head. "You don't understand. When I was younger, he terrified me so much. But he was so beautiful... And I almost gave up everything. Because he was," and the word was transformed into something alien with the bitterness in her voice, "beautiful." She looked down at her hands, twisted painfully together in her lap. "And he knew it. Not only that: he found it amusing." She looked straight into Chaucer's eyes. "He played with me. Like all the others."

"But now --"

"Now? Now it's even worse. He wants to punish me. All I did was get my brother back and now he wants me to suffer. You should have seen his face, Chaucer, when he saw what was happening to me." She shuddered.

"But... you are not unaffected by him."

Sarah drew her knees up, burying her face in them with something like a sob. "I hate it. I hate it. It's pathetic and disgusting and if any of the others found out they'd toss me into the Bog. But I look at him, and he's so..." She turned her face without lifting it, so that her cheek rested on her knees, a curtain of hair falling over her features. "It isn't even the way he looks," she confessed. "It's the way he talks, and the way he carries himself, even the way he laughs. I can't look away. And sometimes I think, if only he were different..."

"Asking people to be different is like asking the sun not to shine."

Sarah sighed. "I know. I know that. But I can't help wondering what it would be like, if he..." She laughed, a little sadly, sitting up. "I can't believe myself, sometimes." She wiped her face with her hands. "I always did have a thing for villains."

Chaucer watched her solemnly. "I know I'm no longer a human, with human emotions," he began. "Haven't been for longer than I like to dwell on. And I know I'm much more at home with dusty piles of parchment than with people. What I said about people is true... But perhaps, just perhaps, there is a bigger picture that you are missing."

"He wants me humiliated and crying in the dust. How much bigger does the picture get?"

"But *why*, child," Chaucer asked intently, leaning forward. "Why does he want that so badly?"

Sarah hesitated. "Because... because I hurt his pride."

There was a long silence, in which the only sound was the crackling of the fire. Then Chaucer sighed.

"You're probably right. In any case, it's not my place to meddle." He fell back against the tree trunk next to Sarah, joining her in watching the sputtering flames.

"Chaucer?"

"Yes?"

“You said only the hedge maze part changes around in the Labyrinth.”

“And so it does.”

“But Hoggle says the royal gardens used to be a part of the hedge maze – not the Forests of Endless Night. Does that mean chunks of it can just appear and re-appear wherever?”

“No, not at all. But as the gardens are Jareth’s, he may relocate them wherever he wishes.” He tilted his head to one side. “Come to think of it, that is odd. I wonder why His Majesty would choose to put them in the Forests all of the sudden?”

Against the brightness of the fire in her eyes, dark memories danced. A hunt of dragons screaming for her blood. A swirl of flaming cloak patches. I forced him to admit something, she thought to herself. What, I’m not sure – but for a moment, I had an edge. And now...

“Payback,” she whispered to herself.

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The others came back shortly after, Sir Didymus bristling with daggers and riding his beloved Ambrosius. Ludo was wearing a rough sling that carried a food pack, and Hoggle actually looked pleased at having minimized the damage. They quenched the fire and moved on, quickly, speeding silently through the forest. The sky lightened with their steps, growing from a pale grey to a rosy dawn sky shot with burning clouds. The sun rose as they hurried, throwing glorious sunshine down upon their heads.

The forest began to thin, trees becoming sparse as they walked. Birdsong began to drift through the woods, and the chirps and gurgles of regular woodland creatures. Golden sunlight speared through the leafy canopy overhead, filtering down to light their path. Eventually, they broke free of the woods. They stood at the top of a hill, long grasses waving in the soft breeze.

Ahead, rising from the dark waters of the moat, lay the Castle.

Me and My Shadow

Darkness has strength. It has weight and intent; it presses against your eyes, is drawn in with every measured breath to slip into your lungs and pass through your blood like oxygen. It inhabits your body, numbing sensation in your limbs, burning away at muscle like lactic acid. Darkness has a presence, and a hateful one, which burdens its captive with feverish dreams and fancies as you sit there — alone, in the dark.

Brian knew this. He hadn't known it at first, when the Goblin King pointedly left Brian in his oubliette, quenching the lone torch with the suddenness of his departure. He had been cocky, then — but most of all he had been angry, overwhelmingly angry at his own vulnerability which put someone he cared about in danger. The anger had fueled him, had kept his mind active and focused as the darkness began to nibble at his resolve. Slowly, Brian began to lose himself. He had never known how much he depended on his sense of sight. It developed the personal boundaries that separated him from his surroundings, it formed his sense of self. It helped him to say: "I am here, that over there is not me." Without it, there was simply darkness, and he was simply a part of it.

Or maybe it had happened quickly, not slowly. He had no way to tell. It could have been hours, or years. It felt like the latter, but common sense scolded him for the thought.

Unless Sarah had failed, and he had been left here to rot.

No. He couldn't think that way, or he'd go insane. Maybe he was insane. Maybe he was dead. Maybe he had died and his spirit was too fucking dumb to know when to move on. Maybe you couldn't die here, in this world of fantasy.

He felt alive. His throat was on fire, mouth parched and lips cracked, skin itching for want of water. If this was death, it sucked.

He breathed through his mouth, taking in the stale air of the oubliette. It had a taste like old dirt, dried sweat, and tears. He lay on his back, spread-eagled, letting his spent muscles settle on the rough, rocky floor, pebbles rasping along bared skin of his arms. He was just so tired — he slept, fitfully and constantly, dreams filled with the same darkness and pain. Reality blurred, became fuzzy around the edges, bled into dreams so that the two were indistinguishable.

When this changed, it came in pieces — a flash of light, a foot nudging him rudely, the sound of a door creaking open — sensations chaotic and out of order intruding on his dream-like consciousness. Reality asserted itself, painfully, with another kick to his side. He groaned, rolling over to avoid the pain.

"He's alive." A thin, whining voice, like nails on chalkboard. "Pick 'im up."

Snickers and grunts greeted this command, and Brian felt small hands grasping and clutching at him, rough skin and sharp, hard nails catching on his clothing. Feebly he tried to evade them, but they only laughed — a harsh, brutal sound — and tightened their grip.

His head spun, blood rushing as he stood, leaving dancing black shadows in his vision. He teetered with the sudden blindness and almost fell down again, but they caught him deftly and stood him more or less firmly on his feet. They led him, stumbling and wavering, on weak legs that could barely hold his weight, through cavernous stone halls that smelled like dust, chickens, and the tickling scent of magic. Brian sneezed furiously, nearly losing his balance again, but the goblins merely laughed and kept on walking.

They ushered him through the castle, eventually depositing him in a chamber (with a shove in the back for good measure). He keeled over, hunched on his hands and knees, gripping the floor in the dim hope that it would soon stop tilting. His fumbling hands hit an earthenware cup, water slopping over the rim onto his parched skin and he reached for it unthinkingly, wrapping his fingers securely around the cup before lifting it to dry lips. He drank, and it was the sweetest sensation he had ever experienced.

“I suppose I owe you an apology. I didn’t mean to cause any deliberate suffering on your part, you understand — I simply forgot all about you.” Brian could *feel* him grinning, a wicked twist of those petulant lips. “Told you it wouldn’t take much.”

“Well,” Brian rasped, throat still tender from lack of use, “glad you got with the program.” Without looking up, he held the cup out before him. “Any more where this came from?”

The sound of rushing water filled his ears. To his right, he found by turning his head, a sparkling fountain had appeared. It was low enough that he didn’t need to rise to his feet, only lean slightly in order to dip his cup beneath the cool water’s surface. He drained the cup once, twice more before he felt prepared to look up at his host.

The king of all the goblins was resting comfortably, perched in one of the wide windows that looked out onto the city below. One leg was crooked to rest on the broad stone ledge, the other dangled to the floor. His slim legs were encased in long, soft boots the color of cream that buckled high on his thighs. Brian caught glimpses of fawn-colored clothes beneath. But Jareth’s form was mainly swathed in a wide, rippling cloak edged in golden embroidery — stylized designs that shifted and flew across its expanse. Long, creamy pinions were sewn to the wide collar, forming a feathery ruff that brushed against his too-pale cheek and frost-blond hair. His eyes seemed darker by comparison, unequal pupils unnerving in that set gaze.

Brian met his eyes, concentrating on the feeling of the soothing water flowing over his hand to keep from loosing his nerve. *I will not be terrified by the figment of my imagination*, Brian thought mutinously. *Even if he does have spectacular eyebrows — may he rot in hell*. Beneath the water’s smooth surface his fist clenched, nails biting into the flesh of his palm. *You’ll get through this. You will.*

“How’s Sarah?” he asked, nonchalant as he drained another cup of water. “Kicking your frou-frou ass around the block, I expect.”

“I’m sure she’d find your confidence in her wonderfully rallying. If only she knew.”

“What’s the deal, exactly? She solves your maze thingy and we both win?”

“There is a time limit.”

“Right. Like it would be too easy, otherwise.” Brian looked disgusted. “You ever heard of stacking the deck?”

Jareth smiled to himself. “I could make the deck stand up and dance a jig, if I wished. Be grateful I only limit how long you impose upon my valuable time.”

“And how long is that?”

“She has thirteen hours to reach you. It has been three.”

“Ah.” With one hand, Brian massaged his throat. “Really? It feels like... a lot longer than that...”

Jareth studied him, chin cupped in one hand. "This is my kingdom. All within are subject to my will. Even the elements."

"You mean..."

"It's an *oubliette*. Your stay is *meant* to be torturous. Otherwise, what's the point? Three hours is hardly long enough to impart the complete experience. And one should experience things to the fullest in life. Don't you think?"

"Hey," Brian squawked. "You said no deliberate suffering!"

"Well." He smiled. "Maybe a little."

Brian sighed, slumping on the stone floor. "How long was I down there?"

"Several days."

"Son of a bitch." Brian looked up, brown eyes glaring. "You screwed up the flow of time — for me, at least — just to fuck me over?" He shook his head. "I obviously need to get out more, if my subconscious is producing little morsels like you."

"While I admit it was vastly amusing, your pain was not the original point." He leaped gracefully from the window ledge, cloak billowing about him like wide, white wings. "You have information that I want. I felt it would be better to extract it over a leisurely period of time — craftsmanship, after all, must not be rushed."

"Like hell you will," Brian spat. "Listen, I'll admit I have no idea what's going on, and whatever is can't be really happening. I don't care. I'm not telling you anything."

Jareth raised an eyebrow like an upswept owl's wing. "What does it matter, if none of this is real?"

"I don't like you. I'm going to take that instinct and run with it."

"Ah." Jareth contemplated the brilliance of the sunset, red light haloing his aristocratic profile. "What a predicament." He spun on his heel, cloak flaring. Stepping lightly over to his captive, he knelt on the rough stone floor, material of his soft, buckled boots bending easily. "I would keep in mind," he spoke barely above a whisper, "that even if Sarah manages to come rescue you, there was no guarantee that your heart had to be beating."

Brian stared into those unnerving eyes, mouth dry. He swallowed with difficulty.

"No," he croaked. "Kill me, or whatever, but I won't help you win."

Jareth's eyes only narrowed slightly, but for a few heart-stopping seconds Brian feared he would make good on his promise. Then the Goblin King rose to his feet, walking past the gurgling fountain to the other end of the small, shadow-filled room. He leaned against the far wall, elegant hands hanging listless at his sides.

"What if I swore that, whatever information you gave me, I would not use it to in any way harm Sarah Williams?"

"Define harm."

"Physical or emotional."

“And it won’t help you trump us both?” Brian sneered. “Right.”

“I swear it.” Jareth shrugged. “What I ask of you will in no way help me impede, obstruct, or restrain her against her will.”

“Why should I believe you?”

“Because I keep my word. And because I think you enjoy having a pulse.”

Brian hesitated. This was not what he wanted... but... He swallowed. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Perfectly.”

Brian quieted, thinking. “What do you want it for, then?”

“I am a curious cat.”

The young man sighed, leaning dispiritedly against the low wall of the fountain. He rested his head against the gravelly stone, breathing in the scent of the cool water. “And what exactly is it what you want to know?”

“Nothing too taxing. Just facts about your life,” came the rich, cultured voice. “Anecdotes, recollections, memories --”

“About Sarah?”

There was a small silence, and Brian tasted sour despair on his tongue.

“Yes,” the answer came.

“Of course,” Brian breathed. “Of course they would be.” He raised his head enough to see his captor clearly. “Fucked either way, aren’t I?”

The barest trace of a smile graced the Goblin King’s lips. “Not the way I would have said it — but yes.”

“Alright. Alright, I’ll do it. Just tell me why.”

The air shimmered faintly near the King’s hand, and the sparkling motes eventually rounded into yet another of those crystal baubles, settling into the dun-colored palm of his glove. He lifted the hand lazily so that the bauble blazed before him, afire with the light of the dying sun.

“I’m sure you’ve heard the saying, ‘Build a better mousetrap, and the world will beat a path to your door’?”

“Yeah.” Brian gave a disbelieving look. “What, you throw me in a dungeon because you’re a budding entrepreneur?”

Jareth threw back his head and laughed — joyfully, this time, without any edge of malice. “You really are amusing, he said, still chuckling. “No wonder Sarah liked to keep you around.”

(Alright, a little malice.)

“So what did you mean?”

Jareth shrugged, still smiling. He began to toss his bauble up in the air and catch it again,

soundlessly. "I once built my own mousetrap. Despite my best efforts, it failed."

"Mouse made off with the cheese? That's a bitch. Why don't you just use your Master of All Space and Time powers to zing the sucker?"

Jareth's smile widened into a grin. "What a marvelous idea. But this was a very particular mouse, very determined. I couldn't use just any trap. It wasn't a trap at all, really — more of a temptation." He caught the shining orb in his left hand, letting it slip down the line of his wrist and dance over the fingers of his right. Brian watched it slide and twist along the long bones of the Goblin King's fingers. "A web of dreams and fancies. But apparently I misjudged the strength of my mouse. She broke through it, and it collapsed entirely." And as he blew lightly on his bauble, it shattered noiselessly into a million motes of crystal dust that fell through the air in shimmering waves. Jareth's eyes met Brian's through the still-sparkling air between them.

"You are going to help me build a better one."

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Time passed. How it passed, Brian had no idea — whether in hours, or days, or even years. He tried, at first, to keep track of the times he was dismissed back to the oubliette to sleep, but that was no help. Sometimes he would fall instantly unconscious the moment the ephemeral door shut behind him. Other times he would lie stubbornly awake, staring into the dark — three or four times in a row. His sleep was dreamless and sparse; they always awoke him with kicks, dragging him (if necessary) stumbling and bleary-eyed into the bare chamber.

Where Jareth was waiting.

Jareth was as unchanging as the rest, always caustic and vaguely threatening, casually ripping through Brian's half-hearted attempts to hold back. Much, much later, when Brian thought back to that hellacious space of time, it was mostly a blur of confusion and mystery, a haze of half-remembered exchanges in the shadows of that tiny room.

Some conversations, however, he could never manage to forget.

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"How did you meet her?"

It wasn't their first conversation. Looking back, Brian supposed it should have been, but knew it wasn't — though he was damned if he could remember details of any earlier conversations. But he remembered that, by the time this question came up, he knew the routine by heart. He would be awakened rudely by his goblin jailers, pushed and shoved down a veritable maze of musty hallways before eventually coming here: this small, barren room. The fountain never appeared again. It was simply a room, wide enough for someone to walk ten paces across, and no more. It was lit by sputtering torches that flamed in wrought-iron stands too heavy to lift from the floor. The only window — a wide, semi-circular opening — looked out onto an ever-present sunset that eventually became a dark and livid twilight by the time each talk ended.

Brian would sit in one corner, close to the wooden door that locked him in. There, he would eat. He was only ever fed when he came to this room; always a pitcher of water and a half-dozen slices of black bread. The water was clear and cold and sparkling, and the bread slices were thick and tasted wonderful, a meal in of itself. But Brian still suspected some sly insult in it all. A world to command at his fingertips — of both servants and magic — and Jareth still chose to keep him on

bread and water. Yes, there was definitely an insult in there.

Brian was still munching on the bread (warm, and fresh-baked) when his Majesty asked the question. Brian swallowed the mouthful hurriedly in surprise — Jareth usually waited for Brian to finish his meal before beginning.

“Um.” Brian stalled for time, reaching for the pitcher of water. As he drank, he peered over the earthenware edge in order to unobtrusively scrutinize the Goblin King. Jareth was nestled in his customary perch. The wide window ledge was his favorite spot for interrogation, and Brian couldn’t remember how many times he’d thought longingly of simply pushing the bastard off the edge. The Goblin King sat in his temporary throne, slender legs crossed as he was angled to watch the city below. He wore simple leather breeches this time, and a billowing white shirt, effusive lace spilling down the sleeves and around his slim fingers, encased in black gloves. A slim circlet of silver rested just above his eyes.

His outfits were sometimes the only way Brian could differentiate between their tête-à-têtes. Today, he was playing with more of those crystals, again — two, in fact. They spun together, lazily, floating over his forearms in a dance of mirror-opposites. The setting sun made them shine like captured stars.

Brian set the tankard down, thinking. “I’m not sure,” he said. “I know I heard about her even before school started. She asked one of the professors if she could audition for a play, even before she was properly enrolled — just to get her face out there, get her feet wet. That kind of thing gets around.”

“Go on.”

“Well, I probably saw her around after that. We were probably introduced... I don’t really remember.”

“You’re little more than useless, aren’t you?”

Brian frowned. “Hey. Can *you* remember every second you spent in her presence?”

“Yes.”

Brian blinked. “Yeah. Well. I have a life.”

“Ah, yes,” Jareth remarked, never taking his eyes from the glass baubles, spinning in coupled orbit. “So I’ve heard, at length. Parties, schoolwork, and plays.” He rolled his eyes. “An endless whirligig of fun.”

Brian settled back against the wall, glaring at him, tearing his last slice of bread to useless crumbs. “Do you want to hear about this or not?”

“Oh, pretty please. Regale me with more tales of your pathetic life.”

“Fine, then,” Brian snarled. “We can both rot here!”

Without hesitation, one of the crystal spheres detached from the other, settling in Jareth’s gloved palm. With a single, fluid motion, the Goblin King grasped it — and threw it directly at Brian.

Brian yelped, immediately throwing up his arms to protect his face. But instead of the cool, hard feeling of crystal bruising flesh and breaking bone as he was expecting, Brian was instead hit with a solid, clawing mass of feathers. He fell to the floor, and the bird — if that’s what it was, he didn’t dare expose his vulnerable eyes — went down with him, somehow tangled in his embrace. Piercing

shrieks filled the air, and the calm part of Brian's mind said, "It's an owl," while the rest of him howled in fear and dismay. Horned claws and beak pulled at the material of his shirt, scratching at his skin — finally ripping deep into the flesh of his arms, drawing blood. Brian screamed in pain.

And then it was over.

He took a few minutes, still lying on the floor, to calm his frantic heartbeat. He forced his lungs to draw slow, measured breaths, until the danger of hyperventilating was past. Cautiously, he lifted his arms from his face. A few inches away was the crystal bauble, shining innocently on the floor beside him. Of its own volition it began to roll, away from Brian – to Jareth, who leaned over to pick it up off the floor.

"Don't trifle with me, boy," as he joined the crystal with its mate. "I'm not in the mood."

"I..." Brian looked down at his arm. True, it wasn't that deep a scratch, but it was bleeding.

"Did you want to say something?"

Brian swallowed. "No." Sitting up, he gently eased himself against the wall again. Subdued, he resumed his narrative.

"The first time I really talked to Sarah, I ran into her at the campus bookstore. I was picking up some recommended reading for a class that looked like it was going to give me trouble. I saw her over by the posters and went to say hi." He smiled, a little forlorn, fingering the cut on his arm. "Like most freshman, she hadn't expected how... empty a dorm room can feel when you've just moved in. She wanted something to make it feel more like home. But the bookstore didn't exactly cultivate to her taste." He leaned his head back to the cold wall, feeling suddenly weary. "I have the same problem, so I offered to drive her to this little shop a ways off campus. It sells books, fantasy art, stuff like that.

So she said yes." He closed his eyes. "We must have spent hours in that place, just browsing and talking... About the books we read, the artists we liked, laughing at all the crazy stuff in there. It was awesome."

"What did she buy?"

The question, so quiet and unobtrusive, didn't even cause Brian to open his eyes. "Not much. A few sketches. A Waterhouse print of "Hylas and the Nymphs." A picture of Maleficent from Sleeping Beauty." Brian chuckled. "God, she loves that movie. I tried to get her to buy this Escher drawing — I have one of my own, it's a favorite. All these twisted staircases to eternity." He sighed. "But she wouldn't get it, even though I practically begged. She finally admitted she actually had a copy, but had to leave it at home.

"She said it gave her nightmares."

So lulled into complacency by the soothing memory, Brian relaxed into quiet, tired of talking. He took a few, blissful moments to simply rest.

The following stillness failed to intrude upon his awareness for a few moments. Then, a few minutes longer, he waited — dreading the imperious command that would begin the exploration of yet another precious memory. But there was no sound from Jareth and finally, anxiously, Brian opened his eyes.

The Goblin King sat in the window, framed by the golden light of the fading sun. He was hunched pensively, profile to his prisoner, over the crystal baubles that danced together in one of his gloved hands. The two spheres spun on his fingertips, noiselessly waltzing, surfaces constantly

touching. Jareth's expression as he gazed into them was one of such bitter regret that Brian could find no words to break the silence.

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"You go to school together?"

"Yeah."

"Does she enjoy it?"

"I guess."

Eyes glinting with annoyance. "Go on."

Brian sighed. "I don't have many classes with her, but yeah, I'm sure she likes it. She's usually happy, anyway. I see her around the Theater department: eating in the café, hanging out, that kind of stuff." He smiled, a memory shining bright against the dirt and darkness surrounding him. "She's great. I remember she was really shy at first, this little freshman who felt so lost. She appeared to be very reserved and poised — kinda cold, actually. But if you looked a bit closer, she was trembling like a kitten. Brought out the motherly instinct in us." He laughed. "Well, some of us."

"Yes. I would expect your maternal instinct was lacking."

Brian shot him a truly murderous look. "Fuck you. I like her. A lot. Not that you could understand that."

Drawing a deep breath: "Anyway. So she was fine once she figured out we didn't bite. Pretty outgoing, actually, and spontaneous..." He laughed. "There's this stone courtyard right outside the department, surrounded by trees and stuff, nice place. It was warm out, so we decided to wait outside — this was during auditions. Someone brought out a radio. It was playing classical music, and suddenly she grabs my hands and we're up and dancing around the courtyard, and she's laughing her head off. Then everybody else got up, and they were all the Theater majors, spinning around like idiots. Everybody who was in Amadeus last year had to learn to waltz. Everyone else faked it." He smiled to himself, dark hair falling into his eyes. "Sarah loves to dance."

"I know."

The words were delivered in a monotone. But the very fact of them made Brian angry. "Oh, how nice. Then why the hell do you need me here? You're keeping me on bread and water for stuff you already know?"

Jareth laughed, and it wasn't a happy sound. "I need you because she hides from me. She secrets herself away when I'm around... she hides her joy."

"I'm betting she's got a pretty good reason."

Jareth threw him a look from the wide window ledge. He was lounging; slender legs crossed and booted feet resting on the other side of the window. He was dressed in black today, silver-shot hair a stark contrast.

"I stole her brother," he said. "I *offered* her happiness." He turned his gaze away. "Somehow, I'm not surprised she got it backwards."

"You what?" Brian yelped, startled. "Back up, back up, hold on a second. Tell me again, how did

you meet Sarah?"

"She never told you about our time together?" Jareth grinned like a contented cat. "Looks like someone isn't such a close confidant, after all." While Brian smoldered, the Goblin King continued. "You know the rest of the story already. Simply fill in the blanks."

Brian's face blanked for a moment as he thought. "Wait... Sarah wished away her brother? And you *took* him?" Jareth nodded, smiling slightly at Brian's distress. "No way. I've met Toby; her parents brought him up when they visited one weekend. He's a great kid, and Sarah adores him. No way would she wish the little chubby-cheeked fiend off to be a goblin." He glared at Jareth, suspicious. "You went and stole him."

Jareth laughed. "Never. I'm not allowed."

"Liar."

"No, really. And you might be surprised at how three years can sway someone's affections."

"Three years?" Brian blinked. "Listen, I know teenagers can be brats, but Sarah--"

"Did not fully appreciate what she was doing. But she did it, all the same."

Brian shook his head. "No, I know Sarah. She's the gentlest, most caring person I've ever met."

"She also has a stubborn streak of independence. Or haven't you noticed?"

"What has that got to do with anything?"

Jareth shrugged, the black and silver ribbons on his shirt fluttering with the movement.

"Like many who suddenly find themselves parents, or siblings, Sarah didn't appreciate how her life had been compromised. Being a selfish creature, she targeted the only obstacle that couldn't fight back." He paused for a moment. "I'll admit... she was the first girl whose sense of obligation eventually transformed into true affection." He gave Brian a sly smile. "But when we first began — true, she never believed someone would grant her wish. But that doesn't mean she didn't mean it."

Brian stared at Jareth in all his lazy hauteur. "You make her sound so ruthless!" he protested. "Sarah isn't like that! She's not like that at all, you couldn't be more wrong about her! She's sweet, and innocent, and practically helpless if anyone says 'boo'!"

"Sweet? Innocent?" Jareth's voice, deathly quiet and calm, cut through his prisoner's tirade. "Sarah Williams? The girl who wished her defenseless baby brother into my arms? And then proceeded to solve my Labyrinth, when mortals three times her age had failed before her?" Jareth leapt off the edge with the grace of a cat, stalking slowly forwards. "Do you know how she managed to complete my Labyrinth, a mystery that has confounded your people for eons? She *charmed* her way through it! A multitude of creatures poised to confound and complicate her path — and they helped her! Because they *wanted* to!"

He crouched down next to Brian, who still sat frozen upon the floor. Jareth bent forward, leaning his face closer towards him. Brian could see the soft strands of his white-blond hair trembling slightly from the power of the Goblin King's voice. "There is a creature in the depths of the maze," he continued, barely above a whisper, "whose hands could crush your skull to powder in a manner of minutes. He's an immense monster, fashioned from every child's nightmare of what may be lurking under the bed."

My goblins, of course, are terrified of him, and regularly sent out hunting parties to subdue the beast.” Jareth came even closer, and the molten fury in his voice was terrifying. “Do you know what Sarah did? She made him her friend!”

He sat back on his heels, exasperation plain on his face. “Hoggle Drav’ken was a mean-spirited, conniving, greedy skinflint, and a complete coward to boot. The nastiest dwarf, in fact, that I have ever met — and the perfect patsy. Up until the part where, after following my orders, he went back and *helped* Sarah, even risking his own life for the girl... because he felt guilty. Guilty! The same dwarf who was kicked out of the Castle because he wouldn’t stop knotting the tails of baby goblins!” He sprang to his feet, pacing the floor with focused energy. “A craven bully, and she made him her loyal companion.” His face darkened at the thought. “Innocent? Don’t make me laugh. She shot through my Labyrinth like a poisoned arrow, tainting everything she touched.”

He whirled to face his prisoner — his hand reached up to clutch protectively at his pendant. “Do you have any idea,” he hissed, “the means she is willing to exercise, in order to achieve her ends? Do you? Harmless,” he sneered. “You know nothing.”

He stilled.

Jareth turned, slowly, to face his ever-belligerent prisoner. Brian was still sitting limply on the floor before him, mouth hanging open in astonishment at the Goblin King’s torrent of impassioned words. His Majesty faced him — harsh angles and stark planes of his face softened by epiphany, fey and pale in the flickering torchlight.

“You don’t know anything, do you?” the Goblin King asked. “Sarah... you don’t know her at all.” Brian was a bit disconcerted to see a gentle sense of wonderment spread across those usually petulant features. “You see her every day,” Jareth continued, softly. “You take meals together. You work together. You share her life. And yet — innocent? Helpless?” Jareth shook his head. “And yet you still don’t know her. You can’t bear to look past the shining ideal.” The strangest look came into Jareth’s mismatched eyes, one completely alien and ill-fitting. If Brian hadn’t considered himself exhausted and half-starved by that point, he might have confidently called it pity.

“No matter,” Jareth resumed. His voice was just as low as before, but now there was a new, undeniable strength behind it; and it was a cruel strength, not kind. “You may be blind, but that will not prevent me from using you. And I will use you.” Jareth smiled — a deadly thing, like a razor’s edge. “You will give me what I need. And I will make her regret the day she defied me.”

On cue, the door slammed open, and a coterie of goblin guards stood ready. “Take him back,” Jareth commanded. Her turned, seating himself once again on the window ledge, solemnly regarding the horizon beyond.

“What?” Brian finally found his voice, struggling against the wiry arms of his jailers in an effort to remain a few moments longer. “You promised me this wouldn’t hurt her!” he screamed, voice rising in desperation.

“You promised!”

“I lied,” Jareth returned, never taking his eyes away from the bruised sky. “I indulge in that occasionally.”

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“What are you to her?”

Brian glared from his corner, curled around the pain in his ribs. That, and the split lip he was nursing, were souvenirs from his jailers as they had dragged him away last time. He had struggled, desperate to race back and beat Jareth to a bloody pulp, but the goblins had fought back. He tested his lip with his fingers, wincing. *And they fight dirty.*

This was the first time he had been called back to Jareth’s audience since then. Brian had spent what felt like several days in the oubliette, drifting listlessly in and out of sleep. Now the routine had resumed itself.

“I asked you once before — do you remember?”

Roses, fire, and a princess in danger. “Yeah.”

“You never gave me a satisfactory answer.”

“I don’t see where it’s any of your business.”

Jareth threw him a wry smile. “I begin to believe you have a problem with authority figures, old son.”

“I have a problem with men who dress better than I do.”

Jareth laughed freely. He was nearly enveloped by a new cloak like something out of a renaissance fantasy. Multitudes of fabric swatches were sewn together, loose edges fluttering with his every movement. The myriad of scarlet shades hurt the eyes.

“An eternity to spend inside a living puzzle-box,” Jareth said. “You must allow me my distractions.”

Brian grimaced. “You couldn’t have normal hobbies? Tying people up and throwing them in dungeons seems like a last resort kind of amusement to me.”

“You’re missing out.”

He fought the childish urge to stick out his tongue. Feeling definitely sulky, he pressed even closer into his corner. “Listen,” he said after a moment. “I’ve challenged you, you’ve beat me down, whatever. But I don’t want to play along anymore. This doesn’t feel real!” he burst out suddenly, looking lost. “Can you understand that? I’m in a fucking medieval castle! I haven’t slept in a bed in days! I’m being kept here by a fucking magician with little glass balls he likes to toss around, and who’s trying to hurt my best friend! And using me to do it!” He slumped against the wall, roughened edges of stone against his back. “I’m tired, and I’m hungry for real food, and I keep praying I’ll just wake up.” He dropped his face into his hands, hiding his smarting eyes. “Can’t you just leave me alone?”

“Would that make you feel better?” Not a sympathetic tone, or concerned — polite interest only. “If I locked you in a dungeon and threw away the key?”

“No.” He lifted his head wearily. “No, it wouldn’t.”

“Then what would you ask of me?”

Brian considered for a moment. “Am I dreaming?”

Jareth smiled. “Of course. This is a dream within a dream — the place where dreams breed.” His

gloved fingers traced the lines of his pendant. "Where they are born even to those who shouldn't possess them."

Brian was thrown. "Who shouldn't dream?"

"Those who have been created for a purpose. To fulfill a need." His hand dropped to his side. "Unfortunately, all things strive."

"So none of this is real." He frowned. "Why doesn't that make me feel better? Of course, the person I'm asking is actually a part of my dream, so it's not exactly --"

Jareth raised an eyebrow like an upswept owl's wing. "Did I say it wasn't real? No. Dreams are very real — just not very tangible."

Brian gave him a level-eyed stare. "Alright. Fine. Whatever." He leaned against the wall again, caving in on himself, letting his head hang to his chest. "Just leave me alone."

"What are you to her?"

Brian sighed. "Just leave me alone," he pleaded.

"What are you to her?"

"Leave me the fuck alone!"

Thin lips twisted in anger. "What. Are you. To her?"

"I don't know!" he finally shouted, wrapping his arms around himself protectively. "I have no idea, okay? Happy?"

There was a brief respite of silence. Brian hugged himself, shivering, eyes squeezed shut.

"You aren't lovers?" The voice knew the answer, just wanted to be reassured — and drive the point home.

"No."

"Or 'trothed?"

"No."

"Handfasted?"

"I have no idea what the hell that means."

"No, then. Simply a friend, like any other?"

"Yeah." The word hurt, and he spit it out like a bite of rotten fruit.

A deep sigh from the shadows — one of release. "And so she risks her life and sanity for a mere friend." He moved from the cover of darkness, layered cloak whispering along the stones as he walked to the half-moon window. He placed his gloved hands on the ledge, bracing himself, quietly surveying the squalor below.

"She always does this," Jareth spoke, almost companionably. "She races in, childishly oblivious to the danger involved. Not even really knowing what is going on. But determined to make things right again."

“She is kinda... I dunno, kinda silly that way,” Brian said. He was so tired, head lolling against the cool stones. The utter helplessness of his situation actually gave him a kind of peace, spreading throughout his aching body.

“No,” Jareth returned, not moving from the window. “Not silly. Courageous.” He started unblinking into the sun as it slowly fell over the horizon. “Do you know about her mother?”

“Yeah. She died about five years back, right?”

“Four years. Sarah had just turned fourteen. Her father remarried a few months later.”

“Wow. That’s... quick.”

“Not as quick as you might think.” The patches of his cloak, blood-red and wine-red and scarlet, trembled with the evening breeze. “Her parents had been separated for quite some time, you see — ever since her mother ran off with another man. In fact, Sarah hadn’t seen her mother for two years when she heard about the death.”

“Oh.” Brian thought about that. “Jesus. Poor kid.” A quick look at Jareth. “Wait, how do you know about this?”

The line of his mouth tightened. “I see a little into the lives of those who travel through my Labyrinth. Not much. Not their everyday existence, for instance. But the things that cause their happiness or pain, the events that influence and shape their dreams; those I see. Even then, I don’t see very clearly... It’s much like watching the world through a pane of smoked glass.” He reached out, grasping at the dust motes that danced in the sunlight. “Unable to touch.

“Sarah lost her mother twice over,” he resumed. “A staggering blow to any child. Usually enough to rob them of any sense of safety, strip from them any kind of illusions of justice, or fairness.” He smiled to himself. “But not Sarah. True,” he laughed a little, “she was not the most sweet-tempered of girls. But instead of hating the cruel world around her, instead of drowning in doubt and self-loathing... She threw herself into her own private fantasy world, trusting in her dreams to save her. Yes, it was an escape. Yes, it made her selfish and self-absorbed. But she was scared — and she was only a child.” His face was pensive. “It kept her from becoming a bitter old woman with no joy in the world.” His gloved hands traced the pattern of the stones that made up the window’s ledge. “And does it not take some amount of courage, to think that life can be different? To believe in your dreams?”

Brian watched him, feeling strangely empty and saddened. A flash of unexpected insight came to him, lightening the shadows of his mind.

“You’re in love with her.”

Jareth remained where he stood, eyes closed against the glare of the dying sun. The light gilded his still features, tainting his pale skin with a flush of gold. And then:

“Yes,” he said on a low voice, the word dropping like a stone from lightly parted lips. “I am.”

Brian’s eyes never left the Goblin King’s face, remote as it was. He drew a shaky breath. He was shaking, he realized — a faint quiver in his limbs. It was difficult to drag air into his lungs, and to expel it... it seemed to stick in his throat. There was a sick, twisting pain in his gut.

He laughed: a low, nasty chuckle that reverberated painfully in his chest. It grew, spilling out of his mouth in laughter so loud he was nearly shouting. Jareth’s eyes opened to slits, and he watched his prisoner from beneath lowered lashes, but otherwise remained expressionless.

“You’re sick,” Brian gasped, leaning to support himself against the stone. “Fucking sick, man. How old was she when she came here? Eleven? Nine?”

“Fifteen.”

“Shit, that’s not much better. Fifteen.” He could only shake his head, wheezing with laughter. “We have a name for people like you, where I come from. Prisons, too.”

“If you are insinuating what I think you are,” Jareth said, deadly quiet, “you’d do well to remember that I can still tear your throat out.”

“Okay, okay, I apologize, obviously you didn’t hurt her. But I know you, like, affected her somehow. You should’ve heard the way she talked about you.” Brian couldn’t seem to stop his mouth from running on, nervous energy fueling the dangerous words. “Don’t you think that’s a bit bent, loving a fifteen-year-old? Couldn’t you have, like, just thought she was cute? Until she got older, I mean.”

“Affection on a time-release mechanism?” Jareth sneered. “How poetic.”

“Whatever,” Brian snapped. “It’s still sick, influencing a fifteen-year-old like that.”

The Goblin King smiled lazily. “You’re just mad you didn’t think of it first.”

“Like hell!” Brian protested, outraged. “She was a kid! Who falls for a kid?”

“Death,” Jareth returned.

Brian paused, confused. “What?”

“Oh, come now,” Jareth said, turning as he eased himself up onto the window ledge. “You must know this story. The myth of Hades and Persephone. The dark lord of death,” he expanded, propping up one leg. “One day, doing his daily rounds, he spies a young girl.” He paused. “A beautiful young girl... the child of a goddess, with all the joy and light that Hades so craved in his own heart. And so he simply took her, with that straightforward way of gods; dragging her down into the belly of the earth to be his queen.” He contemplated the outside world, thoughtful. “Some passions do not play by the rules.”

“Yeah, I remember this story, now. She hated it. She eventually turned into an ice-cold bitch of a queen. So much for your happy ending.”

“Ah.” Jareth smiled to himself, running his gloved thumb over his lips. “But am a patient man – much more so than Death, who is not used to waiting.”

“You talk like you know the guy.”

Jareth simply looked him.

“Jesus,” Brian breathed, almost inaudibly. “That’s it. This place has officially creeped me out.”

Jareth resumed his narrative as if he hadn’t heard. “I’ve waited for my bride,” he said dryly, as if lingering on some personal irony. “Let her grow older, waited for her return... Her willing return, mind you — I did nothing to force her.”

“I’m sorry,” Brian remarked mildly, “but who was it, exactly, that tricked me into kicking myself in the ass, just so dearest Sarah would come back to his God-forsaken kingdom?”

Jareth flicked his fingers outward in a dismissive gesture. “Details.”

Brian was suddenly enraged by his nonchalant attitude. “So you’re in love with her,” he snarled. “So what? Does it give you the right to starve people, chain them up like animals, force them to play your sadistic little mind games? You can’t do that! You can’t treat people like they were pieces on a board game!”

“I can’t?” An eyebrow arched in elegant disbelief. “My, my. What have I been doing with myself this past eternity?”

Brian breathed hard through his mouth, struggling to control his fury. His voice was low. “I’m in love with her, too,” he finally choked out. “But I don’t think that fucking makes me God.”

The smile faded from Jareth’s face. For a long moment, he considered his prisoner, still curled in a corner. Silently, he stepped down from the ledge, standing with one hand against the stones. In a calm, measured voice, he began.

“I could have anyone I wanted.” He took a slow, deliberate step towards the huddled Brian. “But I did not want anyone — until I met her.” He walked steadily, slowly, stalking the defenseless boy before him. “I offered a reality pliant to her wishes in exchange for love — but she rejected me out of silly, childish vengeance. And I still wanted her.” He was close, now, his shadow beginning to touch Brian’s feet. “When she left, I had lifetimes to forget her — but I could not eradicate her memory from my soul.” He was standing so near, the edges of his cloak brushed against Brian’s own ragged clothes. “I tried to hate her instead. But hatred is still a passion, and did nothing to soothe my mind.” He knelt, his cloak a sea of vermilion shades, spreading to flow across the stones. “And so I poured all my skill and cunning into luring her back to me — her, a simple mortal girl.” He leaned, placing his gloved hands on the wall, to bring his face closer. “And now she is here, and I can barely stand it.” His features twisted in thwarted rage. “When I am around her I am stripped raw, defenseless to her every word and whim. When she is in danger, I am vulnerable. I despise myself for that. And her.”

The anger drained from his face, leaving behind a stillness that was somehow just as frightening. “But she is the reason I draw breath. If I never saw her again... there would be no point.”

The intensity returned, and he leaned even closer, nearly spitting in Brian’s face. “Do not ever presume,” he growled, “to compare my feelings for Sarah Williams with your schoolboy infatuation.”

He stood and whirled away, the door opening to reveal Brian’s goblin jailers ready to perform their duty.

“Take him,” Jareth said shortly. “And leave me.”

Brian let them half-carry him down to the oubliette, unresisting for once. Shaken by the sheer intensity of the Goblin King’s words, he almost welcomed the soothing darkness of the oubliette.

Which turned out to be for the best, since he was never again to return to that barren room. He was regulated to the oubliette ever after, his food pushed through a sliding door. Besides this, he passed the time almost exactly as before, in undisturbed communion with the darkness.

Until, of course...

Brian shifted against the jagged rock wall of the oubliette, trying to get a little comfortable in order to sleep. He had just managed to twist his back enough to avoid bruising when the Goblin King strode in.

Brian didn't even have time to think. He blinked, and the next thing he knew Jareth had picked him up by his ragged shirt, slamming him into the stone behind. Jareth pinned him against the wall, a gloved hand resting easily at Brian's throat.

Jareth could crush his windpipe without hesitation. Brian could feel that, could feel the hideous promise of strength in those slender, elegant fingers. He froze like a cornered animal, breathing shallowly through his mouth.

Jareth's eyes held his, crystalline blue filled with hatred. And something else.

"She's mine," the Goblin King said.

Brian paused. "What?"

"Sarah," the King said casually. "She's mine." Then the anger returned and he leaned in closer, applying just enough pressure to make Brian gag slightly. "Do you understand that?" Jareth asked, too softly. "Is it possible for me push that fact far enough into your brain that it actually registers on your adolescent mind? Hmm?" He tilted his head to one side. "She's always been mine. From the moment she called on my goblins I've owned a piece of her soul. I don't care," with a quiet intensity, "If she somehow, miraculously, manages to solve the Labyrinth again. I don't care if she rescues you. Takes you home. Cleans you, feeds, you, tucks you into bed. Even if it's *her* bed." His gloved fingers tightened, black spots swimming before Brian's eyes. "If you marry. If you manage to have a handful of brats and a lovely little *puppy*," he ended viciously.

"None of that will change the fact that she. Is. Mine." He rested his cheek against Brian's. "And you, my fine feathered," he whispered into Brian's ear, "will live always with the knowledge that the one you love belongs body, mind and soul," he pulled back, looking directly into Brian's eyes, "to me."

He removed his hand abruptly, watching as Brian slumping to the floor in a violent coughing fit. Jareth waited until the boy was breathing normally.

"Stay away from what's mine," he said.

He turned and left.

After that, monotony reigned. Eating, sleeping, staring into the blackness that surrounded his ever minute... it all blurred into a nightmare from which he could not awake.

And then, one day, sounds broke though that maddening silence of the dark. Brian was roused from a fitful slumber by the sound of... shouting. The goblins were yelling at something, or someone, throwing down curses and insults. Brian, senses hypersensitive after so long in complete isolation, could just barely hear them. Suddenly, a scream cut through the ruckus — a female voice, so familiar that Brian's heart skipped a beat. There was a tremendous splash, like someone had toppled into a large body of water. The goblins' shouts continued, only to transform into joyous cheering a few minutes later... and then was cut short.

What felt like only moments later, Brian could hear the scurried shuffling of goblin feet outside his oubliette. With a forceful haste, the sliding door used to pass him food was yanked open and then slammed shut — but not before something was rolled through. Brian caught it in his hand, and frowned. Bread and water, of course, was all that had been given to him all this time, and now... He brought the object up to his nose, running his fingers over its slightly furred skin. When the delicious, summery scent of the fruit registered on his senses, he finally knew what he held.

A peach.

Worth a Thousand Words

The water was dark, sluggish liquid that slopped at their feet, licking at the long weeds and grasses that grew at the moat's edge. Its surface was unnaturally still, barely rippling with the light breeze. Sarah swallowed nervously, shifting from foot to foot as she contemplated the moat before her. It was much bigger than she had imagined it would be. Weren't moats supposed to be, well... certainly not circular lakes. This one practically was, though. Possibly a good five hundred feet to the other side... Where, she could see if she squinted, was a huge wrought-iron gate guarded by – something massive. Possibly another one of those robotic guards they had encountered three years ago at the entrance to the Goblin City.

Wonderful.

She sighed deeply, allowed all the air to leak out of her. "Chaucer," she said, "any idea how we're doing on time?"

"Very well!" Chaucer said, keeping a nervous eye on Hoggle and Ludo, who were trying to restrain an over-enthusiastic Didymus from throwing himself in the moat and simply swimming across. "I expect you're only been in the Labyrinth about, oh, five or six hours. Plenty of time left to, er..."

"Storm the Castle, outwit the Goblin King inside, find Brian and make it out in one piece?" Sarah ended for him, a little unsteadily.

"Er... yes."

"I'd really like an extra day or, two, if that's okay." Her head spun, and she nearly tumbled down to a sitting position.

"Sarah! Sarah, are you alright?" Chaucer asked, peering at her anxiously.

"I'm fine," and her voice didn't quaver. Much.

"Hmph." Chaucer frowned. "I don't think you're entirely over the unfortunate incident in Jareth's gardens."

"Oh, you mean the whole turning to stone thing?" Sarah asked, feeling a little giddy. "Well, I've already been tied up with rose vines, nearly drowned, and almost eaten by dragons — I suppose *something* had to do it. I'll just put my head down." And she did, abruptly, between her knees.

"Dragons?" For once, Chaucer was at a loss for words. "Dragons?" he repeated feebly.

"I'll tell you about it later, Chaucer," she said, voice muffled.

"Dragons," Chaucer whispered in awe. "You do that. I'll — I'll go find the boats. And have your large friend untie them for me." He wandered off, bemused, muttering to himself: "Dragons. Huh."

Sarah sighed into the fabric of her jeans, letting her shoulders slump. That had been a slip of the tongue. She hadn't intended to tell anyone about that. Ever.

Feeling slightly better, she lifted her head for another look at the dark waters before her. They were nearly *black*, harsh sunlight glinting off the opaque surface. The water looked practically sinister, though she knew that was silly to think — as if it were waiting for them.

As if it were hungry.

Sarah shuddered, laying her cheek back down on the rough denim. She didn't want to do this. She didn't want to climb into a boat and go across a moat and get past the gate and go straight into the lion's den. Because that was exactly what she was doing -- walking right into the Goblin King's territory. Running to him. Every fiber and every ounce of her being protested against this, and she had to grip the grass tightly to keep from running straight back to the Forests of Endless Night. She laughed, to think how eager she had been to get to the Castle three years ago.

She had been such an *idiot*.

She moaned and turned her face into her knees. She heard the sound of Hoggle and Ludo traipsing through the grass toward her, but didn't look up. She squeezed her eyes shut.

Maybe they couldn't find the boats. Maybe they've figured out another way into the Castle. Maybe Brian escaped on his own, they found him, and we can all go home now. She felt tears stinging against her eyelids. *Coward.*

"Sarah!"

She looked up to see Hoggle waving her over. She struggled to her feet and walked to him, where he stood with everyone next to two flat-bottomed rowboats.

"You, me, and Sir Didymus are gonna take one," he said gruffly. "Ludo and Chaucer the other. Sound good?"

Sarah nodded, feeling as if she watched it all from a thousand miles away. Dimly, she knew that Chaucer was still giving her concerned looks, but she ignored it and simply climbed into the boat, careful to avoid the treacherous-looking waters of the moat. Didymus was already inside, still sulking that he wasn't allowed to show off his dog-paddle prowess. Hoggle followed, and dutifully picked up the two oars that fitted inside the iron rings, and began to row onward.

Didymus soon recovered, and scampered to the prow of the boat in order to have the best view of their course. From that lofty perch, he launched into a tirade of what he would do once he caught up with Jareth the Goblin King. Sarah listened with a small smile as his plans began even more elaborate and "knightly" as they rowed (from simply challenging him to a duel, to a convoluted obstacle course of honor through the Bog of Stench which would then end in a duel, though if Ambrosius hadn't volunteered to patter back home, "'zounds, perhaps a *jousting* match!")

Hoggle rowed stoically, his thick arms more than enough to handle the boat and its passengers. Only slightly behind them Sarah could hear Ludo doing the same as Chaucer expanded on a lecture of the physics of forward motion.

"Hoggle," she said softly, too soft for Didymus to hear, "I'm scared."

His rowing paused for a beat, and eyes beneath fantastically bushy eyebrows started at her. "Y'are?" he asked incredulously.

Sarah nodded, and he resumed rowing with a frown. "You never were before," he said, as if she needed reminding.

Sarah laughed a little. "Yes, I was," she confessed. "I just... I don't know. It was exciting, in a way, last time." She shivered slightly. "Not so much anymore. I don't know..." She thought about it a minute, knees tucked up to her chest. "The Labyrinth always makes me feel like... like I'm learning about myself, the deeper I go. I just don't like where this particular trip is going," she

ended quietly. The she frowned. “Is it just me, or is it getting colder?”

It wasn’t just her. The breeze was picking up, growing into a brisk wind that sent clouds scuttling across the grey sky. The sun dimmed, its radiance tucked behind a swelling cloud bank, and a shadow slipped over the land. Sarah stared at the dark, murky waters of the moat – now graced with slender tendrils of fog.

“That was quick,” she muttered, only to hear Hoggle snort.

“What’d you expect, in this place?” he muttered. “Sides, he can tell we’re comin’.”

Sarah swallowed, mouth suddenly dry. “What makes you say that?”

Hoggle ducked his head reluctantly. His shoulders hunched, he nodded quickly upwards. Sarah turned where she sat, hands gripping either side of the boat to brace herself. She craned her neck, eyes darting every which way — there.

About halfway up the sheer, sandy wall of the castle, a dark break in its smooth monotony, was a window. Goblins were crowded before it, leaning over to peer at the moat below, almost pushing each other over the edge in their urgency to get a look. And there, tucked into the corner, was the Goblin King. He was still swathed in his black velvet cloak, form obscured by folds of fabric that ate up the light. His arms were folded across his chest, and by the way the air glittered and shone by one hand, she guessed he held yet another of his hypnotic crystals. The hood of his cloak was pushed back, revealing rough-cut hair framing an impassive face. He was the point of stillness against the mayhem of his goblin horde; the eye of their storm.

Sarah raised her eyes to his, and a chill ran through her at the aching emptiness she found. She turned her back on him slowly, huddling against her own fear. She squeezed her eyes tight, hands still clenching the sides of the boat painfully.

I will not be afraid. She shivered. I will not be afraid.

But she was.

Chaucer had thought her experience in the gardens might change her attitude about this trip through the Labyrinth, and he was right – just not in the way he expected. He had feared, afterward, that the thought of confronting Jareth again would send her to pieces, terrified of the things he was capable of. That was where he was wrong. Sarah had known what the Goblin King was capable of for a long, long time — ever since he had offered her a useless crystal in exchange for her baby brother, and been enraged when she refused. No. The person she feared now was herself.

The gardens had shown Sarah she had weaknesses: hidden imperfections in her resolve. Knowing that, could she trust herself now? How could she be sure she wouldn’t falter at some crucial point, suddenly lose heart and forfeit the game?

She couldn’t.

So she was afraid.

A pebble grazed her cheek, tracing a line of stinging pain. Shocked out of her reverie, her eyes flew open. She turned, twisting herself uncomfortably where she sat, only to see the melee of goblins jumping excitedly in their window, gnarled fists punching the air in triumph.

“They’re throwing stuff at us,” Hoggle grunted, never pausing in his work. “We’re close enough now. You might want to get down.”

Meekly, Sarah did so, curling up against the splintery boards of the flat-bottomed boat. Unfortunately, not everyone was so willing to do so.

“Have at you, ruffians!” Didymus shouted, nearly hopping in place at he strained at their attackers with his waving sword. Another handful of gravel fell from the Castle’s window, which he nimbly evaded. “It takes more than that to vanquish a stalwart knight! Hah! I shall take you all at once!”

“Didymus,” Sarah hissed, attempting to catch at his clothing and forcibly pull him from harms’ way. “Didymus, get down!”

He shot her a wounded look, still poised to launch himself into the fray. “My lady, you should understand, I am only performing my duty as your sworn protector!”

“And for that you have my gratitude, noble sir,” Sarah spoke quickly. “But at this time, I must entreat you,” another shot of shrapnel rattled past, and she ducked, “to look to yourself! *Please!*” she pleaded.

For a moment he appeared to hesitate, but then a good-sized chunk of rock whistled past his head to land with a *thunk* inside the boat. He suddenly bared his fox-like teeth, muzzle snarling, a maniac gleam in his one eye. With renewed vigor, he turned back to his foes.

“Cowards!” he howled, feathered plume trembling with his passion. “You daren’t even fight us face to face!”

A particularly nasty-looking goblin, with broken tusks and a drooping mustache, snickered at the insult. Sighting Sir Didymus, he hefted a large rock and tossed it easily at his target. Oblivious, Didymus continued his shrill tirade.

“*Sir Didymus!*” Heart in her mouth, Sarah leapt to a half-crouching, half-standing position to lunge at her diminutive defender and drag him to safety. But she misjudged. Not only how close she was to Sir Didymus, but also the danger to him – for the rock sailed benignly over his head to strike her shoulder, hard enough to bruise bone. Already precariously balanced, the blow threw her completely, and with a yelp of pain and terror, she fell...

... into the icy, forbidding waters of the moat. She screamed, and the chokingly cold water rushed into her mouth. An unnatural current tugged at her legs, wrapping around them like a rope and dragging her down. In the murky depths of the moat, shadows blossomed into a billowing cloud, racing upward to consume her.

“I hate you!”

Standing straight up out of her chair. Dinner forgotten on her plate. Hands clenched so hard her nails would leave marks for days.

“Sarah, honey, please –”

“I hate you! How could you do this?”

Her father sat across the table. Still wearing a suit and tie. Her worked late a lot now. Obviously uncomfortable. Shifting in his seat. Playing helplessly with his fork. Concentrating on his food. Avoiding his daughter’s eyes.

“I know this sounds sudden, and it comes as quite a shock... I should have told you about Karen before this --”

“Mom just d-died!” Tears made her throat thick, and she stumbled over the word. “How can you be getting married already?”

Her father hesitated. “Baby, you have to understand. Your mother left us a long time ago --”

“She was coming back!”

“Two years is a long time, Sarah.”

“She was!”

“You didn’t expect me to stop living my life, did you?”

“But it’s only been a couple of months!” Tears spilling, hot and scalding, against her cheeks. “What, did you walk into a bar the day Mom was killed and pick up the first bimbo you saw?”

A guilty flush on his face. “It’s not — Karen and I — honey... please understand... Karen and I met a long time ago. It’s only recently we considered marriage, but you must know we love each other very much.”

“You had an affair.” Shock made her empty and still. “I can’t believe you had an affair.”

“Sarah, your mother and I were only married in name.”

“You didn’t love her at all, did you?” Loosing control now, hiccupping with the sobs that made her shake. “You were probably happy when she died!”

His face darkened. Rising in his seat, finally confronting her. “Sarah, you know that’s not true. If you would only calm down a minute --”

“Why should I believe you?” she asked wildly. “You had an affair, you get married right after Mom dies — you practically didn’t even come to the funeral!”

“The company needed me on a very important assignment,” he began doggedly, “but I managed to go anyway --”

“Barely,” she hissed. “You probably wanted to stay home and be with Karen!”

“Sarah, you aren’t being fair.”

“You aren’t being fair! I can’t believe you would do this to me!”

“This isn’t about you, Sarah. It’s about me, and my happiness.”

“What about me,” she wailed. “I want to be happy, too!”

“You can be!” He was angry, now. Hands balled into fists as he leaned onto the table. “Sarah this is about being a family again — a real family.” Practically shouting. “If you would stop being such a spoiled, selfish brat for one second, you could see that!” He sat heavily. Shoveling food into his mouth. “Go to your room.”

“I--”

“I said go to your room, young lady!”

She ran from him. Bolting up the stairs. Slamming the door behind her. Throwing herself on the bed. Crying furiously into her pillows. “I hate you!” she screamed. “I hate you!”

Hands caught at her, dragged her gasping for breath to the surface. The worried faces of Hoggle and Didymus met her streaming eyes. Hoggle had the shoulders of her shirt clenched tightly in his blunt fingers, Didymus insistently tugging on the end of a sleeve.

“Sarah,” Hoggle spoke, hoarse with fear, “you okay?”

“Speak to us, fair maiden!”

Sarah coughed, the taste of the moat still slimy in her mouth. Numb hands gripped the side of the boat, and she shuddered, matted hair plastered against her face. “No,” she said shortly. “I’m not okay. I need to get out of the water. Now.”

Panic spread across Hoggle’s face. “We could pull you over the side --”

Sarah shook her head. “That won’t work,” she said. “You’d only tip the boat over, and then you’d all fall in.”

“Patience, Lady Sarah — my brother-in-arms approaches! Sir Ludo will be able to aide thee, have no fear!”

“That might work.” She cast frightened eyes up at Hoggle. “Ludo can probably lift me straight up. Is he coming? He and Chaucer alright?”

“Fine,” Hoggle replied tersely. “Can you hold on until then?”

Her face was pale with cold, dark shadows under her eyes. “I don’t know,” she whispered. “There’s something about the moat, Hoggle — there shouldn’t be a current, but there is. And it’s pulling me under.” Her frozen fingers moved stiffly to cover his. “Like the water’s alive. You might have to drag me up again.”

Hoggle’s face wrinkled with dismay, holding tight to her hand. “You shouldn’t have ever come back, Sarah,” he said softly, as if about to cry.

Sarah grinned, a little wryly. “I had to. It’s okay. I wanted to see --”

The waters caught at her again, dragging her down beneath the murky surface and into another bitter memory.

“I’m disappointed in you, Sarah.”

Sitting at a desk. Hands clenched in her lap. Hair falling past her face. Didn’t want to answer.

“Did you hear me, Miss Williams?”

She raised her head. “Yes, Mr. Phelps.”

Her junior-year English teacher frowned at her from behind bifocals. “This kind of work is unacceptable in my class.”

Rebellion in her voice. “I’m sorry you think it was a bad paper.”

He scowled. “You know that’s not the issue. It was a very good paper — but you completely ignored the assignment! You were required to write about how Yeats’ obsession with the supernatural handicapped his abilities as a poet.” Picking up and scrutinizing a bunch of papers stapled together. Her name, and a ‘D’ in red ink, at the top. “You argued the opposite.”

Shrugging. "It's what I believe."

"I am not interested in what you believe." Voice like a whiplash. "What I want is to see your ability to recapitulate an argument as discussed in class."

He sighed, leaning back in his chair. Brown suit rumpling. "I talked to your mother last night."

The old anger flared. If just for an instant. "Karen is my stepmother."

"Stepmother, then. She and I had a long talk. She said you were called into the school counselor's office for refusing to do work."

"That was over a year ago!"

"But that your attitude had improved a great deal since then," he added smoothly. "Personally, I think it could still use some work." Flipping a pen idly between his fingers. "Ignoring the rules will earn you no favors in the real world, Miss Williams. You need to face facts."

"I don't understand," she finally burst out. "What's the point of just writing down what you said in class for our papers? Especially if I don't think it's true!"

He frowned at her. "I am the teacher, Sarah. I've had years of experience with great literature." He leaned forward. "And you think you can teach class better than I can?"

"I just meant --"

"Let me tell you something." Getting out of his chair, circling around to face her. Leaning against the desk. "Individuality is all well and good, and should be applauded. But you are not such a genius that you can get away with re-working an assignment on your own terms." An expression of faint disgust. "For one thing, your ideas about the existence of ethereal beings are preposterous."

"So I believe there's more to the world than meets the eye. Is that a crime?"

"Don't be silly. You're sixteen, and far too old for fairytales." Crossing his arms, still glaring. "Idle dreamers get nowhere in life, Sarah. Shape up, or suffer the consequences."

She broke to the surface again, almost laughing as she clung to the boat. "It's almost funny, now," she said faintly, gasping for air, "considering where I am. I'd almost feel sorry for Phelps," she muttered, blue lips trembling with cold, "if he weren't such an ass. He really made me feel like --"

"Sarah!" Hoggle shouted, slapping her numb cheeks gently as she murmured to herself. "Sarah, stay with us!"

Teeth chattering, she looked up at her friends. "I'm sorry, guys," she whispered.

"Just a little longer, Sarah!"

The moat swallowed her up.

She was a little more prepared this time around, and she fought. Kicking and struggling against the malignant current, her head reaching the surface as she gasped for air. She drifted away from the boat, floundering as memories circled like sharks, whispering poisonous words.

"Spoiled, selfish brat."

"Idle dreamer."

“Shut up,” she muttered, cold stealing the strength from her limbs. “The water is *talking*, and the irony is not lost on me, so you can go to hell, Phelps.”

“Spoiled, selfish brat.”

She whimpered. “I’m sorry, Daddy.”

“Spoiled, selfish --”

She went under again. The slippery shadows converged upon her, and voices filled her head.

Karen, trying to understand, and failing miserably. “*I’d like it if you had dates! You should have dates, at your age!*”

Cedric, trying to hurt her when she said she didn’t want to see him anymore. “*You’re a cold bitch, do you know that?*”

Even Nikki, lolling on her bed. “*You’re getting the reputation of being a snob.*”

Sarah thrashed weakly in the water, desperately striving to reach the surface again. *No*, she thought grimly. *I like who I am. I don’t care what you think.*

“Brat.”

“Snob.”

“Dreamer.”

“Bitch.”

Fingertips reaching the surface, just above her. *I don’t care what anyone thinks!*

And then the cool, elegant voice that had haunted her nightmares for three years. “*I was wrong. You haven’t changed at all.*”

Determination melted away, and she let the water take her.

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Far above the moat, the goblins rejoiced. As Sarah’s dark head slipped beneath the water for the last time, they howled in triumph: feet stomping dust into the air, arms waving wildly, cheering and shouting like madmen. They continued to lob rocks at the miserable four still in boats, catcalling and jeering from their perch.

Jareth continued to watch silently, expressionless. The dark folds of his cloak hung heavy, undisturbed by the flurry of movement around him. His eyes never left the spot where Sarah had sank beneath the sluggish waters. A bauble, grasped lightly in one listless hand, shone in the feeble sunlight.

And fell.

The goblins fell silent, as abruptly as if a string, holding them together, had snapped. As one, they stared as the crystal sphere tumbled noiselessly through the air, watched as it pierced the moat’s waters without a ripple, and disappear into the depths. As one, they turned to Jareth.

Who rubbed his velvet-clad fingers together, regarding them with a look of mild annoyance.

“Hmm.” He feigned a shrug. “Slippery little devils.” He turned, cloak swirling around him like wind-kissed water.

Wide-eyed, they watched him go.

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She awoke with a start, harsh breathing echoing slightly in the surrounding darkness. There was no light at all – she was completely blind. All she knew was that she lay on her back on cold, rough stones. Her clothes were dry, but in an oddly stiff way, and she could still smell the moat in them.

“Sarah.”

She jerked herself up into a sitting position and winced, feeling tired muscles ache with the abrupt movement. She blinked her eyes against the impenetrable darkness, trying to make out his shape.

“Sarah.”

Softer, now, and closer. She held up one hand, warding him away, but could feel nothing... Then velvet fingers brushed her face, as gentle as butterfly wings. She froze, heart beating fast.

“Why?” he murmured. He laid his hand against her cheek, and for a moment Sarah had to fight the urge to turn her face to that terribly soothing caress. “Why do you fight me so hard? Why can’t you just give in?”

“Because,” she whispered hoarsely, blinking back sudden tears of weariness. “You always ask for too much in return.”

“I?” The fingers tightened momentarily against her skin. “I ask for too much?” The hand left her face, and she sighed — from relief or disappointment, she didn’t know. “*You* ask for the impossible!”

“I only wish...” She struggled for words. What? That he played fair? That he understood? That he wasn’t so completely alien to everything and everyone she’d ever known?

“Exactly,” he said bitterly. And then he was gone — how, or how she even knew, she had no idea, but she could tell. The air no longer felt charged with electricity, as if an impending storm were about to break.

She sighed deeply, letting her head drop. This wasn’t how things were supposed to happen. She wasn’t supposed to... and he wasn’t...

She climbed doggedly to her feet. What was the use? He had saved her from dragons like living silver. She had nearly turned to stone in a moonlit paradise. It was done, whatever it was, whatever it meant. All that mattered was getting Brian and getting free.

She felt her way about the room cautiously, hands outstretched to trace the lines of stone and mortar in the dark. Eventually she found the long, rectangular edge of a door, and pushed it open.

Light flooded her eyes, and for a second she was just as blind as she’d been in the darkness. She shut her eyes against the onslaught, and then reopened them slowly.

“Oh, wow,” she breathed.

The door of her tiny, dark room led to an immense hallway. It towered above her, loft rafters

crisscrossing far above her head. The walls, of pale sandstones, were covered in thick, rich tapestries of jeweled colors and glittering threads. Candles and torches flamed everywhere, even high along the walls, so that the hall was filled with light.

With a low whistle, Sarah walked along the corridor, sneakered feet sinking into an oriental carpet that stretched as far as she could see. She shook her head.

“As much as I see,” she said to herself, “this place never ceases to amaze me.”

Which reminded her: Hoggle, Chaucer, Ludo, Didymus – what had happened to them? Did they turn back, thinking she had drowned? Or had they reached the far shore without her? She hesitated a moment, then sighed. Whatever had happened, she couldn’t do anything about it. Not now. She just had to keep going.

And so she walked tiredly down the hallway, eyes lingering on the tapestries she passed. They were glorious – made of thread, velvet, silk, fibers, even stuff she didn’t know about and couldn’t possibly name. Geometric designs or fluid ones, scenes of battles she had never heard of, embroidered with texts in languages she had never seen. One showed a pale girl sitting cross-legged on the sea, a clutch of eggs nestled in her lap. Above her, two moons shone.

And then, suddenly, the tapestries were gone, replaced by delicately detailed oil paintings on either side. She stepped close to one, narrowing her eyes as she concentrated on a particular scene: an exquisitely accurate depiction of the Labyrinth’s main gate. If she peered intently past the frame (swept by a feeling of *déjà vu*) she could just see the dust being kicked up by the breeze.

“Of course,” she said aloud, words startling in the deep silence of the corridor. “Of *course!*”

This was the fabled Portrait Hall Chaucer had been so keen on! Filled with the magical paintings that could take you, instantly, to the location they depicted. She turned, sweeping her gaze over the long stretch of passageway before her. There must have been hundreds.

And that, she thought, hope blossoming inside her, *is how I’m going to get out.*

All she had to do was grab Brian, run back to the Hall, and they were free! What could be simpler?

She ran along the length of the corridor, grinning with delight. Paintings passed in flashes:

... a sparkling cave, somewhere in the depths of the earth...

... a rustling orchard, smelling of summer fruit and bathed in golden sunlight...

... a musty throne room, draped in rich hangings and overrun with chickens...

She stopped, panting. There, right in front of her, was the exit: thick oak doors carved in a waterfall relief. She rested a moment, catching a breath. And then something caught her eye — a fall of pale hair, the crystalline color of a gaze — and she turned unthinkingly towards it.

There, large as life and twice as natural, was a portrait of Jareth. Ice shot through her veins before realizing the figure didn’t breathe, didn’t move. It was a normal painting. He stood, feet apart and arms folded, eyes filled with mocking defiance. He was dressed simply, in leather pants that fit the line of his leg snugly, and a grey shirt, unbuttoned. As always, dark gloves sheathed his hands.

“Figures,” Sarah muttered. “He wears the fantastical every day, and then dresses down to have his picture taken.” And the painting was not looking at her. No way.

A prickling on the back of her neck made her turn her head.

There was a painting on the wall directly opposite of Jareth's. It was smaller; not life-sized like the Goblin King's, but of regular height and width. All this was only a rough guess, however — the actual canvas of the painting had been slashed so violently the fabric draped over and out of the frame, obscuring the subject from view.

Knowing it was stupid, *knowing* it was a bad idea and she should be running out those doors that very minute (and knowing she couldn't help herself), she stepped over to the ruined portrait. Tentatively curious, she picked up the savaged canvas by its tattered edges, spreading it smooth again over the backing.

It was her.

Her fifteen-year-old self, dressed in the glittering gown of the masked ball, a net of silver leaves caught in her hair. She stood as if caught in surprise: eyes filled with gentle wonder, lips softly parted.

A hand latched onto her elbow and yanked her away, almost wrenching her arm out of the socket. "Didn't your dead mother ever tell you," came a cultured, coldly furious voice in her ear, "not to play with other people's toys?"

He slammed her into the opposite wall, breath rushing from her body. It took a minute for her to collect herself. "Why do you have a picture of me?"

"Target practice," he said softly. Bracing one hand on the wall behind her, he leaned in close, eyes intent. "Why do you think?"

"Doesn't look like it." She tried to inch her way along the wall, but he placed his other hand on the stones, effectively trapping her. So she flattened herself, trying to get as much space between them as possible. Praying he couldn't tell how fast her heart was beating. "Looks like you took a knife to it, or something."

He smiled at her, baring sharp teeth. "I was having a bad day." His body was rigid with tension, the smooth, pale skin of his chest a striking contrast to the soft material of his unbuttoned shirt. She flushed, realizing she'd been staring, and Jareth's expression relaxed into a grin.

"Do you like?" he asked, voice soft.

Sarah squirmed, still caught between him and the wall. Her skin prickled with the nearness of him. "It's different."

He smiled slightly, stepping away. "With so many Aboveground visitors, I felt overdressed."

"I'm sure Brian appreciates your efforts," she muttered, relaxing as he moved from her. The edges of his shirt whispered, shadow-soft, against her own clothing as he backed off. "Of course, you --" Her mouth snapped shut. She stared at him, wide-eyed. "You wore that in the portrait." Craning her neck, she looked to the aforementioned painting — only to find it empty, gilded frame capturing nothing but a blank canvas. She turned back to him, expression outraged. "You mean you — and the picture --"

Jareth, now leaning against the opposite wall, threw back his head and laughed. "Ah, Sarah," and he made the name a caress, "you are adorable when you feel betrayed."

He smiled at her, resting his head against the stones. His frost-blond hair fell softly about the sharp features of his pale, fey face, unnerving eyes regarding her with merciless intensity. The

unbuttoned shirt hung on him loosely, baring white flesh and the taut line of his stomach. The pendant hanging on his chest gleamed with its own light. The leather hugged his legs like a second skin, tucked into dark boots. He was strangely defenseless, Sarah felt, arms hanging listless as he let her look at him. It wasn't just the simple clothes. Some pretension had dropped away, some assumed nonchalance, leaving raw essence behind -- and a terrible, vulnerable honesty.

He made her heart ache.

She raised her eyes to his again, oddly calm. "I'm going to go, now," she said quietly.

He closed his eyes, making no move to stop her as she pulled away from the wall. Watching him carefully from the corner of her eye, she stepped cautiously over to the double oak doors. She placed her hand on them, fingertips feeling the ridges cut into wood to conjure the sight of falling water. She threw one last look at him over her shoulder, and made to put her weight against the door.

"Wait."

She stumbled a little at his voice, and glared at him. "Yes?" she asked, a little testily.

"I have a much better idea." He lifted himself away from the wall, shirt fluttering with the movement. Turning away from her, he continued to talk as he walked idly down the corridor. "Perhaps it would be wiser if you went straight to Brian himself."

"Thanks all the same," she said, moving toward the doors again, "but I've learned not to take any of your 'helpful' advice."

Suddenly he was beside her, and his gloved fingers fastened around her wrist. "There is something you should see."

"Stop it!" She struggled to free herself, but he persisted in guiding her down the hall. Finally he swung her around, releasing her before a particular painting.

She glared at him, rubbing her slightly sore wrist. "Spectacularly unimpressive. It's blank."

"Not true."

She gave the painting another look. "Okay, it's *black*. I still don't get it."

He gave a small sigh. "Sometimes, you are surprisingly slow to catch on." Deftly, he snagged a torch flaming in its bracket, thrusting it casually past the frame. Sarah gasped as the uncertain light flickered over rough-hewn stone, dirt, and cobwebs. It was a terribly familiar sight.

"The oubliette," she whispered to herself.

"Oh, but there's much more to it than that," Jareth said, placing the torch into a holder so that the tiny cavern remained lit. "Can you guess what it is?"

But she had already sighted the still figure lying on the cold stone, already launched herself at the painting. "Brian!"

He stopped her before she could step completely through, one arm catching her around the waist and pulling her to him. "Careful," he warned, warm breath stirring her hair. "Once in, would you know how to get out?"

She tried to pry his arm off her, but it was like a steel band – not hurting her, but very firmly

holding her in place. Exasperated, she gave up, instead straining to see any sign of movement in the oubliette. “Brian!” she shouted. “Can you hear me? It’s Sarah!” Frustrated, she turned her head to see Jareth. He was so close his hair brushed feather-soft against her cheek. “Why doesn’t he get up?”

Still watching the light flicker over the stones of the oubliette, Jareth gave a small smile. “Because he is dead to the world.”

She stared at him. Frowning, she turned back to the painting. “What’s in his hand?” she asked abruptly.

“What do you mean?”

“There’s something in his hand.” She pulled away, and this time he let his arm drop away. She stepped closer to the painting, eyes narrowing in concentration. And then, with a dawning sense of discovering: “It’s... I think it’s...”

“A half-eaten peach,” Jareth finished for her. From beneath half-lowered lids, he watched the line of her back go rigid. For a long moment, she simply stood, eyes never leaving Brian’s unconscious form. Then she whirled, hand upraised as if to hit him. Laughing, as if it were a game, he caught at it effortlessly, hand locking around her wrist.

“You *bastard!*” Sarah raged, nearly spitting in his face. “How could you do that to him? He had no idea what was happening! He was helpless!” She swung at him again, and he captured the other wrist. She winced at the strength of his grip. “You’re such a hard bastard,” she whispered, voice shaking slightly. “Why are you so cruel?”

“*Life* is cruel, Sarah,” he said fiercely. “Children are taken from their parents, parents from their children, and cherished friends are forgotten over time. The stories are no different! Your people knew that, before someone came along and took out all the nasty parts. The prince is blinded by thorns, the swan maiden is betrayed and throws herself off a cliff. *I am what humanity has made me.*”

“You enjoy it,” she said, biting out each word. “You have fun.”

Jareth shrugged, releasing her, but not moving away. “Perhaps. What is it to you?”

“What is it to me? I’m here because of your tricks and your games!”

He gave an indolent smirk. “You’re here because you couldn’t resist the chance to play heroine again — couldn’t bear to leave a friend in my wicked clutches. Isn’t that so? It has to be, doesn’t it... only something terribly noble and self-sacrificing would entice you to walk back into my kingdom.”

“I have nothing against the Labyrinth,” she said, throwing the words into his face. “It’s home to my friends. It’s the king I despise.”

“I find it rather hard to believe that,” he said, towering over her with his old, imperious air. “You did find it terribly easy, after all, to put him out of your mind. Once doesn’t forget those we hate so very quickly.”

Sarah froze where she stood, green eyes wide. Suddenly, the laughter bubbled up in her like champagne. “Don’t tell me... oh, this is rich,” she gasped. Jareth’s mouth thinned. “This is too funny! Your *feelings* were hurt, were they?” she asked, unconsciously mimicking his mocking hauteur. “Did it prick at you pride, the fact that I didn’t concern myself with you, ever again? That I never gave you a second’s thought?” *You’re lying*, a voice inside her whispered. *Shut up*, Sarah

snapped. *I'm on a roll.* "What a terrible wound to your arrogance! Well, you must forgive me, *your Maje --*"

He brought his mouth down on hers, hard, as if desperate to cut off the poisonous words. She instinctively tried to break away, but his arms snaked around her in a crushing grip, pinning her limbs to her sides and rendering her struggles futile. His fingers dug sharply into her back, as if in punishment even for that feeble attempt to liberate herself. She gave a small cry of pain, arching against him to escape that bruising grip.

The kiss itself was strangely gentle. Soft lips pressed tenderly to her own, coaxing her to respond to their warmth. She obeyed without thinking, opening to him, the shock of his touch making her boneless in his arms. His hold loosened, became supporting instead of a restraint. He gathered her up like something precious, cradling her body against him as if wanting to protect her from the entire world.

He tasted as wild and sweet as a summer storm.

He was the one that broke the kiss, sighing so deeply she felt it in her bones. He leaned his forehead gently against hers, eyes closed.

"And to think," he whispered against her lips. "Once, you wanted to stay a child forever, playing with your toys and your costumes." His arms loosened further, setting her back on the floor. His hands slipped down her arms to entwine his gloved fingers with her own, still keeping her trapped against his body. "Think of what you would have missed." He kissed her again — softly, chastely — on the mouth, pulling his hands free of hers. Sarah felt him step away.

She opened her eyes groggily, as if blinking back a spell. "Oh my God." Eyes wide, she touched her lips hesitantly, stumbling backwards a bit. "Stop doing that!" she cried.

"Why? You looked like you were having fun."

She glared at him, actually scrubbing at her mouth with the sleeve of her shirt. Jareth looked supremely amused at the childish gesture. "Why the hell do you keep doing that?" she snarled.

The smile slipped from his face. "Why do you think?"

She hugged herself tightly, trying to subdue the trembling in her limbs. She regarded him warily.

"Because." Belligerently: "You're screwing with me — playing with my head." She frowned, and her voice became a little unsure. "That's what you said before."

Jareth was silent for a moment, eyes distant. "Close," he said quietly. "You are very close." He reached out, touching a strand of dark hair that had fallen in front of her face. When she stiffened and drew back, he let the hand drop. "But not quite."

They regarded each other -- two enemies in a vast, reaching hallway, alone except for the living works of art surrounding them. "I am a determined man, Sarah," Jareth began again. "When I want something, I go after it. No matter what the cost — to myself or others." His crystalline eyes stared into hers, burning with unknown emotion. "Take care you don't get in my way."

"I don't know if I am," Sarah replied stonily. "I don't even know what you want. Even when you took Toby, I was never sure if it was him you wanted, or --" Then she closed her mouth firmly.

Jareth grinned wickedly, looking genuinely delighted. "I want," he said lightly, "what I've always wanted: to win."

He turned on his heel, striding away. “What do you plan to do now?”

She looked back to Brian, lying prone on the stone oubliette floor. “I don’t suppose I could just grab him and run?” she asked dully.

Jareth laughed mirthlessly. “Not unless you value friends you cannot wake, who are lost forever in the wanderings of their own fantasies.”

She sighed, shoulders drooping. “Then what?” she asked softly, almost too soft for him to hear.

He twisted his hand in a fluid, effortless motion, revealing another peach. Arm outstretched, he held it out to her, expressionless.

“You must follow him,” he said simply.

She stared at the round fruit, a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. “Go in and drag him out... that’s the idea?”

He nodded, once.

The peach was perfect: golden, with a faint blush of rose. She could smell it — enticing and sweet — from where she stood.

“The last one had a worm in it,” she said, with a note of faint rebuke.

“Not this one,” Jareth promised, running his thumb over the slightly fuzzy skin. “This one is perfect.”

Reluctantly, she held out her hand, and he dropped the peach into it. She regarded it somberly, then raised her eyes to his. “I don’t trust you.”

He laughed a little. “I know, dearest. But that won’t stop you, will it?”

She drew a deep breath. “No,” she said clearly. “It never will.”

She raised the peach and bit it, juices running into her mouth. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand as she swallowed. “You never get them to taste quite right,” she said, voice a little wobbly.

“Lack of experience with the real thing,” he said softly, watching her like a hawk.

She laughed, feeling strangely giddy. “That would explain it.” Her vision swam and she stumbled a little, leaning for support against the wall. “One of these days,” she spoke sleepily, eyes drifting shut, “I’ll have to send you a fruit basket.”

The peach dropped from her hand and landed wetly. Empty hands clutched futilely at the smooth stones, looking for purchase as a wave of dizziness hit her hard. She leaned her forehead against the wall, breathing slowly through her mouth. “I’m going to fall,” she said in a small, scared voice. Then the life left her, leaving her features slack, and she dropped to the floor.

Jareth caught her before she could hit the carpeted stones, adroitly scooping her up in his arms. He stepped carefully through one of the wide paintings, ending up in his throne room. Ever so gently, he placed the sleeping Sarah in his throne, curled up like a child. Her breathing was soft and regular, and he paused to smooth one hand over her hair. He bent to kiss her forehead, softly.

“Sweet dreams, my love.”

Once Upon a Dream

Gondolas glided smoothly along the canal, midnight waters rippling with the light from torches linking the banks. The slim crafts deftly weaved through the network of canals, moving together like a flock of water-bound birds. Nighttime sounds surrounded them, echoing off the tall, majestic buildings that flanked their watery roads: a child crying, sleepy chatter, muffled revelry. The whispering waters – and the night – swallowed up the noises with a secretive smile.

The boats were decked in elegant, if simple, trappings. Each had a new coat of fresh white paint, gleaming with moonlit luminescence. The bare sitting slats were softened with pillows of satin and velvet. Cords of twisted white silk trimmed the lithe vessels as they skimmed across murky waters, shining like pearls.

Individuals began, at an irregular pace, to break away from the fleet. They darted down the smaller, unlit canals, gondoliers whistling low and soft so that their charges would step out of their houses. Laughter drifted across the water as richly bedecked parties climbed into their watery chariots.

A single gondola slipped apart from its brothers, driver ducking beneath low-slung bridges. He muttered to himself as he threw his weight against the pole, surly with displeasure. His grumbling grew louder as he neared his destination, until he began to speak aloud, snapping irritably at no one at all.

“Nobles,” he grunted. “Run here, fetch this, paint your boat. Do as you’re told, don’t ask questions.” He snorted with disgust, shoving his weight against the pole so violently the canal waters sloshed against the sides of his boat with wet, smacking sounds. He continued regardless, ignoring the upset as his craft bobbed unsteadily along the waterway. “Damn snotty aristocrats.”

He was a tiny, gnarled man, hunched and doubled over with bad temper until he looked more like a dwarf than a man. A cap was smashed down upon his head, pulled low until it touched frantically bushy eyebrows. A weathered face of indeterminate age lay beneath it, and eyes with a sly gleam darted every which way as he skillfully guided his flat-bottomed boat.

He paused, carefully pushing the gondola up against the stone ledge lifting the street away from the murky canal. He whistled sharply, impatiently drumming his fingers against his palm. When no response followed, he called a curt “Ho!” and whistled again.

The door opposite him opened, and a servant’s face peeked out. She curtsied shyly, drab dress brushing along the cobblestones, then hurried back inside. As he waited, he heard voices within.

“Hurry!” someone hissed. “Before the old bat wakes up!”

Muffled laughter. “Nicole, you can’t mean...” A pregnant silence. “Nicole! You mean your aunt doesn’t know about this?”

He could hear the soft rustle of cloaks being donned, heard the maid fussing as she fastened ties beneath chins and drew hoods over elaborate hairstyles.

“She wouldn’t have liked it,” came the mulish reply. “Oh, she would have allowed us — even Aunt would never have refused this invitation — but she would have wept and cajoled and pleaded...” The two emerged in the doorway, girlish figures swathed in heavy fabric. “And who wants to endure that sort of trouble?”

“Still.” The taller girl lingered, face hidden in the shadow of her hood. “Perhaps a note, or —”

“I left the invitation by her bed,” the first girl said, tugging on her friend’s arm. “She will find it when she rises, and it will be fine.” A manservant (hiding a yawn at the late hour) adroitly sidestepped them both, and then helped the first young woman into the waiting vessel.

The second girl sighed, and then held out an arm for the manservant to hold. “All right,” she said, a hint of mischief in her voice. “However, if she becomes furious, you know I will claim you led your poor, helpless cousin astray.”

“Hah.” Nicole settled into the cushions along with her friend, shaking shining blonde curls free of the heavy hood. “She would believe you, though. She thinks I am the devil,” she said airily.

“You should stop tormenting her dog, then,” the friend said.

“Nasty little creature,” Nicole muttered as the gondola skimmed across the water towards the main canal. “I don’t believe it’s really a dog – she must have accidentally fed a river rat all these years, and now it’s tame.”

Her friend laughed, turning a hooded gaze in the direction of the horizon, where the light of the low moon polished the ornate buildings and rippling water with a glimmering sheen.

“It’s beautiful,” she breathed. “Venice is so beautiful. I cannot imagine why Father went to London.”

Lady Nicole smiled, a bit wistfully. “I imagine it is not so beautiful,” she said, “when the one you love has left it.”

“True,” her companion replied lightly. “But one may suppose the same for all the world.”

“What do you mean?”

“All things considered, I would rather he stayed in Venice, despite my mother’s death. The English court holds its own wonder, but I would have liked to know my mother’s city.”

They were silent together, listening to the canal waters swirl around them. After a moment, Nicole shook herself free of its hypnotizing spell.

“Well, you will know it now,” she said firmly. “And this party is the absolute best way I could have chosen for you!” She squealed with delight. “Can you believe it? A private gondola! With satin cushions! And with the sumptuary laws restricting excess of grandeur – only the Prince could manage it. I cannot even *imagine* what awaits for us at his house,” she ended with a deep feeling of satisfaction. She sighed lustily, eyeing their surroundings. “For heaven’s sake, Sarah. If you do not take off that hood, I will succumb to the persistent paranoia that you are making faces at me.”

Her companion laughed again, easily throwing back the hood of her cloak. The gondolier -- one eye on his path, the other on his charges -- nearly pitched forward into the canal in surprise.

He knew her.

He had never seen her before in his life; he knew that, as well as the network of canals that snaked through his beloved city. But he knew her. The dark hair that lay in sumptuous curls against her white neck, the proud green eyes set in an oval face – he knew it all, knew the cut of her features as if they were those of a cherished friend. He stared, letting the boat go adrift. She caught his gaze with her own, and within her eyes he spied the same sense of recognition.

Her lips, faintly pinked with coral shine, parted softly in wonder. She stared back, and her hands lingered, forgotten, on the edges of her hood.

"I'm Sarah," she said after a moment. She gave him an open smile. "I feel as if I know you."

"Doubt it, my lady," the man mumbled, ducking his head as he returned to his task.

"No, I know you," Sarah insisted calmly. She regarded him with curiosity, head to one side.

"What is your name?"

He flushed hotly, struggling to regain his control of the boat. "Don't like my name," he grumbled.

"Friends call me Hoggle."

"Hoggle?" Nicole's head peered over her friend's shoulder, blinking in surprise. "That's not a name, that's the last gasp of a dying frog."

"Huh," he grunted significantly. "Shows what you know."

Sarah's smile widened. "Hoggle," she said fondly, as if accustomed to the unorthodox sound. "It's good to see you."

"Thank you then, little man," Nicole called gaily, "for escorting us to the Prince's house forthwith." She made a melodramatic flourish. "Our gratitude is yours."

Sarah's eyes shone with excitement. "I'm not sure I understand," she laughed with good-natured confusion. "I thought princes lived in castles."

"He's not a prince," Hoggle said, eyes on the canal. "Not a real one."

"Venice doesn't have kings," Nicole added. "We have a Doge, may his Venerableness continue until even porridge is too exciting for the old coot."

Hoggle shot her an evil grin. "Your host is his nephew. 'The Prince' is his nickname."

"As he is a prince among men!" Nicole proclaimed dramatically. Laughing at herself, she settled deeper into luxurious pillows. "He's lovely, Sarah."

"Is he so grand?"

"Grander than the grandest Duke of Europe. All the women swoon for him," she said, matter-of-factly. "And his house is the jewel of Venice. A small palace, really. The Doge insisted."

"But I'm not looking to capture a prince, authentic or otherwise," Sarah teased, running her hand lightly through the water and delicately flicking the errant drops at her friend, who squeaked and ducked. "I'm spoken for, remember?"

Nicole smiled slyly. "Lord Brian will be there, also."

"Nicole!" Sarah gasped. "Did you tell him I would be there?"

"No," her cousin returned impishly. "I did not have to — as a son of a great Venetian family, he was invited on his own merits, I'm sure."

"And a member of the same stocking club," Hoggle grumbled behind them. "The Ardent, isn't it?"

Nicole gave him a close look. “You,” she said pointedly, “know quite a lot, don’t you, little man?”

“Th’name’s Hoggle,” he replied. “And ‘course I know a lot. Part of the job.”

Nicole grinned at him. “There is no such thing as a secret in this city, Sarah,” she spoke to her friend. “Someone always knows about things – and more than likely it’s a gondolier.”

“This isn’t fair!” Sarah cried, laughing. “I feel as if you two had your own language — stocking clubs? What are those? And why do gondoliers know everything?”

Nicole relaxed against the soft cushions; heedless of her crushed blonde curls. “Stocking clubs,” she said with a gleeful smile, “are a tradition among the best and brightest sons of our fair city. Something to amuse themselves with before they have to don a black patrician’s robe. Oh, they do everything: stage battles, put on plays, arrange parties... loads of fun. They all have names like The Ardent, or The Patriotic — something wonderfully romantic and idealistic. And you can tell which one they belong to by a badge on their cloak or coat-sleeve or their stocking. The Ardent is the best. Last year, during Carnival, they staged a Turkish invasion! It was amazing!”

“Nearly put the Doge in his grave,” Hoggle muttered, still grimly poling along the Grand Canal.

“Ah yes,” Nicole agreed, nodding. “They did look awfully authentic for a moment there, did they not?”

“And gondoliers?” Sarah demanded, eyes sparkling.

Nicole giggled wickedly. “I believe our little friend here should answer that question.”

Hoggle glared at her. “We’re required to keep all secrets of our passengers,” he said gruffly. “Everything we are privy to — betrayals, plots, affairs. Or we’re banished from the Brotherhood.”

Sarah laughed delightedly. “Venice is like something out of a dream,” she said, shaking her head. “Dramatic clubs, secrets, parties in the dead of the night...”

“This is the *perfect* time for a party!” Nicole insisted indignantly. “Of course. The Prince would never do anything inappropriate. Well,” she added thoughtfully. “Nothing inappropriate that wasn’t *expected*.”

Their gondolier chuckled unexpectedly. “You have the right of him, my lady,” he said.

“Come now, Sarah,” Nicole chided gently. “Close your mouth, darling child — or you will look a perfect foreigner, and no one will ever believe your own mother was a Venetian.”

Sarah laughed, a little wryly. “I’m not sure being the daughter of a courtesan is anything to boast about.”

Nicole stared at her in amazement, tempered with pity. “My dear cousin,” she said softly. “I know you have grown up far away from us, in a Puritan court, but... this is *Venice*. And when your mother was alive, she was one of the most beloved and respected courtesans of the Lion City.” She laughed slightly. “My father joked about fighting over her with your own father — even when I was a child. And you are *her* daughter.” Sitting up, she placed a slender white hand over Sarah’s own. “We welcome you back home, Sarah — we welcome you back where you belong.”

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The hall was magnificent. It simply took her breath away — jasper columns rising from a dark floor of stained oak boards, chandeliers filling the air with light and the scent of hot wax,

candlelight catching on the scrolls and flowers of gold that graced every edge and corner of the walls. And there were mirrors everywhere — wide, shining planes of reflecting glass that caught at the chaotic, vibrant swathes of color in the room, throwing them back into a melee of celebration.

Sarah stood hesitantly on the edge, fan clutched tightly in her gloved hands and held against the silken material of her dress. She felt admittedly out of place. Nicole had abandoned her — not out of any ill nature, but she had spied friends and rushed to them unthinkingly, and Sarah hadn't wanted to be a nuisance. Not only was she a stranger to everyone here, she *looked* a foreigner — a paler complexion (though many women boasted skin of the same shade, hers was natural and unaided by paints), and dark hair where the favored shade of Venetians was a golden blonde. Her manner of dress, though elegant and stylish, could not hope to match the stunning array of satin, jewels, and lace she saw around her. Her midnight colors, edged in silver, looked positively plain in comparison. And the elaborate hairstyles on the women, as opposed to her own simple cascade of curls... No. She should have stayed home — she should have never let Nicole talk her into coming...

“Lady Sarah?”

She started, turning toward the polite inquiry. Her eyes met a tall young man dressed in the height of current Venetian fashion: knee breeches of dark wool, pristine white stockings, elegant buckled shoes... His coat, heavily embroidered with gold thread, was open to show the splendor of his silk waistcoat, effusive lace spilling out onto his wrists and at his throat. The tricorne hat that would have completed the outfit was missing, naturally, probably resting somewhere along with his cloak. Soft brown hair fell softly to his shoulders, and dark eyes smiled pleasantly at her.

Sarah shivered, suffering from the same shock of recognition as when she had met Hoggle — somehow, though she had never seen him before in all her life, she knew this man.

“Yes?” she returned, a trifle wary.

His smile deepened, eyes sparkling at her caution. “You must excuse my rudeness,” he said frankly. “My family was sent a miniature of your portrait, and I thought I chanced to recognize you, although we did not expect you in Venice quite yet --”

“Are you...” she hesitated. “Lord Brian?”

He shrugged slightly. “I beg pardon for not introducing myself properly — I am afraid we are a little short on propriety in His Highness's court, and I am bred in absolute boorishness. That does not,” he hastily amended, “excuse my conduct, of course — what I mean to say is --”

“You are forgiven,” Sarah said, laughing slightly. “I assure you, I wasn't offended — just surprised. I hadn't expected to meet you so soon.” She blushed a little, dropping her gaze. Her father wanted her to marry this man. He was young, handsome, and of a good family. Of course, she herself was the daughter of a prominent ambassador to England. But Lord Brian's family was recorded in the Golden Book. Marrying him would mean the best possible future she could hope for — and she would get to live in Venice, her mother's city.

Then why did some part of her hesitate?

“His Highness's court?” she asked abruptly, to cover her sudden discomfort.

He chuckled. “The Prince, as we all refer to him — we grew up together, all of us who are now members of the Ardent.” He motioned absently with one hand to the stylized design that graced the stocking of his right leg. “He was always the leader of us boys, and whether his direction did more harm than good, it is yet to be seen.” He grinned. “He rules us still — he's the prior of our

stocking club.” He caught himself. “But this must sound all gibberish to you --”

“Not at all,” she said smoothly, smiling. “I was just given a lesson by my friend,” and she motioned toward her cousin discretely with her closed fan, “the Lady Nicole. She is, after all, a native of Venice,” turning back to Brian, “and is well-knowleged in these things.”

They smiled at each other, warmly, openly, and Sarah could feel the beginnings of an easy friendship between them. Yes, she liked him — very much.

They chatted easily for a few moments more, and Sarah explained that she had traveled ahead of her father in order to spend more time with her cousin. Lord Brian, apparently, knew Nicole through reputation only. Sarah threw a quick glance at her cousin — who was surrounded by a veritable flock of male admirers. Her fan, a gorgeous piece of tortoise-shell spokes and painted silk, was fluttering rapidly as she cooled herself, then used it to flirt: tapping her own cheek, rapping someone’s wrist at an impudent remark. Sarah knew the language of fans, but she had never seen it used so effortlessly (and constantly) as she did now, surrounded by the ladies of Venice. The women around her spoke on a wide range of levels: speaking coquettishly in fact, the movement of their fans contradicting every other word. A handle to the lips was an invitation for a kiss, despite the scathing manner with which the lady mocked her suitor in public. And, no matter how

warmly she laughed at the innuendos around her, a sharp twist of a closed fan was a clear message: *Do not be so foolish.*

Nicole noticed Sarah’s eyes were upon her, and she smiled at her cousin with secret delight. Suddenly, her eyes widened, and with a deliberate gesture, twirled her fan in her left hand.

*You are being watched.*

Sarah frowned slightly. Still laughing at a joke Lord Brian had just told her, concerning antics of sons of the Council of Ten, she let her eyes roam over the crowd. Yes, she was being watched — she caught more than a few gentlemen giving her quick glances while their ladies looked the other way, and many women were outright assessing her from behind their gorgeous fans. But who would concern Nicole...?

She saw him.

He had draped himself casually over a chair set in one corner, almost rude in his utter comfort. He was surrounded by others — male and female friends grouped around him in other chairs and a bevy of women with yellow and red silk dresses, like wild tulips, at his feet. Their painted faces were upturned adoringly, and he tousled the hair of one with an elegant white hand, the aged lace at his cuff mixing with her fair curls. His coat was unbuttoned, revealing a waistcoat stitched so heavily with silver, it looked stiff and armor-like. Lace again, this time at his pale throat. His hair was an unbelievably faded, frost-blond, falling in rough locks around his face. Dark eyes a sharp contrast to his fey complexion.

Shock swept through her, leaving her still and cold. Where the others had been a mere note of recognition, this was a chord. She felt like a bell that had been struck, and she was now inaudibly ringing, from coifed head to slippered toes. It was impossible, and it was inconceivable — *but she knew him.*

His eyes, she noticed, were strangely mismatched: the unequal pupils made one seem darker than the other, shading the pure, crystalline color. Those eyes laughed at her with dark, wicked delight, his lips curling in a decidedly feral grin.

*Come, those eyes beckoned. Come to me. We both know that you want to — and I will welcome*

*you with open arms.*

She turned away.

Lord Brian gave her an amused glance, mouth quirking into a grin. “And I see you have met the Prince,” he drawled. “I won’t be offended if you take a moment to catch your breath — even if you are my intended.”

“We aren’t engaged yet,” she muttered, ignoring the fact that her breath was a little short. “So that is the Doge’s nephew?” She raised her head, mouth set stubbornly. “He looks like a lout.”

Brian laughed outright in surprised delight. “You would be the first woman of my acquaintance to say so,” he said, “but I agree.” He shrugged lightly. “He enjoys freedoms the rest of us only dream of. So, he tends to put aside propriety. He is forgiven, because he is Venice’s favored son — but the rest of us must conform to what is expected of us.”

“Who are those women with him? In the red and yellow dresses.”

Brian shot her a sly grin. “Courtesans.”

“Courtesans!” Her head whipped around to regard them again, in amazement. “But — I thought the age of courtesans had disappeared with the Inquisition.”

“And so it has.” Brian shrugged lightly. “But the Lion City still has its wayward children. We no longer counted them among our most valued assets — do you know of Veronica Franco, who was presented to a foreign king by the Doge himself? — but eliminating courtesans from Venice would be like trying to run all the rats out of London.” He sneered, and Sarah regarded him somberly.

“Do you dislike them so?” she asked quietly.

He shrugged again. “I understand they are amusing, and it is always fun to have them at such parties, when their presence shocks our revered elders — but no, I do not like them. His Highness... well, he will make friends where he pleases. But the rest of us will strive to have better taste.”

“I see.”

He turned his head, catching her grave expression. “Come,” he said, smiling. “Enough of this talking — I would dance with you.” He swept a bow, one leg behind the other, offering an outstretched hand. “May I have the honor?”

She simply looked at him for a moment, and then a smile appeared on her face — like the sun breaking through the clouds. A hint of mischief in her eyes, she curtsied and placed her gloved hand in his own.

The minuet is a precise, exacting dance: every step coinciding with a clear note, each demure curtsy and courtly bow signaled by a fall of music. The dancers move across the floor like trained swans — even the most graceful of men and women have trouble breathing life into the rigid choreography. It is more of an excuse to move while conducting polite conversation than a dance, and every grand lord or lady knows this. So they smile, and flirt with lowered eyelashes, soft voices traveling no farther than themselves as the partners cross each other's paths.

Sarah and Brian danced, together with many others, gliding across the smooth wooden floor within the confines of the dance. They spoke politely as they followed the steps, speaking of his family, or her time in the English court. Eventually their manner relaxed, grew more casual — she laughed openly at his jokes, and he let his hand linger on hers before turning into the next

movement.

So it was something of a shock — like dashing into cold water — when an arm suddenly curled around her waist, and a stranger's voice (but she knew it so well, somehow) spoke close to her ear:

“My turn, Brian.”

And she found herself whirled away, just after catching a glimpse of her previous partner's scowling face before she was caught up in the minuet again. Stunned, hardly knowing for certain what was going on, she moved too quickly, jumping ahead of the music so she could see who she now danced with.

Pale hair fell roughly around dark, mismatched eyes, and he lifted an eyebrow in amusement at her expression. “Are you enjoying my party, Sarah?”

She glared at him, furious and still confused, angling her head to see that Brian had stalked away in fury. “I *was*,” she said darkly.

He laughed, allowing his hands to brush against her brocaded waist as they passed each other in the dance. She stumbled slightly, eyes wide. She considered leaving the floor — but only for a minute. They had already caused enough of a spectacle as it was. It would be nice putting off becoming gossip fodder at least for a few days.

Besides, she wasn't going to run from him.

“Your Highness honors me with his presence,” she said, allowing a faint note of mockery to enter her voice, and was rewarded with his slight frown. “Although I hadn't expected to be introduced to Venice's favorite son quite so soon.”

“Protocol is foolish, don't you think?” he asked airily, catching her hand with such possessive abruptness that the skirt of the gown flared behind her, silver thread shining in the candlelight. “It only serves to delay the inevitable.”

“Oh,” she countered, poisonously sweet, “but it is such a boon when dealing with people we dislike — otherwise our obvious *distaste* for them,” snatching her hand free of his grip as she turned “would be rudely apparent.”

“You always did have a way with words,” he said wryly to himself.

“Beg pardon?”

“I was simply admiring your *passionata*,” he covered smoothly. “It's wonderful to meet women with such,” and his eyes and mouth made the innuendo obvious, “fervor.”

Sarah blushed, uncomfortably conscious of the velvet patch, placed by the corner of her eye. “My cousin did insist,” she said gracelessly. “She swore to me it didn't mean anything political — like in the English court. I didn't think there was anything else to it.”

The Prince chuckled, raised eyebrow like an upswept owl's wing. “You should be more careful, Sarah. Venetians have a secret language in even the most insignificant of details.” She circled him, and his fingertip slid against her cheek as she passed. “*Passionata* — passion. A mark here,” and he pressed two fingers against the dimple of her cheek, “is *civetta* — a coquette.” He laughed, stepping back at her glare. “A message, I assume, which is not to my lady's taste. Here, instead,” and — to her astonishment — he lightly tweaked her nose as he made to bow, “which is *sfrontata*: forwardness. You do have a talent for being blunt, Sarah.”

Unbalanced and flustered by his actions, she made to turn into the next movement — but he caught her shoulders, holding her firmly in place. One hand, encased in a grey kid glove, gripped her chin and raised her eyes to his. “Or perhaps,” he said quietly, “you should wear the *assasina* — the most dangerous mark of all.” And he bent to brush his lips, softly, against the corner of her mouth.

“Stop!” She stumbled back, one hand against her mouth cheeks burning. The musicians faltered, violin strains dying in astonishment. The other dancers — the entire room — turned in astonishment at her demanding voice.

The Prince, watching her closely, seemed slightly surprised at her reaction. “You are angry with me,” he stated plainly — yet with a soft note of wistfulness.

Sarah set her mouth firmly, stepping close so as to speak softly and not be heard. “You send away my intended dance partner,” she spoke, low and intense, “and then proceed to flirt shamelessly with me in front of *everyone* — of course I’m angry!”

He stared down at her, expression aggravatingly free of remorse. “But,” he returned softly, as if lost in his own thought, “something is...” His strange eyes widened. “You’re not afraid of me.”

Sarah blinked. “Of course I’m not afraid of you!” she cried. “I will never be afraid of you, *your Highness*. You cannot intimidate me,” she spoke furiously, still trying to keep her voice low. “I don’t care whose nephew you are — we are equals in this court.”

He started at her for a moment longer. “Good,” he said forcefully, almost savagely.

Sarah held his eyes for a moment longer, suddenly less sure of herself. “Good,” she echoed, feeling a little foolish at her outburst. “Then we understand each other.”

He laughed, low in his throat. Quick as thought, he snatched at her hand and brought it to his mouth, placing a gentle kiss on her palm before she drew it away. “Yes, Sarah,” he said, dark eyes on her. “I understand you perfectly.”

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Mornings in Venice consisted of dressing. That was all — something that had initially shocked Sarah a little. The thought of receiving visitors wasn’t even palatable until the hours after noon. And it wasn’t as if Nicole and all the other Venetian ladies slept abed all those hours, oh no. All that time was spent *dressing*.

A week later, however, and Sarah had become accustomed to the alien routine. She now rose out of bed with the sun, along with her cousin, and took the following hours to leisurely tend to herself.

And, of course, to gossip.

She sat on the edge of her bed, brushing out her dark hair as she watched her cousin. They shared a room — Nicole insisted, saying she had always wanted someone to be a sister to — and ever morning Sarah watched in amusement as Nicole lifted strips of meat away from her face, placing the scraps into a bowl by her own beside.

“That’s disgusting,” she said frankly. “I can’t believe you wear that to bed every night. How can you stand it?”

Nicole sniffed, wiping her face with a linen towel. “Everyone knows,” she replied loftily, “that

veal soaked in milk renders the most delicate of complexions.

Not all of us were lucky enough to grow up in a land without any sun.”

Sarah laughed. “England has a sun!” she insisted. “The same one that shines over Venice, you goose.”

“Huh.” Nicole dipped the towel in water, cleaning the last traces of milk from her face. “Wait until you see that “same” sun reflecting off the canal waters. Your pretty porcelain skin will be a passing dream, and you’ll be reduced to veal like the rest of us.”

Sarah grimaced at the thought. “Never.”

Nicole shot her a wicked glance. “Oh? You can say goodbye to anymore attentions from the Prince, then.”

Sarah frowned at her, sternly, jerking the brush through her hair. “I don’t want to talk about that.”

Wisely, Nicole changed the subject. They chatted together as the maids brought in their separate bathtubs, deep basins that were filled with steaming water scented with myrrh, or mint. They gasped at the heat and flung water at each other as they climbed in, giggling like schoolchildren. After washing, they dressed — Nicole in bright and shining silk, Sarah in deep, rich red. Nicole placed herself in front of the dressing table while Sarah sat herself in a chair nearby, and a maid was sent to fetch a hairdresser. Nicole had been upset that Sarah would not let her hire another for her guest, but Sarah had been uncomfortable at imposing, and at the cost. Consequently, Nicole insisted that Sarah be styled last, so she would be freshest when they ventured out. Each morning Nicole would tend to her hair and makeup as Sarah quietly read a book, waiting for her turn.

Lucien, Nicole’s hairdresser, was a fair-haired man with long fingers and an almost magical ability to coax locks into any shape he wished. He was also an artist when it came to applying paints — on the face, throat, even at the breasts if the dress was low enough. And, like every other in his profession, he was a gossip-monger of the highest rank. He had to be, or Nicole (and any other self-respecting Venetian woman) would have dismissed him for someone more interesting.

Walking into their room, a smile suddenly lit up Lucien’s face as he spied Sarah curled up with her book. He swallowed it quickly when her eyes rose to his, but couldn’t keep a quirk out of his lips.

“And how are you both today?” he asked smoothly, ill-concealed amusement in his voice. “Well, I suppose?”

Sarah returned her gaze to the printed words on the pages before her. “Nicole,” she said mildly, “tell your hairdresser that if he doesn’t stop laughing at me, I’m going to throw a pillow at him.”

Nicole twisted where she sat, trying impetuously to see his face. “Lucien? Why are you laughing at Sarah?” she demanded.

“If you hold still, Nicole,” he replied, placing his hands on either side of her head. “I will tell you. Stop fussing like a child.”

She pouted. “No one tells me anything.”

He sighed deeply, taking up a comb and running it through her pale blonde hair. “I am laughing because your cousin is over there, reading her novel as calmly as you please — as if half of Venice wasn’t working itself into a state of indignation over the ‘presumptuous little chit,’ as I believe she is has been dubbed.”

Sarah dropped her hands to her lap, book forgotten. "That isn't fair!" she cried. "I was accosted by *him!*"

"Ah," Lucien said, eyes still on Nicole's coiffure. "So you know what I'm talking about."

"Of course she does," Nicole responded, sounding unbearably smug. "She just doesn't want to discuss it, that's all. One of the more shocking events of the *season*," she stressed, sounding aggrieved, "and she won't speak to me about it! My own cousin!"

Sarah groaned, letting her head fall back. "This is silly," she pleaded. "Surely it can't be that important; one dance? Lucien, you're exaggerating, aren't you?"

"You left the Prince standing alone on the floor, my lady," Lucien responded. "After he deliberately interrupted yourself and Lord Brian. After he overtly made his interest in you quite clear. And after you scolded him roundly in public --"

"People heard that?"

"We all heard it, Sarah."

"The most popular theory is that you are secret lovers," Lucien continued, ignoring the girls' exchange. "That, or the suspicion that your families are engaged in some sort of covert feud." He grinned at her, heating the tongs. "If you tell me the truth, I could make enough to retire to the country within the next six hours."

"Don't tell him," Nicole demanded. "At least, not until he's done curling my hair."

"This is ridiculous," Sarah said flatly, hands gripping each other tightly in her lap, twisting against the patterned brocade. "I have no idea why he was acting that way. I've never met him before in my life. This is *silly*," she burst out.

"Silly or not," Lucien replied easily, "You have the entire city buzzing with excitement. Carnival ended weeks ago, and my lords and ladies have little to do with themselves." Taking a strand of silk flowers from the dressing table, he tucked them adroitly into the curves and corners of Nicole's elaborate hairstyle. "Perfect," he proclaimed. "Now close your eyes." She did so, and he lightly powdered her face, adding a trace of shine to her lips and a hint of kohl to her eyes. Sarah watched for a minute, bemused.

"It amazes me," she said dryly, "that the people here carry veritable fruit-baskets in their hair, but scorn makeup."

"I still can't believe they outlawed rouge," Nicole replied, eyes still closed, in a tone of deep disgust. "In the wrong light we all look like perfect ghosts."

"Natural beauty," Lucien said mildly, placing just a hint of scent along Nicole's neck, "is the greatest adornment. Just thank God you are not reduced to dying your hair constantly, like almost every other woman in Venice."

"Bah." Nicole opened her eyes, and seemed to find her reflection pleasing enough. "Now my cousin. If she's to be the talk of the city, we must have her shine."

Sarah shook her head forcefully. "No. I'm not visiting with you today, and I won't be receiving. Not at all."

"You mean you're going to hide here in our room?" Nicole cried.

“Exactly.”

“But Sarah —”

“No.”

Nicole looked despondent for a moment, and then sighed with resignation. “I suppose it’s just as well. This way, everyone will be asking me about you...” She perked up at the thought of being the center of so much attention. “But you must go out, even if just to a coffeehouse. It’s almost summer, and then we won’t be able to venture outside but rarely — take this time to enjoy yourself. Please?”

Sarah laughed, nodding. “I promise.”

She bade goodbye to Nicole an hour or so later, Lucien having left to tend to other charges around the city. Rummaging through the bags she had brought from London, she finally found the volume she was looking for, and slipped it into a small bag. Her hair was twisted under a simple white chignon secured with silver pins, and over this she placed her *zendale* — a light shawl edged in black lace that hid her profile, covering her to where it knotted becomingly around her waist. With a small amount of money in her purse, she quietly informed the maid where she would be (Nicole’s aunt, as usual, was napping in her salon), and stepped into the sunshine.

It was a wonderful place to be. Gondolas, both covered and open, skimmed across the waters of the canals. Shouts could be heard in the distance, and the people she passed on the cobblestone streets laughed and talked amongst themselves. Every now and again she would hear the strains of a violin, or someone singing — a busker earning their trade further down an alley.

She reached the coffeehouse within a few minutes of walking. She had been there before with her cousin, and the host recognized her as she walked in the door. Eyes widening only slightly, he rushed to greet her, asking if she would prefer to sit inside, or dine in the open air.

She loosened the *zendale*, drawing it down to her shoulders, and immediately the coffeehouse was filled with a quiet murmur of surprise. Looking around, she saw more than a few familiar faces from the party last night — all with expressions of avid curiosity and anticipation. She sighed, and asked to be seated outside. It wasn’t quite warm enough yet to be comfortable — but since so few followed her example, she would be left quite alone.

Within minutes she was seated comfortably at a small table, the view looking out onto the Grand Canal. Tucking her slippered feet beneath her chair, she ordered and drew her book from her bag, settling back to read with a sense of deep contentment.

She was only able to enjoy a few moments of peace after her coffee and fruit was set in front of her by a waiter, as a depressingly cheerful (and familiar) voice soon interrupted her reverie.

“Good book?”

“I’m not talking to you,” she said without looking up. “Go away and ruin someone else’s life.”

“Now really,” he drawled, flinging himself into the opposite chair, the uneven lengths of his fair hair shivering with the sudden movement. “Is that any way to speak to a gentleman who merely wishes to engage in conversation with you?”

“Show me a gentleman, and I will speak to him properly.”

Adroitly, he snatched the book out of her hands, ignoring her protests. “If you would look up from your absorbing novel...” Carefully, he turned the slim volume over in his leather-gloved hands,

opening to a random page. His strange eyes glanced over a few lines, and widened. "My lady reads the *Iliad* for amusement."

Sarah stood, reclaiming the book with considerably less grace than he had taken it. She sat back in her chair, the line of her jaw tight with annoyance. "Yes. When she is *left alone*."

He watched her with a grin. "Still angry with me, Sarah?"

She looked at him gravely, book lying forgotten beside her plate. "You ridicule me in public," she said quietly, "and now in private. Are you surprised I wish to be free of you?" She laughed shortly, bringing the cup of coffee to her lips.

"I was not ridiculing you, my lady," he said quietly. "Not then, and not now."

"Oh, and I suppose you do not find my scholarly tendencies to be vastly amusing?" she asked bitterly.

He smiled slightly, leaning one cheek upon a hand. "I prefer the *Odyssey*, truthfully. A tale of a man who travels for years upon years, striving to reach the one he loves, pitting himself against dangers untold and obstacles beyond imagination — I find it inspiring. Don't you?"

She started, and flushed guiltily at her previous judgment of him. "I'm sorry," she said quietly. "But you didn't strike me as someone who read very much."

Something bleak and unamused flashed behind his eyes. "I am alone with myself often — and I am not the best of company. I would rather read." He seemed to shake himself free of the fleeting disquiet. "But don't tell anyone — reading is something of a lost art, here. You prefer the *Iliad*?"

She smiled. "It's an amazing story — full of human strength and frailty." She shrugged. "Odysseus was always a trifle too clever for me. Yes, he struggled back to Penelope, but he never seemed really concerned as to whether he would reach her or not." She frowned. "I thought he was uncaring... hard, almost."

The Prince toyed with a knife beside her plate. "Men of his character are often awed by the strength of their own feeling. They have extreme confidence in themselves, you see — and such devotion can often be interpreted as a weakness. So they hide from it, and hide it from others." He smiled at her. "But your own tale has its unconventional heroine. I'm surprised, truth be told, to find you enjoying a book about the wickedest woman in history."

"Because I don't believe it was Helen's fault," she said firmly. "It was just as much Paris' error, stealing another man's wife, or even Aphrodite's — risking everything simply to assuage her own vanity. Why should Helen alone bear the blame for ten years of war?"

He laughed lightly. "Ah, but men cannot help what they do when bespelled by a woman."

Sarah laughed. "Don't be ridiculous."

"I'm not." He glanced up at her, eyes dark. "They said Helen's beauty made the sun seem cold and lifeless, and that her gaze could tear the heart out of a man's chest." He leaned in closer. "What atrocities might he commit," he spoke, voice low, "when faced with such cruel eyes?"

Sarah shivered at his words, feeling suddenly cold. For a long moment, she simply met his gaze with her own. "Whatever was done," she said quietly, "it was of his own doing — not hers. Never hers."

"Perhaps." He sat back abruptly, and Sarah breathed easier. "But perhaps not." He grinned. "It is

a very convenient excuse.”

“I would beg to differ.” Still feeling a little shaky, she rose to her feet, book and bag firmly in hand. “If you would excuse me,” she muttered, not waiting for his response as she turned from him, practically running away.

He watched her go with a smile.

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“Ascension Day, Ascension Day,” Nicole chanted gleefully, kicking her legs like a small child as Lucien attended to her hair. She squealed in excitement, practically bouncing in her seat. “Better than Christmas!”

Lucien laughed at her silliness. “Yes, yes,” he muttered under his breath, concentrating on twisting her curls into an elaborate crown. “Today the Doge will take his yearly bath, everyone will get dead drunk, and you will get your trinkets, silly little girl. If you will only hold still.”

Sarah giggled at them both from the bed, where she rubbed scented cream into her hands. She was filled with the exact same excitement as her cousin – she was just more reserved about showing it. Nicole had been full of Ascension Day for the past week, and told her cousin all the details. Every year, during Holy Week, Venice celebrated her victory in fighting Frederic Barbarossa under Pope Alexander III in 1177. In appreciation, the Pope had gifted the Doge ring, saying, “Let posterity remember that the sea is yours by right of conquest, subject to you as a wife to her husband.” Since then, on Ascension Day, the Doge and his entire retinue would submerge themselves in the waters of the Adriatic.

And, of course, the whole city celebrated their poetic marriage. Dances were held, contests, feasts, processions, and private parties of all kinds. Market stalls hawking wares from the Far East, Paris, even India and the Americas would line the Piazza. And (Nicole told her with a special excitement) when they returned that night, exhausted and happy, the house would be filled with customary gifts from all their male friends and suitors.

They dressed hurriedly, barely pausing to be coiffed and painted by Lucien, who was clearly annoyed by their impatience. Finally throwing up his hands in defeat, he set the finishing touches in place and then practically stalked out the door.

It was like something out of a dream. They spent several hours simply sitting on the balcony, eating and drinking coffee, waving to friends as they passed by. All the gondolas on the canals were carpeted and hung in rich fabrics. Similarly, banners and tapestries hung from dozens of windows around them, house crests fluttering proudly in the breeze. In the distance they could see the merchant and warships, stationed from San Marco to the Lido, flags unfurled. Beneath them messengers darted to and fro as they delivered the traditional presents to ladies of every station.

Then the bells rang, and the cheering could be heard from far away as the Doge emerged from his palace on his state litter, preceded by fifes and trumpets. Immediately behind him came the ambassadors, grandees, and senators in their solemn robes of black. They boarded a small craft and sailed down the flower-strewn waters of the Grand Canal, followed by the *peotte* of the noble families, likewise be-flagged and be-garlanded, with gilded oars and gondoliers in uniforms of rose and sky-blue. Ordinary citizens could follow behind if they wished in crowded crafts, plainer but also festooned with ribbons and pendants. The triumphant procession ended by the lighthouse on the Lido island — where only courtesans and their lovers could go. When the Doge flung a ring into the sea with a few ceremonial words — himself and his retinue following immediately after — the crowds roared, the bells rang, the Venice itself seemed to be singing for joy.

When it was all done, everyone returned in a perfect splendor of velvet trains jeweled fans amidst the flower-carpeted lagoon. Almost shrieking for joy, Nicole grabbed her cousin's hand and made to run through the house and out into the celebration. Laughing, Sarah followed her.

They sped along the streets towards the Piazza, a manservant ducking behind in their footsteps. The square was transformed into a fairyland of glittering crystal lamps, cafés from end to end proffering their chocolate, Cyprus and Samian wines, and delicate, delicious water-ices. There were thousands pouring into the area, all dressed in their finest ribbons and silks and lace. A double row of market stalls were open: the Feria, a marvelous display of commerce and art where Venice paraded the finest she had to offer. Around them fabrics glowed with jewel-like colors in the bright sunshine, glassblowers exhibited their delicately exquisite trade, and the finest goldsmiths and painters plied their wares. It was exhilarating, being a part of the joking, jostling crowd, watching Nicole haggle like a common fishwife over a new fan, taking in the sights and smells and sounds of it all.

In the very midst of it, Nicole suddenly grabbed at her hand. "Remind me," she said sharply, one eye on the stall that displayed the fan she so coveted, "later this afternoon, we should go down to the Grand Canal. There are races being held, and I so want to see them."

They did so shortly, sending the manservant home with all the things they had purchased. They weaved among the thronging crowds, hardly stopping to catch their breath as they raced onward. As it was, the sun was already setting as they reached one of the low bridges that arched over the Canal.

"Oh!" Nicole struck her gloved hands against the rail in frustration. "They've already started!"

"Nicole, this is fine. We can watch the end of it from here." Sarah leaned against the same rail, letting the breeze blow back tendrils of hair that had escaped the braided crown. She could smell the sea, not so far away, and the dark waters of the canals beneath them.

"But I wanted to be here in the beginning," Nicole sulked. "You would have, too — Brian is racing."

"What?"

"Of course, he doesn't have a chance against the actual gondoliers. None of them do — the Ardent, I mean. They race every year, and make a bet with the guild that they can beat the professionals. They never can, and every year they hold a feast for each and every gondolier in Venice." She smiled widely. "But you can still throw him a token."

"A what?" Sarah asked, bewildered by this onslaught of information.

"A token." Nicole unpinned several of the flowers from her hair, placing them carefully in the rail. "Like knights and their ladies. You throw it to them as they pass, to signal your affection." Giggling, she tossed one of her silken decorations out into the air. "The fun part is watching them try to catch it!"

Sarah laughed at her, noticing the women around them were doing the same. Most were simply enjoying themselves, ripping ribbons and jewels from their bodices and throwing them carelessly to any racer that caught their eye. A few, however, smiled to those who passed, but kept their tokens carefully at hand, until finally tossing one to their deliberate sweetheart.

She had no flowers in her hair, having been too impatient to wait for Lucien this morning. And her dress lacked the ostentatious ornamentation that Venetian women so favored. That left... She laughed softly, and delicately tugged a glove from one hand. It was a smooth, dark blue, with a

rose blossom embroidered within the palm; a seed pearl shining like an ember at its heart. Holding it loosely, she rested against the rail and strained to catch a glimpse of Lord Brian.

There he was – poling determinedly down the Canal, grinning at the taunts from the professional gondoliers that passed him with insulting ease. He spied her up on the bridge, and his face lit up with a wide smiling. He waved briefly, and then returned with renewed vigor to his task.

She smiled, watching him, feeling strangely happy. As he neared she leaned farther over the railing, dropping her arm over in anticipation of tossing it into his boat. The glove dangled from her hand --

-- and was abruptly snatched from her grasp.

With a gasp of surprise, Sarah pulled herself up. Peering over the rail, she could see the thief had already passed under the bridge. She whirled, skirts flying, over to the opposite rail, furiously waiting for him to appear again. At the sight of a pale blonde head emerging from the shadows underneath the bridge, she began her tirade:

“Sirrah! That wasn’t meant --” She choked on her words as she saw who it was but then began again, doubly angry. “That wasn’t meant for you!”

The Prince, dressed in the rough breeches and loose cotton shirt of a true gondolier, laughed. He slipped the glove securely into the cuff of one sleeve without loosing his grip on the pole. “Cruel eyes, Sarah,” he called teasingly, as he resumed the race. “You have them.”

The day was ruined, as far as Sarah was concerned. Absolutely incensed, she insisted that they return home immediately. Nicole, sensing her dangerous mood, agreed without complaint. They walked back to the house in silence.

When they arrived, however, neither could resist breaking into surprised cries of joy. Their shared bedroom was literally stuffed with bouquets and arrangements of flowers, from exotic blossoms to the sweetest-smelling of wildflowers. And heaped on their separate beds were piles of packages, wrapped in delicate paper of all hues of the rainbow.

They abandoned the uncomfortable silence completely, greedily throwing themselves on the beds to open their presents. Most were simple trifles -- an engraved card, chocolates, a bottle of perfume -- sent from all the male friends in their circle. But when all those were unwrapped, Sarah found she had two more packages -- and by the cards she knew they were from men whose acquaintance was anything but casual.

“They both sent you presents!” Nicole squealed. “Open them! Open them!” Sarah reached for the largest box, but Nicole snatched it away with a scowl. “Don’t you dare,” she threatened. “Brian first!”

Sighing, Sarah ripped away the paper from the smaller package. Opening the elegant box, she found a gorgeous pair of pearl-encrusted gloves and a matching collar. It was quite a gift – finding so many pearls of the same size, shape, and color was an understated expression of his family’s wealth and influence. It was a fitting present for a fiancée.

Nicole gasped in delight, but Sarah withheld the gifts until she handed over the package from the Prince. While Nicole oooh-ed and aaah-ed over the pearls, Sarah unceremoniously ripped open the Prince’s gift.

It was a dress. As she drew it from the folds of paper, Sarah felt her eyes widen against her will. It was incredible. It was a square-cut bodice with a high waist -- an older style, more traditional than

fashion dictated, but with an appropriately long train. It was mainly made from a deep, black velvet, an incredibly soft fabric that seemed to eat up the light. But the front of the bodice, and an ever-widening strip of fabric down the front, was a brocade of deep, emerald-green and gold colors in a leaf-like pattern.

Nicole *shrieked*. Before Sarah could react, Nicole snatched the dress from her cousin's hands. She stared in open-mouthed amazement.

"Look at this! *Look at this!*" She laid the dress out on her bedspread, touching it lightly in wonder. "No one has dresses like this anymore because of the sumptuary laws. Every stitch and ribbon is counted, portioned out! No one can have beyond a certain amount. But this..." She shook her head. "This is incredible. Look," she said, longing in her voice as she touched the fall of delicate lace that made up the sleeves, "it's *cascade*. The women of Paris have it, but here in Venice... Only the Doge's nephew could get a dress made with *cascade*."

Sarah sighed deeply. "It's ridiculous, giving me a dress. What will I do if it doesn't fit me?"

"Oh, it will. I told him the address of our dressmaker."

"You *what*?"

"He asked me after a gambling party, one day. You weren't there. You never are."

"Nicole, how could you?"

"Stuff it, Sarah."

Sarah sat back, amazed. Nicole continued to inspect the dress, brow furrowed in concentration. Finally, she lifted her head. "If you weren't my cousin," she spoke evenly, "I'd hate you with the passion of a thousand burning suns."

"For a dress, Nicole?"

"This is not just a dress, Sarah!" Nicole said, obviously impatient with her obtuseness. "This is a statement of intention! One does not exert one's influence just to buy some girl a dress!"

"He obviously just did."

"You don't understand!" Nicole crossed her arms, keeping her anger in check. "Sarah," she stated baldly, "he's courting you."

A moment of stunned silence. "No, he's not."

"Yes, he is."

"I don't believe you."

"Sarah!" Nicole grabbed a handful of dark velvet in one hand, brandishing it in her cousin's face. "I know you come from a barbarian court where everyone has gold coming out of their *ears*, or whatever, but here, we have a budget! We have restricted spending! This," still waving the fabric, "is anything but restricted! The only way I can think that he managed it is by prostituting his sister!"

"He has a sister?"

"NO! But that's beside the point!" Seemingly exhausted by her impassioned outburst, Nicole fell

back against her pillows, careful to avoid crushing the dress. “He’s making his intentions known,” she said wearily. “If you wear this dress, everyone in Venice will know he has claimed you — and you accept that claim.”

Sarah stared for a moment, thoughtful, at the innocuous-looking garment. “Then I won’t wear it,” she said simply.

“Sarah!”

“No,” she said firmly as she packed up the dress. “Don’t try to dissuade me.”

A knock came on the door, startling both of them. With a frustrated sigh, Nicole bounded off the bed and onto the floor, racing over to open the door. A liveried messenger stood there with the maid, both looking a little sheepish.

“He insisted on coming up to see you personally,” the maid said softly.

“Fine, fine,” Nicole said airily. “What is it you want?”

The messenger simply presented her with an engraved invitation, which she snapped the seal and opened immediately. “We’re invited to the feast,” she called to her cousin.

“Feast?”

“You remember, the one the Ardent holds for the gondoliers every year when they lose the race.”

Sarah paused in folding the dress. “All of the Ardent are there?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’m not going,” she said stubbornly.

“Sarah...”

“No! I refused to be tossed between the two of them anymore!” She grimaced. “Like a little child’s ball. It’s humiliating, and I won’t be a part of this game.”

The messenger cleared his throat, a little hesitantly. “Pardon,” he began, “but I was told to give it to you personally for this very reason — your presence is especially requested, Lady Sarah.”

Sarah froze in mid-movement. Very carefully, she set the box down on the bed. Very slowly, she turned toward the messenger — and smiled very, very sweetly. “Oh, was it?”

The messenger swallowed. “Yes, my lady.”

“And why is that, pray tell?”

The messenger shifted nervously from foot to foot. She was still smiling, but... she looked strangely dangerous, for a smiling woman. Perhaps *because* she was a smiling woman. “The Prince and Lord Brian are to fight a duel, my lady. At the feast tomorrow night.”

“Are they?” She took a slow, measured step toward him, and he flinched. “And what does this have to do with me?”

“Um, uh, I wasn’t let known the exact details, my lady...” He swallowed again. “But I was given the impression it had everything to do with you.”

“Really.”

“Sarah,” Nicole spoke mildly, as the messenger began to shake. “You’re scaring him.”

“Ah.” Instantly, her posture relaxed, and she gave him a genuine smile. “Tell his Highness that I am going to attend.”

The messenger bowed and left, almost tripping over himself in his eagerness to be gone. Nicole shut the door behind him, and then turned – merely regarding her cousin with an inquiring look.

“I am going to attend,” Sarah continued pleasantly, in response to that look, “and I am going to break both their necks.”

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They arrived at the Prince’s house late the next evening. They were shown into the same hall that first momentous party was held in. Only now it had been converted to a feast-room, with long tables laid across the dark boards. They weren’t the only nobility present. Amidst the rough joking and rougher manners of the gondoliers, elegant and bejeweled nobles sat and talked easily. This was another thing that had initially surprised Sarah, coming from the turbulent English court: the apparent easiness between classes. In Venice, the boundaries were set, and permanent. You could not rise above your station, either by gaining greater wealth (impossible) or marrying into a higher class (unthinkable). And so, in certain social functions, people from all walks of life could intermingle with the greatest comfort, secure in their place in the world.

Stepping into the great hall, Sarah immediately spotted a familiar face. “Hoggle!” She waved excitedly at the tiny man, whose stuffed mouth broke into a wide grin at her appearance. She wanted to go join him, but had business to attend to.

She grabbed a servant, hiding discretely in the shadows. “Where is the Prince?” she demanded, and he hurriedly pointed in some vague direction. Determined, she strode away.

The direction he had pointed in led to a door, the door led to a hallway, which led to a veritable array of doors. Groaning at her own foolishness, she opened one at random.

It was a library. The shelves rose high above her head, stacked with leather-bound volumes that let the scent of old knowledge into the air. Sarah breathed it in deeply. There had been a library like this at her father’s estate in England – she missed it, and the serenity of her time there.

“A-hem.”

She turned, surprised, to find a stick-thin, wrinkled man with half-moon spectacles glaring at her sternly.

“Do you have any business here, young lady?” he asked disapprovingly.

“Ah... I’m looking for the Prince.”

The man’s eyebrows shot up, almost hiding in his hairline, at the nickname. “Well, he’s not here,” he said unpleasantly. “If only I could say the same for you.”

Sarah blinked at his rudeness. Then her eyes narrowed. “I know you,” she said wearily. “Like I seem to know every other person I meet in this damned city...” Sighing with resignation, she held out her hand as if to shake his, like a commoner. “My name is Sarah.”

Now it was his turn to be taken aback. He stared at her for a moment, red-rimmed eyes

unnervingly sharp as he perused her face. Finally, he gripped her hand with his own. “Chaucer.”

She started. “As in..?”

“No, no relation.” But he seemed pleased she had made the connection. “Just a silly nickname. I’m a scholar. The — ahem — Prince has been most generous in allowing me to make use of his library in the course of my research.”

“What is it you are researching?”

He smiled at her, warming to her frank interest. “Geoffrey Chaucer, as a matter of fact — that’s where the nickname comes from. I believe he completed the Cook’s Tale, you see, and I am attempting to retrace and discover the missing fragments.”

Sarah laughed delightedly. “If you do, I want to read them as soon as possible.”

He frowned at her, but it was strangely affectionate. “Young girls shouldn’t be reader Chaucer — to be fair,” he amended, “I’m not sure *who* should be reading him — besides decrepit old scholars like myself.”

“My mother died when I was born, and my father is ambassador to the English court,” Sarah said simply. “I was a lonely child and my father’s library was a friend.” She sighed. “But I wish to find the Prince. I need to stop this ridiculous duel.”

At that, his eyebrows disappeared entirely beneath his ragged mop of hair. “Well,” he said, in completely different tone, “in that case, forgive my utter rudeness. It appears you not only have a brain, but the sense to use it. Let me see if --” He peeked out into the corridor. “My dear friend,” he called, “would you escort this young lady to the Prince — or, barring the ability to locate him, to the main hall? I’m sure he’ll turn up soon,” he spoke aside to Sarah. “He can’t resist the chance to strut amidst an audience before performing. Good luck at your endeavor. My friend will show you the way.”

Curious, Sarah stepped out of the library. She started, stepping back in surprise at the man before her. He was huge — easily towering to seven or eight feet. And he was heavy with it. Not the soft heaviness of fat and good living, but the massive bulk of sheer power and muscle. He was dressed in plain-fitting, solid black clothing. His hair, the color of autumn leaves, was cut short to feather softly about his face, which was impressive. It was painted a stark white, and then the eyes were ringed heavily with black paint. The mouth was painted a harsh red, and long tusks had been stenciled from his bottom lip to his chin. The end result was a truly shocking sight — as if one were faced with a hulking monster.

Then he smiled, and Sarah couldn’t keep herself from smiling back.

“Hello,” she said softly. “I’m Sarah.”

He nodded wisely, placing one finger on the side of his nose and solemnly winking. Sarah giggled.

“Can you help me?” she asked simply.

He nodded again, this time drawing a ball of twine from his pocket. He held out his hand — large and rough, the skin tanned and nails ragged — and she placed her own in it without thinking. With infinite care, as if she were made of glass, he tied one end of the twine around her ring finger. When that was done, he winked at her — and tossed the ball of string down the corridor, where it rolled serenely across the floor and out of sight.

He clasped his hands before him, innocently, and turned back to her with a large grin. Sarah laughed outright.

“Ariadne and the labyrinth, hmm?” she asked. He wagged his eyebrows at her, and she couldn’t help but giggle again. “And I suppose you’re the Minotaur?” He held out his large hands with a clear look of “Who, me?” Sarah remembered who they were originally looking for. “No, no…” she amended quickly. “I agree with your interpretation of things.”

They walked down the dark corridors together, laughing at the shadows. Although he never spoke, he kept her delighted and amused: trying vainly to hide behind tapestries, tiptoeing ahead in an obvious attempt to check for danger, his obviously stealth belying his bulk. They followed the twine faithfully, until at last they emerged into the light of the main hall.

Sarah breathed a deep sigh of relief, turning back to her new-found friend. “Thank you,” she said with obvious gratitude.

He feigned to blush, kicking one foot into the floor. Shyly, he twisted his hand — and something appeared in it as if from the very air. Sarah took the offered object, frowning over its rough texture for a moment.

“What is --” She looked up to see that he had disappeared. “Oh,” she said involuntarily, crestfallen. She turned back the gift in her hands.

“A pomegranate.” He emerged from the shadows as if he were a part of them, stepping casually away from the wall and into the wall. “It’s a type of fruit.”

“I remember the story,” she said wryly. “He enjoys Greek myths, doesn’t he?”

“Ludo?” The Prince ran his own fingers over the fruit in mild curiosity. “He has an interest in everything, unfortunately. And the tendency to interfere in affairs that are not his own.” Deftly, he took the gift from her gloved hand. “He’s forgotten more than most people will ever know.”

She sighed, knowing he wouldn’t return the strange fruit, and giving it up for lost. “Ludo…” She tasted the name. “Who is he?”

“My buffoon.”

“Ah.” She nodded. Professional buffoons were a staple of any noble household, and the good ones were valued their weight in gold. Though, considering Ludo’s immense stature, perhaps not quite so much. “I wanted to talk to you about the duel.”

“I see.” He leaned comfortably against the wall. “What did you want to say?”

“I want you to put a stop to it.”

“It’s only play, Sarah. No one will actually get hurt.”

“Oh, I know that,” she dismissed the notion with a wave of her hand. Play-duels were common among noble youth. “But I know why it’s being fought, and I want you to call it off.”

“Do you really?” He bent close, breath stirring tendrils of her hair. “Do you really, Sarah?” She drew back, and he smiled. “Even if you do, it’s not my affair to call off. I was challenged.”

She frowned, chagrined. “Why would Brian challenge you?”

“Ah, well.” Casually, he drew something out from his coat: a dark blue glove with an

embroidered rose. “Apparently I have something he wants... or some other nonsense of the sort.” He absentmindedly drew the glove through his hands. “I can’t think of what he might mean. Can you? Ah ah,” he warned, holding the glove away as she darted to snatch at it. “Not unless I get something in return. Perhaps not even then.”

She scowled at him, crossing her arms across her chest. “What do you want for it?”

He smiled like a contented cat. “Let me think about it.”

She glared at him, opening her mouth to deliver a tart reply, when a voice to her left interrupted.

“I don’t mean to intrude,” Brian said, coolly, “but I believe his Highness and I have business to attend to.” He gave a short, mocking bow. “If my lady doesn’t mind.”

Glaring at them both, Sarah marched away to take her place at the feast table next to Hoggle, who grinned at her fury. Generally discontent with the universe, she flung herself into a chair beside the sniggering midget, resigned to let events play themselves out.

The two combatants took their places in the hall, at either end of a cleared space. Blunted foils in hand, they raised their weapons in salute.

And it began.

They circled each other warily, foils ready, eyes trained on their opponent’s face. Feints, slashes, coupés, all followed in rapid succession as they drew closer to each other. The crowd, mainly the jocular gondoliers, called out encouragement or ribald comments.

They were closer, now, only a few paces apart, foils relaxed at their sides until one committed, attacked. Then they both moved like something out of a dream — foils flashing in the flickering light, quicksilver and deadly.

Brian was breathing heavily, strain showing on his face and sweat on his forehead. “Why?” he asked, voice low.

“Why what?” his opponent replied absently, eyes on Brian’s sword.

“Why Sarah?”

The Prince laughed to himself. “That’s like asking, why light?” He feinted, pulling back at the last moment, but Brian didn’t take the bait. “It simply is.”

“She was *my* intended,” Brian continued stubbornly. If he was chagrined at the fact his opponent didn’t even look like he was trying very hard, he didn’t show it.

A flicker of pity moved in the Prince’s eyes. “No,” he said gently. “She wasn’t.”

This time Brian attacked, a flurry of movement the Prince countered, but did not try to overpower. “Fine,” Brian replied savagely. “So it wasn’t set in stone. But it was understood — so why did you have to go after her?”

The Prince sighed, his mismatched eyes strangely sad. “Nothing I could say could explain it to you, at this point. It is enough to say --” and he abruptly attacked seriously, a startling barrage of sudden movements that left Brian gasping and stretching to counter “— that I *am* going after her, and you cannot ever hope to stop me.” With a final, almost casual flick of his foil, he disarmed Brian. “There. Now we are done.”

He turned on his heel, and Brian let himself fall to the floor, chest heaving. The silence in the hall was deafening, but it still wasn't enough to hear the continuance of their quiet exchange. The young lord took a moment to find his voice, and then:
"Wait."

The Prince paused. "Yes?"

Brian raised his sweating face, mouth in a wry grin. "I don't want this to come between us."

The Prince went absolutely still. Without turning, he asked – in a soft, and uncertain voice: "What did you just say?"

Brian laughed, wheezing slightly. "I know it sounds strange. We've never been the best of friends, and I've wanted to deck you more times than I can count. But we grew up together. Believe it or not, I do not wish us to be enemies." He stumbled to his feet, holding one hand outstretched. "So, we shall say... let the best man win?"

With infinite slowness, the Prince turned. Brian had never seen him look like this: eyes wide and face completely open, shock plain on his face. "You... wish us to remain friends," he said slowly.

Brian shrugged. "Yes. Because, all grandstanding aside, I understand the desire to go after Sarah."

The Prince continued to look at him. "I am sorry," he finally said.

Brian's grin faltered. "You don't want the same?"

"No, that's not what I meant. What I mean is... I am sorry. For all that I have done to you," the Prince said simply. He was silent a moment longer. "I wish things had been different."

"I can stand a little roughing-up."

The Prince looked at him again. Slowly, deliberately, he reached up to grasp Brian's hand with his gloved one. "Yes."

They stood like that, arms outstretched to the fullest and hands clasped. Then the room erupted into cheers, and they were surrounded by well-wishers and friends, everyone patting them on the back, shaking them, roaring congratulations or gentle teasing. Amidst the chaos, they smiled at each other.

The only one who did not join the happy fray was a dark-haired girl with a small, contemplative frown. That night, she went home to find a message waiting for her.

If you meet me at the sagra for St. Katharine, the unsigned note read, I will give you back your glove. Wear the dress.

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A *sagra* was a festival celebrating a saint's day – usually held in the parish that was dedicated to that specific saint. Of course, each parish's celebration had to outdo their neighbor's, so a simple feast-day could erupt into quite riotous celebration.

She had found with Nicole's help (without letting her cousin know why, or that she would be leaving the house dressed as she was) the location of the parish that celebrated St. Katharine. She couldn't escape wearing the dress, of course, but an old Carnival mask of simple black satin hid her identity from any casual observers, along with a domino cloak. Perversely, she had refused to put up her hair, and the simple style was a strange contrast to the elaborate gown. She navigated

her way easily through the narrow streets, a secretive figure left strictly alone. It was easy to ascertain that she was getting closer — she could hear the music and the shouts of people dancing, and the houses around her were decked in garlands, flags, and tapestries. Forgotten flowers were littered underneath her feet, bruised and crushed by former passer-bys.

She stepped into the square, pausing a moment to adjust to the flurry of noise and motion around her. Tables were set up everywhere she looked, hawking religious icons and cheap ribbons both, some even frying fritters in oil. She purchased one for a few pennies, eating the hot treat out of a napkin as she waded deeper into the square. Makeshift stages were set up, and clowns performed, people wrestled, bets were placed. She was not the only noble person in the crowd — like the previous night at the Prince's hall, a few of the nobility wandered easily among the crowd, and she could see more dancing with the girls of the neighborhood.

He appeared at her side as suddenly as always, simply stepping into the picture. She was licking the oil from her fingertips (gloves deliberately left at home — wondering what he would think of that) when a hand on her arm made her turn.

"The cloak I can understand," the Prince said, dryly, "as I admit, the dress might have caused some unwanted attention. But the mask?" He tried to lift it, but she batted his hand away. "What, are you suddenly scarred by smallpox?"

"I think it would be obvious," she replied icily.

He hesitated, and gave her a reproving look. "Come now, Sarah." Quick as through, he adroitly pulled away the satin mask, before she could even blink. "I went to all this trouble to get you here," he explained, assuming a patient tone as he brusquely tossed away her disguise. "I would have the pleasure of your pretty face."

Her hands, held rigidly at her sides, clenched into fists. He was dressed, she realized with mounting rage, in matching colors: black coat and half-cloak, a waistcoat of shining green and gold. It looked splendid on him, appropriately fey and enchanting. She wanted nothing more than to slap his smiling face.

With a brief shout of frustration, she actually stamped her foot, the childish gesture sending loose tendrils of hair tumbling into her eyes. "I can't believe you!" she hissed. "You swoop in and make an entire mess of my life — I was happy with the way things were! I didn't need you re-arranging things to your taste!"

A sly grin. "But I think I have wonderful taste."

"And then you refuse to admit you've done anything wrong! That you have anything to apologize for!" She took a deep breath, feeling a strange mixture of excitement and frustration bubbling up from some hitherto secret place inside of her. "Every single time! *You always do this!*"

She paused, catching her breath, and he stared at her with something like amazement. They both disregarded the curious stares of the people around them.

"Sarah," the Prince began after a minute, considering, "you've only known me a fortnight."

"I know that," she muttered sulkily. "That doesn't mean I'm not right."

"A *fortnight*," he emphasized, not seeming to have heard her, "and already you distrust me completely." He sighed deeply, bringing one hand to his forehead and closing his eyes, as if against some intangible pain. "We are strangers to each other, and still you fight me." His pale, poetic profile suddenly gained a decidedly uncomplimentary peevish aspect, and he glared at her

from beneath lowered lashes. “You are the most difficult woman I have ever met.”

She crossed her arms defiantly. “You provoke me,” she said pointedly. “Stealing my glove, sending me inappropriate gifts, that silly duel...” She hugged herself even tighter. “Besides,” she said quietly. “I know you.”

He went very still. “No, you don’t.”

“Oh, I know we’ve only had each other acquaintance for a few weeks,” she went on, “but — I don’t know. You seem very familiar to me, somehow. As if we had spent years together.”

He dropped his hand to his side. His stance was suddenly very open, losing the imperious air that so marked him apart from the crowd — but he was still somehow alien, somehow sharply defined against the blur of their humanity. “Even if that were true, Sarah,” he said simply, looking her full in the face, “You still don’t know me.”

She blinked at his quiet intensity, ducking her gaze away. She hunched her shoulders, feeling awkward. “I came for my glove.”

“What will you give me for it?”

She gave a loud sigh of exasperation. “I already wore your dress, and met you all the way out here. What more do you want of me?”

He looked thoughtful for a moment. “A dance.”

“A dance?” She threw a glance to where the center of the plaza, where revelers were doing just that to a makeshift orchestra of violins. She turning back, she gave the Prince a wary look. “That’s all?”

“That’s all.” He smiled slightly, eyes never leaving her. “I’ve always loved dancing with you.”

She continued to scrutinize his face carefully, but he only held out his gloved hand. After another moment of consideration, she placed her naked palm in his own – to the sudden outburst of applause from onlookers. Realizing they’d been providing amusement to all these strangers for the last quarter of an hour, Sarah’s face flamed red.

“Another time,” she said, obviously embarrassed, backing away as if to retreat into the anonymity of the crowd. He placed a gloved hand on her wrist, gentle but firm.

“I’m afraid I must insist,” he said mildly. “Who knows when I’d next be able to attract your attention?”

She shot him a dark look. “You never had any trouble before.”

He grinned mischievously. “You wouldn’t believe how it thrills my heart to hear that, lady.”

Sarah tried to tug free, pleading in her dark green eyes. “Please... perhaps some other time...”

“Sarah.” He turned over her wrist, exposing the delicate tracery of veins there. He lightly ran his fingers over the soft, vulnerable skin. “One dance.”

She shivered, but he didn’t look up. She licked suddenly dry lips. “All right,” she said softly. “One dance.”

He smiled. He gently encased her hand in both of his, leading her over to the other dancers, who

watched them both with ill-concealed amusement. The Prince drew Sarah to him, placing one hand on her waist and taking up her hand in the other. Quietly, she placed her left hand on his shoulder, casting her eyes about those who surrounded them. Men with their hair falling loose about their shoulders and girls in bright sleeveless bodices all grinned at her, whispering in their partners' ears. She flushed under their curious gazes, fair skin coloring.

"Do you know how to dance the *furlana*?" the Prince asked, voice soft.

"I'll learn," she replied grimly, trying to ignore those inquisitive looks.

He laughed low in his throat. "That's my girl."

The impromptu orchestra, also watching from the corner of the square, looked at each other and shrugged. With one fluid movement they set bows to strings – and the dance began.

The *furlana* is a fast, sweeping dance, as different from the stiff, practiced dances of the court as one can get. It is hugely popular among the lower – and the upper – classes, as it attempts to embody the true Italian ideal: love, and flirtation.

Sarah danced well. At first she did it out of defiance – following the Prince's strong lead so she wouldn't trip and make a fool of herself, watching other girls out of the corner of her eyes so she would do as well. She copied the way they held their hands, the turn of their hips, the tilt of their heads. After a while, however, the music infected her – quickening her blood and her steps alike with sharp arpeggios and plaintive cries. The world spun around her: dazzling fabrics and laughing faces flashed by her eyes, the singing of the violins and the chatter of the crowd filling her ears, and the weight of her own heavy skirts was the only thing that seemed to anchor her within the circle of the Prince's arms. Unconsciously, she began to mimic the same coy, teasing looks the other girls threw to their partners, glancing up at the Prince through her dark hair, brushing up against him as they passed. His strange eyes widened, and there was a faint stumble in his step – slight reaction in any other man, but she knew it to be evidence of his complete surprise. The laughter practically spilled out of her, and at last, she danced for the joy of it.

The music ended abruptly. The dancers stopped, exchanging friendly kisses and curtsies. Breathing fast, Sarah smiled openly up at her Prince, who was watching her with dark intensity.

"What?" Her smile faded uncertainly. "Is something wrong?"

He swept her up in his arms without warning, crushing her to his chest. He held her so tight she could barely breathe, and she gasped at the suddenness of it.

After a long moment his hold loosened. He drew back slowly, cheek resting against her own. He rested his forehead against hers. "Thank you," he said, rough-cut hair tickling her face. He stepped away, drawing the errant glove out of her coat and pressing it into her hand. "Go," he spoke, voice hoarse. "Go on home."

She stepped backward, a little awkwardly, and was about to turn away when she hesitated, and turned back.

"Will you walk me there?" she asked simply.

He shook his head, laughing a little shakily. "No," he said. "I don't think I will." He gave her a slow smile, regaining his composure. "But don't think that I will forget the invitation."

She looked at him for a moment, and then, wordlessly, returned the smile.

Sarah returned home on her own, well before Nicole was finished with her outings. She slipped out of her dress and into a less incriminating garment, curling up in the small, sunlit study. She had a book ready, of course – but more often than not, the novel lay listlessly in her lap as she frowned in contemplation, hand resting on her chin, lost in thought.

Nicole burst in a few hours later, carrying the scent of alien perfumes and tobacco with her. Breathless, she dropped onto the footstool in front of her cousin, collapsing in a pool of flowered silk and roughened satin.

“Listen,” she commanded. “Hear me out, please: that’s all I ask. Just hear me out.”

Eyebrows raised in surprise, Sarah nodded her agreement.

“All right.” Drawing a deep breath, Nicole began. “It will officially be summer in only a few days. Less than a week. Aunt has no summerhouse, and with my father traveling we cannot use his. You know what that means — we will have to stay in Venice. And it will be *boring*, Sarah,” Nicole implored. Moved by her own passion, she stretched out to place a gloved hand lightly on her cousin’s arm. “It will be absolutely awful. *No one* stays in Venice over the summer. The heat is unbearable in August and the canals raise a stink that won’t leave your hair for days.” Her eyes widened at the sheer horror of it. “Everyone goes to their summerhouses in the country – those who cannot must lock themselves up in their homes and go *masked* if they venture to the Piazza, for fear of the shame of being seen. It’s terrible.”

“It does sound rather unbearable,” Sarah admitted, “but what else can we do?”

Nicole drew another steadying breath, letting it out with a *whoosh*. “I was at Gabrielle’s gambling party today — as you should have been, by the by --”

“I wasn’t invited!”

“Oh, just because Gabrielle hates the attentions the Prince pays to you. When she heard he had stolen one of your gloves, she nearly snapped her fan in two.” Nicole giggled wickedly. “But no one would have thought ill had you come. Probably would have been more exciting, with the two of you —” Sarah grinned at her chatter, and Nicole snapped her mouth shut. “Anyhow. A message was left for me by the Prince himself.” Nicole grinned with unholy glee. “Gabrielle nearly spit blood! Ahem. As I was saying...”

“Yes?”

Nicole hesitated. “He has invited all of us — you, myself, Aunt, even her damn dog — to spend the summer with him. In his house in the country.” Suddenly she was gripping both of her cousin’s hands, words tumbling heedlessly out of her mouth. “Please, Sarah! I know you despise him, I know the two of you are constantly at odds, and that you hate the gossip that follows you both, but *please*! I will die if forced to stay here in Venice! I will throw myself into the canal with all my jewelry sewn into my petticoats and sink like a *stone*. Please, Sarah, I will do anything if you agree to go! I will buy you a new fan! Ten new fans! I’ll teach you how to dance the *furlana* and steal the souls of men everywhere! I will kiss my Aunts godforsaken tame rat *every single day*, if you say yes. Please, please say yes.”

Sarah was silent for a moment, gazing studiously into her cousin’s face.

“Sarah!” Nicole wailed.

“Yes.”

Nicole’s mouth fell open in shock. “What did you say?” she shrieked.



Sarah colored slightly, squirming where she sat. "I said, yes."

"Sarah," her cousin warned, grip on her cousin's hands tightening, "don't trifle with me. I'm apt to become violent."

"Fine, then" Sarah said, a little waspishly. She wrenched her hands free and picked up her book. "I take it back."

"Don't you dare!" Nicole ripped the book from her grasp. "Say it again. Swear you're serious."

Sarah crossed her arms, slightly vexed. "Yes! I swear!"

Nicole stared at her. Her eyes rolled back into her head, whites showing, and she slowly toppled off the footstool and fell to the floor with a thud.

"Nicole!" startled, Sarah leapt from her chair, rushing to kneel at her cousin's side. "Are you alright?"

Nicole, lying tangled in her own skirts, fluttered her eyes open. "I'm fine," she said dreamily. "I'm just dying from happiness."

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They spent the following days packing up their belongings. Sarah, who had arrived in Venice little more than a fortnight ago, had no trouble simply re-folding her clothes and putting them back into her brass-bound trunks. Nicole insisted otherwise. They needed new gowns, new gloves, new fans, new shoes, new *everything*. The rest of the week was a blur of shopping and sampling and ordering. Nicole was absolutely giddy. Sarah... wasn't sure what she was.

She had said yes. To a season with the Prince -- in his house, day and night. To his company every single day. She had said yes. Why? Who knew. But she had said it.

She couldn't take it back.

Finally everything was purchased and everything packed. Summer had officially begun: his Highness had already left, along with the nobility who had little responsibility in the city and less inclination to stay. The two cousins traveled from Venice that very day, Nicole blowing kisses behind them the entire way.

After reaching the mainland they climbed into a carriage, with a second one trailing behind for their luggage. The road to the Prince's summerhouse was long, but not terribly boring. They passed dozens of mansions and palaces, Nicole naming their owners and any gossip that went with them.

They finally reached the territory belonging to the Prince. Traveling up a long drive of pristine white sand, they watched as they drove by artificial pools of still water and cultivated gardens with pale marble statues. The lawn stretched before them, green as an emerald and almost gleaming in the heady sunlight.

The servants met them at the doors. A veritable army in starched flounces and powdered wigs, they swept in and immediately took charge of the situation. In moments the trunks were unloaded from the other carriage and Nicole's aunt (and tiny powder puff of a dog) were well in hand, being calmly escorted amidst her shrill complaints and protestations to her rooms. Giggling to each other, Sarah and Nicole did the same.

The rooms Sarah was shown were simply amazing. Vivid frescos lined the walls, mahogany furniture filled every vacant corner, and the floor beneath her feet was of delicately veined marble. Breathing in the warm air, scented by a tray of fresh-picked oranges lying on a low table, Sarah flung herself into a high-backed chair and gave a deep sigh of contentment.

The servants trailed in respectfully behind her, quietly placing her trunks inside her private salon. With a last bow in her direction, they left her in peace.

Her hand was barely lifted to open a trunk lid when a familiar voice came from the doorway.

“You came.”

She hesitated and pulled back, hands straightening her voluminous skirts as she stood. Calmly, she smoothed the rustling fabric as she stood to face him.

He was leaning against the doorjamb, arms crossed thoughtfully across his chest as he watched her with those unnerving, crystalline eyes. Thankfully, there was only a slight edge of smugness to the smile that pulled at his thin lips.

“I had to,” she replied steadily. “It was important to Nicole.”

“Hmm.” He stepped away from her room, still smiling to himself. “Whatever the reason, I am glad to find you here.” He held one arm before him, courteously, inviting her back downstairs. “Would you like to see the rest of the house?”

“What about Nicole?”

“I’m sorry to tell you your cousin has already taken off,” he replied without a hint of repentance. “Apparently, she felt the need to grace the entire neighborhood with her presence. And she took one of my best carriages.”

Sarah grinned, despite herself. “She’s making sure everyone knows that you are her host for the summer months.”

“I have the greatest faith in her endeavors.” He gestured again, expectantly. “My lady?”

Wary, she ventured out of the sanctuary of her rooms, to the obvious delight of his Highness. She stepped cautiously out into the hall, which looked over a railing and onto the main foyer. As she moved to peer curiously over the rail, the Prince swung around, forcing her to back up against the wall. He placed his gloved hands against the patterned wallpaper on either side of her — an effective trap.

She glared. “I thought you were going to show me the house.”

He chuckled. “I will, Sarah, I will.” He grinned, sharp teeth peeking. “I only wanted to tell you,” he said softly, “how glad I am that you came.”

“I told you,” she replied, eyes downcast. “Nicole wanted me to.”

The grin widened. “Then I am forever indebted to your cousin.” He leaned in closer, and Sarah nervously pressed herself even closer to the wall.

“Let me go! What are you doing?”

“Showing my gratitude, of course.”

“I thought you owed a debt to Nicole, not me.”

“She has granted me quite a favor,” he agreed, mock-solemn. “But it is your presence that makes my heart sing,” he continued mischievously, “and so the bulk of my thanks goes to you. Any gentleman knows he must give evidence of his gratitude.”

Scowling, she placed both hands against his chest and ineffectually attempted to push him away, twisting in his grasp. “Sarah,” he said, sounding a trifle exasperated, “it won’t hurt. Just hold still.”

He kissed her: lightly, sweetly. This was no casual brush of lips, but a full meeting of mouths with all the tenderness and restrained passion contained therein. Sarah froze, unthinkingly closing her eyes and succumbing to the caress, her fingers curling against the fabric of his waistcoat. He was so close... she could feel his eyelashes brushing against her cheeks.

He broke the kiss after a few moments, smiling gently before stepping away. He turned, practically dancing down the steps -- he took them so light and quick.

“I’ll be riding out in an hour,” he called back, not looking over his shoulder. “Ask any servant to show you the stables.”

Sarah stood as if rooted to the spot, watching him as he went down the staircase and turned the corner. After he had gone she let her head fall back against the wall with a bewildered sigh. Silently, she touched her gloved fingertips to her mouth. She could still feel his kiss.

A little less than an hour later, she had fully changed into an old-fashioned riding habit with a divided skirt, hair caught up in a simple twist. A servant, trying to be unobtrusive, was waiting outside her door to show her to the stables as soon as she was finished.

The Prince was already mounted and walking his horse, a dark Arabian, around the grassy padlock. A stable hand was bringing a cream-colored Palomino toward Sarah, ready to ride. She got into the saddle with little help, and gently guided the animal over to the Prince.

“Come,” he said casually as she approached. “There’s someone I want you to meet.”

He wheeled his horse and she followed close behind. There was no talk between them as they rode — the Prince obviously knew where he was going as he wound around sculpted gardens and sparse scatterings of trees, galloping over faultless lawns. Sarah simply tried to keep up.

After a few moments, she could smell a tang of salt in the air. The grass beneath the horses’ hooves grew longer and tougher, eventually mixing with silt — and they were on a sandy beach.

The Prince didn’t stop, but simply turned so that they walked the horses close to the surf. To her surprise, Sarah spotted their destination: a sturdy shack, tucked against the shelter of a grassy dune.

When they approached the Prince leaned down and rapped upon the door with his riding crop, which had hitherto hung unused from his gloved hand. After a moment the door swung open to reveal the strangest-looking man Sarah had ever seen. He stood, slightly bow-legged, in the tattered rags of bygone finery: slightly rusted chain mail and tattered tabard, tall boots nearly falling apart on his feet. An incredibly skinny old man, his white hair ruffled in the breeze, but even a jeweled eye patch couldn’t dim his keen, one-eyed gaze. Seeing his visitors he saluted smartly, bringing his heels together with a soft click.

“My liege,” he bowed deep, voice muffled as he spoke through a thick, drooping mustache.

“Sir Didymus,” his Highness returned respectfully, nodding. “May I present to you the Lady

Sarah? She is newly arrived at my household.”

Sarah dismounted, though the Prince had made no move to do so himself. After taking a moment to ensure her footing in the shifting sand, she made a demure little curtsy, which the aged knight returned with an impressively deep bow of his own.

“Verily, ‘tis a true honor to meet you, m’lady,” Sir Didymus spoke, almost overcome with emotion. “Methinks it possible we are destined companions, for I am abound with such happiness and joy in your presence.”

“Flatterer,” the Prince muttered.

Sarah ignored him, smiling at the man before her. “As am I, sir knight,” she said softly. “As am I.”

He blushed under her warm gaze, sun and wind-roughened cheeks coloring. He puffed up with importance, chest swelling beneath the grimy and ancient coat of arms. “I will be thy staunch defender, guardian, and protector whilst thou resides in his Highness’s kingdom, m’Lady Sarah.” He lowered his voice, leaning in to whisper confidentially. “And, of course, in all lands beyond.” He winked his good eye at her.

“Of course,” she whispered back.

“Lady Sarah hails from the kingdom of England,” the Prince broke in, severing their conspiratorial connection.

“Is this true, m’lady?” the knight asked, astonished.

“It is.”

“Why then, pray tell, how fare the Crusades?” he pursued eagerly.

Sarah hesitated, throwing a confused look at the Prince, who merely shrugged. “The Crusades?”

“Of course! The noble and never-ending pursuit of that most esteemed treasure, the Holy Grail! How goes the search?”

“Ah... it has been, er, temporarily abandoned, sir knight.”

His bushy eyebrows drew together in consternation. “Abandoned? This cannot be!”

“I suspect the quest has been postponed only until you are released from your duties here,” the Prince smoothly interjected. “After all, feats of your prowess could be nothing but an asset to any Crusade.”

Sir Didymus appeared to consider this a moment, then nodded shortly. “This is true.”

“But the lady and I must be returning to the house — I mean, my palace. We must beg your leave.”

“Of course, my liege,” Didymus replied, and he gave yet another sweeping bow. He took Sarah’s hand and pressed it tenderly, tears of sentiment coming to his eye. “And fair thee well, sweet maiden. I shall pray our paths cross again.”

“They will, Sir Didymus,” Sarah promised quietly. She mounted her mare without assistance, and both she and the Prince waved their goodbyes as they rode away from the lone, stalwart figure that stood ramrod-straight on the windy beach.

They slowed their horses to a walk after escaping the treacherous sandy ground, which ended several minutes after leaving the ocean behind. Neither was in any hurry, and simply let their mounts step easily along the lawn as they enjoyed the clear afternoon sunshine. They weaved between orange groves and the small, square pools of water with brightly colored mosaics of tiles beneath their depths, bordered by box-cut hedges.

Sarah, stroking the long, arched neck of her horse, eventually broke the silence. "Has he always been like that?"

"Didymus?" The Prince smiled, looking miraculously confident in the saddle. The Arabian, a stallion with the look of fire in his eye, quieted at his Highness's touch. "Always. Though I admit, it's been downhill since I gave him access to my library. Between Cervantes and *Morte D'Arthur*, I fear he is spoilt forever."

"Oh, no," Sarah spoke softly. "Not spoilt. Refined."

He glanced at her sideways, eyes curious. "You are happy to see him, then. Good." Nodding to himself, he turned towards his magnificent house. "He insists on standing guard at the beach in case of a Turkish invasion. And," he continued loftily, "I believe it is prudent to have such an outpost."

"Of course," she replied, grinning at him.

"But," he said easily, "I see no reason why you should not visit him on a regular basis, as the two of you seem to get on so swimmingly. I shall often accompany you," he added, as if an afterthought. "After all, it is a neglectful sovereign why does not regularly inspect his borders."

She tensed, and the Palomino sensed it, twitching her ears back. "Oh," Sarah replied carefully.

The rest of the ride was conducted in an awkward silence — awkward, at least, on Sarah's part. The Prince, as always, appeared to be insultingly comfortable. He guided them both to the stables, the dappled sunlight that filtered down through the trees throwing a shadow across his eyes and turning his hair silver-gilt. He waved away the stable boys, which made Sarah surprisingly grateful. She shied away from their inquisitive gazes, and wanted to do something with her hands as she thought.

They stabled the horses together, unbuckling the tack. Sarah turned away from the Prince so he wouldn't see the agitated flush on her face. Her hands shook as she began to wipe down the leather saddle.

"Why are you pursuing me?" she demanded suddenly.

The Prince, engaged in the same task, raised an eyebrow. "Any reason I shouldn't?"

"Yes, there is a reason! My lord Brian, for one."

His Highness laughed shortly. "Forgive my bluntness, Sarah, but if Brian were cause for any real inhibitions on your part, you wouldn't be talking with me now."

She colored, mouth pressed into a thin line as she whirled to face him, arms crossed tightly across her chest. "My own reluctance, then," she retorted.

"Why should you be reluctant?"

She glared at him. "Contrary to popular belief, your Highness is not my ideal of the perfect lover."

He turned, eyes wide with indignation. "And why not?"

"Your arrogance, for one."

"You prefer false modesty?"

"You are also inconsiderate."

"Only to those that deserve it, love."

"And your utterly incorrigible forwardness!"

"I was merely anticipating your own wishes," he replied in an injured tone, "like any gentleman. And don't you dare," he said, suddenly serious, pointing a gloved finger at her, "say anything about the quality of my kisses. They don't count, because you always refuse to *hold still*."

She stared, open-mouthed at his outraged expression, eyes wide at his exasperated tone. Suddenly she burst out into laughter, tears leaking from the corners of her eyes. With a content smile, the Prince took up a currycomb and began to brush the stallion.

"Why is it," Sarah gasped, regaining control, "that I can never stay angry with you?"

His Highness stood with his back to her as he tended to the horse. "Perhaps because you know that, if you asked it of me," he said softly, "I would turn the world upside-down."

Her breath caught in her throat.

"Although the truth of it is," he continued in a normal tone, "I'm bored out of my mind here, and simply looking for something to do." He waited, briefly, for her outraged response. When it didn't come, he feared he had pushed her too far. "Sarah, you know I --"

He stopped at the sight of her standing with a riding crop -- which she had taken off the wall -- in one hand. Smiling, she swished it experimentally through the air. "I," she announced with dreadful cheerfulness, "am going to hit you."

His eyes narrowed with suspicion. "You wouldn't," he said after a pause.

Her face broke into a wide grin. "Watch me."

He watched her carefully as she began to advance with slow, measured steps. "My lady, if I have given offence, I humbly crave pardon --"

"Try again."

Desperately, as she neared: "Sarah, I was *joking*!"

"C'mere!"

Throughout the stables, and in the surrounding yard, horses pricked up their ears as stable hands paused in their work. The servants smiled as one, as laughter -- the joyful, uninhibited sound of two children playing together -- rang out in the languid summer air.

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Time passed.

She visited Didymus daily, and spent hours with him on the beach listening to his tales of fierce

knights and fair princesses, while sitting in front of a blazing fire on the sands. Ludo had also been a part of the Prince's entourage from Venice, and she passed many a sunny afternoon with him in the gardens. He never spoke, but constantly delighted her with sleight-of-hand tricks and exaggerated expressions. Sarah even had frequent letters from Chaucer, still searching for elusive documents back in the city, and he grudgingly gave her messages from her friend, Hoggle.

The Prince, of course, was still a constant element of her daily life. Just not an overly obtrusive one. Though perhaps not an *unobtrusive* one... She was having a hard time making up her mind. It wasn't as if he were dogging her footsteps and popping up every time she turned around. She would often go for hours without catching a glimpse of him. But when she did see him — as she would, inevitably — there was always something... He would press her hand with his, or bend too close to whisper something in her ear. He had even, on several occasions, suddenly interrupted her with a full, sweet kiss upon the mouth before turning abruptly away and leaving. His behavior shocked her into a confused kind of stupor. She would flush, and then feel cold -- numb, even. When she finally shook herself free of his spell, she would have to check the sudden urge to run after him, shake him, make him explain himself. Make him explain everything.

He made her feel lost and stumbling in his presence, as if she were moving through sluggish waters. At the same time everything felt clearer when he was around: sharper, focused. The world was centered on the Prince.

She didn't know whether to run away, or run to him.

And then Brian came.

It was an innocuous visit. It was practically expected — after all, he was a childhood friend of the prince, and Brian's own manor was only a few hours' ride away. They had received a multitude of visitors already. Mostly gossip mongers who wanted to see how Sarah and his Highness were getting along. They always left shortly, disgruntled; the Prince could never be found on such occasions, and Sarah immediately managed to escape into the gardens, leaving the unwanted guests to Nicole's tender mercies.

But the Prince was in the foyer when Brian arrived, dusty and slightly disheveled from riding on horseback. With an uncanny lack of surprise, his Highness took Brian's card and tapped it against his lips.

"Right," he said suddenly. "We'll have a picnic. Doesn't that sound lovely, Sarah?" he asked without looking around.

Sarah, who had imagined herself hidden in the shadows, jumped. "Er, yes," she said, a bit flustered. "Very nice."

The Prince smiled at Brian. "Such an enchanting girl," he drawled. "She does love a picnic."

Brian's expressive mouth twisted disagreeably, but he nodded, acknowledging the hit. His Highness smiled widely. Sarah sighed.

It was going to be a very long day.

They set out within a half hour: the four of them, Nicole, Sarah, the Prince, and Brian, with a retinue of servants. After riding on horseback for a while, they found a nicely shaded spot in his Highness's immaculate gardens. The servants spread a thick cotton cloth over the lush grass, placing a low wooden table with stout legs upon the coarse blanket, heavy enough to remain anchored. Nimbly, they unpacked the immense baskets they had carried all this way, throwing back patterned covers to reveal fresh fruit and moist cheeses, warm bread and a variety of sorbet

and pâté. A few full dishes had been prepared and transported, and these were brought forth to cries of delight. A barrel of fresh water had also been lugged along. It was opened, and a pitcher dipped inside to pour the sparkling liquid into crystal glasses. They sat — the girls modestly tucking their skirts beneath their legs, the boys lounging like cats — and ate.

They chattered easily at first, laughing around bites of food as they sipped water and wine in the cool shade. Nicole was blithely unconscious, it seemed, of any lingering tension between her companions. She teased them all pitilessly about previous events — ball, Ascension Day, and duel — interspersing her sly remarks with catty snippets of gossip about others of their acquaintance. Nicole's attitude actually brightened the event, as everyone was forced to laugh and defend themselves against her taunts. On the mild breeze Sarah could catch the scent of both the sea and the orange groves surrounding them. Idly, she wondered if she'd ever been happier.

The touch of soft leather broke her from the reverie, and she started. She looked to see that his Highness had covered her hand with his gloved one. Apparently, from the curious gazes around her, a question had gone unheard.

"I beg your pardon?" she asked.

He smiled at her — a dangerous thing. "I wanted to know if you've ever tasted marchpane." She frowned her confusion. "Marzipan?" he continued. "*Pate d'amandes*?" He laughed at her bewilderment, drawing forth a small tin box.

Taking off the lid, his hand delved between layers of tissue paper so delicate it was almost transparent. He lifted something away, cradling it in his palm before showing it to her. A strawberry — impossible in its perfection, gorgeously flushed from blached top to ruby tip.

"It's a paste made from sweet almonds," he said. "They sculpt it into fruits in the kitchens and color it with glazes. Here." Her mouth was still slightly open in amazement, and he pushed it gently between her lips. The tips of his gloved fingers lingered fractionally in the briefest of caresses that left behind crumbs of sugar. She licked her lips without thinking, disarmed by a sudden mouthful of soft sweetness. Dimly she could hear Nicole's shocked laughter, could see Brian's expression darken. But all she knew was the mismatched gaze of the crystalline eyes that never looked away from her own.

She swallowed thickly, reddening as she struggled with the marzipan. She ducked her head. "It's nice," she murmured.

"I knew you would like it."

Their easy camaraderie was broken. In stiff silence they motioned for the remnants of food to be cleared and their horses brought to them. In those few minutes, Sarah could constantly feel Brian's eyes on her. The Prince, however, never once looked her way.

As she mounted her horse, she heard the jingle of a harness as Brian guided his own forward. He pulled in next to her.

"Sarah..." he began hesitantly.

She didn't look at him, busying herself with the reins. "Yes?"

He drew something from his coat. "I want you to have this." He placed into her hand a thick, cream-colored sheet of paper that was folded into thirds. On one side was her full name and title, and on the other he had fastened the edges with red wax imprinted with his seal.

"Read it," he urged quietly. "Please. I — it's for you."



She made as if to reply, but someone snatched the reins from her listless hands, and a cool, elegant voice said: “Come with me, Sarah. I want to show you something.”

She gave a startled yelp as her mount began to trot, twisting her fingers in the horse’s mane and holding on for dear life. His Highness, blatantly showing off, had flipped the reins and was leading her Palomino with his right hand, guiding his own with his left. They cantered away from their friends, quickly losing sight of the perplexed pair.

Sarah eventually managed to wrench the reins from his hand and regain control of the horse. She brought the mare to a gentle halt and then wheeled upon her kidnapper, furious.

“How *dare* you?” she fumed. “Never mind how angry *I* am right now — what about Nicole and Brian? How must they feel, being abandoned? Did you ever think of that?”

The question brought him up short. For a moment he stared at her in complete surprise, and then burst into laughter. “No,” he confessed. “I only think about you.”

She stared at him. “Um, well,” she said after a moment, tucking an errant strand of hair behind one ear. “Did you want to show me something?”

He laughed again shaking his head. “Not really. I was just tired of sharing you. Come on,” he said, ignoring her baffled expression. “I’ll race you back to the house.” He turned his horse in that direction. “And if I win, I get to kiss you.”

“You do that anyway,” she muttered darkly.

“Yes, but this time,” he muttered wryly, “you have to enjoy it.” Without waiting for her response, he urged his horse to a gallop.

She followed; telling herself the beauty of the setting sun was what made her smile.

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When Nicole arrived back at the house some hours later, she assured Sarah she bore no ill will against her cousin — though she was resolved to snub the Prince for at least a few days, just so he was aware of her displeasure. Brian, Nicole reported, had been less upset than one might have expected, considering the circumstances. Thus assured, Sarah went to sleep without qualm. The letter from Brian was laid unopened on a table beside her bed. She thought it would be better to read it in the morning, when she felt more refreshed.

Her sleep was easy and dreamless amidst the silk pillows and warm blankets of her bed. She left the window open so that fresh air could move about her room, and awoke to the sound of birdsong...

And that of someone reading a letter.

“...suppose I have to give him credit for that one, your eyes are rather enchanting. But the next time he tries to rhyme “green” with “seen” I’ll have him kicked out of Venice. And, oh look, here he is professing undying devotion again. He does that quite often... one might begin to think he were an abandoned puppy. And this next line is simply atrocious. I refuse to read it aloud. What business does he have looking at your ankles, anyway?”

Sarah’s eyes snapped open. By turning her head, she could see the Prince – on the edge of her bed, comfortably sitting up against the headboard with his long legs stretched out on the coverlet. In his hands he held a piece of paper graced with her name and the remnants of a red wax seal.

“What are you doing?” she demanded in a dangerous tone.

He paused, taking a moment to smile at her. “Ah, good, you’re up. Cook is adamant in her belief that you will want chocolate. She’s guarding the last pitcher with a ferocity I’ve rarely seen, and don’t feel like testing. Get up and tell her you don’t want it, so she’ll give it to me.”

“I do want it,” she said, struggling to sit up. “And what are you doing with Brian’s letter? Give it back!”

She reached for it, but he sprang nimbly away from her and onto the floor. “But I’m not finished with it,” he said mildly.

“You damn well are,” she growled, throwing back the covers. “You have no right to read that, it’s mine, and meant for me. Give it here!”

He evaded her grasp again, laughing. She lunged for him, nearly tripping on the edge of her long nightgown. He always kept one step ahead, taunting her with the folded paper, whisking it away just as her fingertips touched it. She stumbled in her bare feet, almost tackling him a time or two in her stubborn refusal to give up the chase. He led her on a merry dance all through her private rooms, and finally edged outside into the hallway, where Sarah knew she couldn’t follow for propriety’s sake. Desperate, she seized the pitcher of water on her dresser, filled every morning for her to wash her face in. His feet were on the top step of the long stairway when she dashed the water against his back.

He froze, and then spun around to glare at her like a disgruntled (and drenched) cat, wheat-gold hair dripping into his eyes. His face was the perfect expression of wry defeat, and she couldn’t help laughing as she leaned against the doorway.

“Now,” she gasped out, “will you kindly return my letter?”

He did so, courteously, and she broke into giggles again at his apparently unshakable composure.

“Do you know,” he said suddenly, intently, eyes locked on her face, “how beautiful you are when you smile? Or when you laugh,” he continued, oblivious to the look of shock that slipped over her features. “There’s a... a glow to your face, to your skin — a new grace in the way you move.” From the step below her, he lifted a hand to softly trace the curve of her cheek. “As if you were lit from within. You conquer a room with that smile, Sarah.” His hand dropped. “You conquer *me*.”

Without another word, he turned on his heel and walked down, taking the steps two at a time. Thrilled and lost, she watched him go.

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Nicole had discovered a tiny bouquet of wild violets by her breakfast plate, and was immensely mollified by their presence. She was sunny and gay that morning, with not an ill word to be had for the Prince.

“It’s just a shame,” she kept saying, “that he didn’t come back to the table after he left to fetch you, Sarah. I hope I wasn’t too cold to him... maybe he thinks I hate him, and is avoiding my company... I’ll find him after breakfast.”

Sarah smiled as she sipped her chocolate.

After her meal she went into the library to curl up before the fireplace. Contrary to expected August weather, it was cool that day. A heavy fog blanketed the ground, and the chill leaked

through even the thick house walls. She shivered in her thin summer dress, and drew a blanket over herself.

At one point, she looked up to find the Prince watching her from the doorway.

“How long have you been standing there?” she demanded.

“Come riding,” he said, ignoring the question. “I’m getting restless, staying inside like this. I want you to come with me.”

She cast another glance at the window, the view still obscured by thick fog. “But the weather’s terrible.”

“So? It only looks terrible from the outside. It’s beautiful when you’re out riding in it.” He walked over, catching her hand and giving it an impatient tug. “Come on, Sarah.”

She made a face, reluctantly getting up from her warm chair. “I’ll catch a cold,” she grumbled.

“You won’t. Trust me.”

It *was* gorgeous to be out riding in. The fog washed everything pale and ghostly, the sun breaking through in luminous beams from the cloud-filled sky. Wispings tendrils clung to anything that moved through it -- a tree branch waving in the breeze, a horse’s hoof, Sarah’s arm as she tucked her hair out of her eyes -- leaving beaded droplets of cold water in its wake.

“I’m getting wet,” Sarah muttered, petulant. “I’m going to get sick.”

The Prince gave a small sigh of exasperation. “I promise that you won’t.

And if you’re getting wet, it’s because you deserve to be after dumping a pitcher of water on my head.”

She grinned at him. “Really? It’s worth it, then.”

He gave her a mock-sowl. “Wicked creature.”

She laughed, and they rode comfortably for a while longer. Sarah had her eyes on the ground, making sure she was guiding her horse safely through the treacherous fog when his imperious voice lanced through the silence:

“A question.”

“A possible answer,” she replied, voice deliberately light to counter his serious tone.

“Your father has never remarried.”

“That’s true.”

“Why?”

She blinked at him, a little startled. “You ask as if... well, as if *I* had something to do with it. Which I haven’t — I’m not that well acquainted with my father’s personal life.”

He nodded shortly. “But you are glad he has never taken a second wife. You prefer it that way.”

She gave him a sidelong glance. “To be perfectly honest... yes. Am I so transparent?”

He made a faint grimace, still looking studiously away from her face. “Call it intuition. Why do

you prefer it? Surely you wish your father to be happy?"

"Of course I do," she replied, a little indignant. "And I never directly prevented him from getting remarried — I'm just glad it never happened."

"I repeat: why?"

She drew a long breath, frowning in thought. "Well, for one thing, a second marriage is always hard on the children from the first. So self-preservation, in part."

"What do you mean?"

She hesitated. "Growing up, girls adore their mothers. They worship them. They watch their mothers get dressed for parties, beg to put on the same makeup, mimic them in each and every way possible." She laughed a little. "To a young girl, a mother is a fascinating creature: always laughing, kissing her father, accompanied by some delicious scent. I never knew my own mother, of course. But if I had... If a man remarries, choosing another woman after his previous wife, he throws off the hold his dead wife has on him — relinquishes her love, in a way. He loves someone else, you see... And if the little girl has spent her whole life trying to be exactly like the woman her father now strives to forget, and begins daily to see her dead mother's face reflected back at her from the mirror... the daughter begins to wonder if *she* still has her father's love."

The Prince was unusually subdued, answering. "You know that's not true, Sarah."

She smiled to herself. "Of course. But the head and heart speak in different tongues, and things don't always translate well. Thankfully," raising her head up, "I've never had to deal with that problem. But I imagine it must be hard. Especially if — for example — the second wife is the exact opposite of his first: fair where she was dark, stern where she was always teasing..." Suddenly, her breath caught, as if she choked on her own unexpectedly vehement words. The world swam, dark and bright colors bleeding together into chaos. She ducked her head, gloved hand coming up to shield her closed eyes.

"Sarah?" A soft touch under her chin, forcing her to raise her face under the scrutiny of that unnerving gaze. "Are you all right?"

She breathed deep, if a little unsteadily. "I'm fine," she protested. "Just a little dizziness — really, very strange, but I'm fine now." She smiled wide to prove it. "Perfectly fine."

His dark eyes were strangely sad, and he angled his gloved hand to caress her cheek. Oddly tired, she let herself lean into his hand — letting him support her briefly, relaxing into that gentleness — before her horse sidestepped, and she had to snap to attention to control her animal.

"Besides," she continued lightly, fussing unnecessarily with the reins, "I admit to a childish wish for a love that can outlast death."

"Oh?"

"Mm-hmm." She threw him a teasing look. "I know it's a silly fantasy, but I can't give up the idea."

"Really. Care to explain further?"

She shrugged nonchalantly. "Oh, the usual adolescent's dream of a soul mate, that sort of thing. As long as my father remains unmarried, I can believe my mother was his true love — that he is sustained by her memory and needs no one else to fulfill his life." She was silent for a moment as they rode through the ghostly surroundings. "I want to believe such love exists."

“I see.” He nodded gravely, eyes on their path. “But surely such love becomes rather... oh, oppressive, after a while?”

“Oppressive!” she retorted, stung. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, soul mates are more trouble than they’re worth.” He dismissed them with an affected wave of his hand. “There are always so many challenges to face and obstacles to master before you can be with them, for instance. And even if you can be together, the love of a soulmate is such a *serious* thing. Eternal, everlasting, and so very meaningful devotion.” He made a face. “So very permanent.”

She laughed at his distaste. “Quite a difference to your usual flings, I expect.”

“Quite,” he drawled. “And don’t try to tell me you wouldn’t rebel under the weight of such intentions, either.”

“Of course I wouldn’t.”

“Really? This from the girl who scorned poor Paris for throwing his country into war — out of love for a woman, may I remind you. The unfortunate thing is that desperate love is often coupled with desperate actions, for which you have a marked distaste.”

“True,” she replied after a moment. “I refuse to accept the perpetration of such events — even in the name of love.”

He raised an eyebrow like an upswept owl’s wing.

“And the love itself?” he asked, voice light, but with the ring of challenge.

She smiled serenely, holding his eyes with her own. “The love itself,” she replied softly, “is always accepted.”

He looked away first.

“So,” she resumed, “I have been very forthcoming in answer to your questions — may I pose one of my own?”

“Of course.”

She grinned at him. “What is it like to be the so-called ‘Prince’ of Venice, with all the wealth, power, and control that comes with that title?”

He was quiet for a very long moment, finally letting his eyes fall shut before answering: “Lonely.”

She started, and her horse flicked her ears back at the unorthodox movement. “You can’t be serious,” she said, frowning.

“Can’t I?”

“You have the whole city at your feet! How can you be lonely?”

“Perhaps the whole of Venice is not the company I seek.”

“And what is wrong with the people in the city?”

“You don’t understand.” He sighed briefly. “I am... I am the Prince, there, Sarah, and no one else.”

I will never be anyone else. Not to them, at least. And being the Prince is a role with certain... obligations."

"And you find them taxing?"

"No. *No*. In fact, I found them rather enjoyable, until --" He shot her a look from beneath half-lowered lashes. "The truth of it is, I don't know if they are, or not. Because I have never been without them. The court games you despise so much -- the power plays, the manipulations, the schemes -- I have never lived any other way. I know nothing else, Sarah."

She watched him as he brooded, his face dark and turned slightly away from her. She spoke, softly, as if she didn't quite realize what she was saying: "And if you had one wish -- one dream -- it would be to be free of them. To live like any other human being."

His head whipped around, eyes wide with shock. And the naked pain and vulnerability of his face almost made her gasp.

With obvious effort, he shut his eyes against that terrible truth. "How did you guess?" he asked, sounding slightly strangled.

She suppressed a smile, letting her mare step lightly ahead of his mount. "I told you before," she said lightly. "I know you." She cast him a backward glance, dark curtain of hair falling over one shoulder. "Even if you didn't believe me at the time."

"Well," he spoke mildly, rapidly regaining his composure, "I can't always be right." He scrutinized her carefully, raising an eyebrow at the shivers she didn't bother to suppress. "Ready to go home?"

She trembled in the damp fog. "More than ready. I just know I'll wake up with a cold tomorrow. My clothes are soaked through."

"You won't get sick, Sarah. Will you ever learn to trust me about these things?"

"Not as long as I draw breath," she muttered, and his burst of laughter was lost in the ghostly expanses around them.

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"You're *sick*?"

She glared at him from where she was propped up on a chaise lounge. She had refused to stay in bed, but was too miserable to do anything but curl up with a book and a steady supply of hot chocolate. The servants had made sure she was comfortable, bolstered by mounds of soft pillows and a heavy blanket tucked around her. It was a trifling thing, really -- just a few sniffles and a headache, not even a real fever to worry about. But it made her decidedly cranky -- and the look of utterly incredulous disbelief on the Prince's face wasn't helping.

"How did you get sick?" he demanded, as if her present condition was a personal insult.

"I think being dragged out into the damp weather had something to do with it," she replied waspishly. "Don't you?"

His eyes narrowed, as if he suspected her of faking it. "That's not possible," he proclaimed.

"Of course it's possible!" she replied hotly. "It happens all the time! And I *knew* I would catch a cold, riding out in that stuff," she seethed. "I just knew it."

He stared at her, mouth falling open slightly in shock. "It's you," he breathed. "You did this."

"I did not," she grumped, rooting herself further down into her burrow of blankets and pillows. "Well, I suppose it's my own fault — but it's more yours!"

He laughed, delighted, and she gave him a puzzled look. He stepped into her rooms, still chuckling and shaking his head. He knelt easily beside the chaise, smoothing dark hair from her forehead with a gloved hand. "Ah, Sarah," he sighed. "You are a constant wonder." Confused, but pleased, she smiled back at him, childishly happy to have him near. Suddenly he frowned, getting to his feet and regarding her with a highly suspicious air. "It's not catching," he demanded, "is it?"

She threw a pillow at him.

He returned, after having made a discreet exit amidst insults and plush airborne missiles, a half-hour later. He knocked softly on the door and opened it just a bit, peeking in. He held something behind his back.

"Pax?" He asked, wary of her reaction.

"I suppose so," she grumbled. "No one else has come to visit me, anyway. Where is Nicole?"

"Gallivanting," he replied, stepping inside and closing the door behind him. "The weather's cleared, and I'm afraid a sick cousin can't compete with the prospect of visiting the neighbors. However, I've brought you a present."

"Why thank you, your Highness," she grinned impishly at him. "Your patronage is much appreciated."

He hesitated a moment, steps pausing as he walked towards the chaise. "Sarah," he said, suddenly serious, "why is it you always use that silly nickname? Don't you feel comfortable using my real name?"

She frowned. "It's not that," she began slowly. "It's just... I know someone told me your true name, I just... I can't seem to remember it..." She winced abruptly, dizzy, her head throbbing, and she dropped her face into her hands.

The Prince strode over to kneel quickly by her side. He took one of her hands in his own. "Sarah," he asked urgently, "Sarah, are you all right?"

She shuddered briefly, and then looked up, blinking. "I'm fine," she spoke softly. "I'm sorry, I suppose I'm a bit sicker than I thought... what was I talking about?"

He dropped her hand. "Nothing," he said shortly. "Nothing important." He picked up her present - a book -- from where he had laid it safely on the floor. "Take this."

She held out her hands, and in them he placed the large, leather-bound volume. She dropped it into her lap, greedily opening up the ornate cover, a look of delight spreading over her features as she glimpsed the title page. "*La Reine Margot*! I've heard of this one — how did you get a copy so soon?"

"I have a friend in the French court," he said, watching her thumb idly through the pages. Her face fell.

"It's an original copy," she said, subdued.

“Is that a problem?”

She flushed slightly. “I can’t read French — I know, I know I should have learned, but good tutors were often hard to find.”

“You can’t? Pity.” He clasped his hands behind his back, contemplating the frescos on her walls with the look of greatest innocence. “I can.”

“That’s all very well for you, I suppose,” she sighed, reluctantly closing the book, “but I am still at a loss.”

“I could read it to you.”

She hesitated. “What?”

He smiled benignly. “I could translate as I read, and read it aloud to you. Here.” Without further ado, he stood up and lifted her — book, blanket, and all — into his arms. Ignoring her gasp of surprise, he adroitly carried her over to the other side of the room, where a broad couch rested beneath a wide window that let sunlight wash into the room. Swiftly, he put her down upon it, managing to position both her and himself so that in a manner of minutes, Sarah found herself sharing the couch with him. He angled himself so that he was sitting against one of the plush arms while she was stretched out on the cushions, her head resting on his chest. She immediately struggled to sit up, but his arm snaked around her waist and he held her fast.

“I thought you wanted to hear the story,” he remarked mildly.

“Yes,” she muttered. “But this is — this is not --” With a sigh of defeat she gave up, head falling onto his shoulder. “Never mind.”

“Good.” Releasing her, he opened up the book. “Now, hush.” With his rich, sonorous voice, he began to tell her the story of the beautiful, reckless, doomed queen.

Sarah was strangely content listening to Dumas’ tale told in the Prince’s cool, cultured tone, feeling the rumble of his voice deep inside his chest against her cheek. Her fingers curled against the velvet softness of his waistcoat, a beautiful midnight blue shot with silver threads of embroidery. Smiling to herself, she closed her eyes.

She must have fallen asleep. She knew she had — but it was a strange sort of sleep, dreamless and drifting. Sometimes she was half-awake, listening to the sound of the Prince reading to her, conscious of her head tucked beneath his chin and the movement of his chest as he breathed deep. Other times all she knew was darkness, and the gentle drift of the breeze and the sound of the Prince’s voice — singing to her, a half-whispered melody that she could almost... remember...

She awoke several hours later; she could tell by the angle that the sunlight slanted through the window overhead. She breathed deep, utterly relaxed and happy. She could feel that the Prince had placed his arms loosely around her shoulders.

“Sarah,” his voice came, pitched so low that, even in the empty room, it barely reached her ears.

“Mm?” She closed her eyes again, reveling in his warmth.

“I want you to marry me.”

That brought her fully awake. Her head jerked up, and she half sat up where she lay, supporting herself on her arms so that she could look him full in the face. Her eyes were wide with shock, but his own face was immeasurably calm, as if he had made a statement about the weather or

something just as inevitable.

“I can’t,” she protested faintly. She made as if to lift herself away from him, but his hands came up and circled her wrists, not letting her go.

He raised an eyebrow. “And why is that?”

She opened and shut her mouth a few times in aborted attempt to reply. “You’re uncle is the Doge of Venice,” she began — speaking as if these things should be obvious to him. “I come from a good family, but yours — they would want you to marry a foreign princess, make an alliance... You can’t just throw yourself away on an ambassador’s daughter.”

“Sarah, I want you to do me a favor.” He spoke easily, lightly, as if the subject was of little overall importance — but the grip on her wrists tightened with bruising strength, and the dark intensity of his eyes unnerved her little. “Pretend this is all a dream. Pretend none of that is true — your family, my family, what you will. Pretend that we can do whatever we want.” She opened her mouth to make some protest, but he let go of her wrist to press a finger firmly against her lips. “Would you marry me then?”

“Sarah,” he continued in a harsher tone, as she made no move to answer. “I don’t have to ask this. To be perfectly honest, I never intended to, because there was no need for it. But now... now I am asking. Because I want to.”

He took away his hand, and for a long moment she simply looked at him, eyes searching his stark features for some hint of mockery, or teasing. She found none.

She let herself fall back onto his chest, listening quietly to the sound of his heartbeat beneath her ear. She closed her eyes against the almost unbearable happiness that was born within her own heart. “Yes,” she said softly. “I’ll marry you.”

He made no answer. But he entwined his gloved fingers with hers, bringing up her hand to press his lips against it in a gesture of wordless love.

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They managed to keep the engagement a secret — not an easy task with someone like Nicole in the house, who obviously sensed that something had changed between the two of them. But although she gave them both long, hard looks and a couple of pointed questions, Nicole seemed thwarted in figuring out their mystery. And so they safely returned to Venice, undiscovered, a few weeks later.

The days passed in a whirl that Sarah could barely keep straight. It seemed a blur of events and faces: greeting her father, who had finally come home; opening up their old house; telling him of the engagement, and all the procedures that entailed... So much fussing. Her trousseau, so carefully kept and added to over the years, was shipped in from England. Her father had to meet with the Prince’s in order to discuss dowry arrangements and draw up the marriage contract. She never actually met the Prince’s family. She never understood how he got them to agree to this unorthodox arrangement... all she knew was that she was happy.

The day after the public announcement, Sarah was in her room (just waking up) when her cousin threw open the door with a bang.

“You!” Nicole screeched. “You little...” she advanced, grabbing pillows from chairs and couches and lobbing them at her dark-haired cousin, who yelped and ducked, as she went. “I will never forgive you! THREE WEEKS! Three! And you never said a word!” She lunged, finally catching

Sarah by the shoulders and managing to give the girl a good shaking, despite her diminutive status. Finally, she stopped, dropping down onto the bed. “Why didn’t you tell me?” she wailed.

Sarah laughed and fell back into a chair, a little breathless. “We didn’t want anyone to know until the summer was over,” she explained gently. “And Nicole, I love you very much, but you can’t keep a secret.”

“I could have, this once!” Nicole pouted.

Sarah laughed again, joyfully throwing her head back. “Alright, I promise that next time I’m engaged to the Prince, I’ll tell you right away. Is that okay?”

“I suppose,” Nicole muttered.

“Right.” Sarah nodded, standing. “Now, will you help me get dressed for the betrothal? I can’t bring myself to deal with servants, right now.”

“Of course,” Nicole said. “Why do you think I came, you silly goose? And Lucien will be over in a moment for your hair. Now,” she said greedily, climbing to her feet, “where’s your dress?”

The betrothal ceremony was a simple one, mainly concerning the male members of both families, but the bride-to-be did play a small part. After the Prince arrived with his retinue of friends and family, Sarah would have to descend, dressed in white, and present herself in the portego. She would circle the room, allowing herself to be viewed and inspected, and then respectfully withdraw. It was, she and Nicole agreed, distastefully like a horse fair — but it had to be done.

Lucien — full of murmured praise and warm wishes — had just finished plaiting her hair, which hung loose to her shoulders, with the traditional gold threads and twists of red silk when Nicole rushed breathless into the room again.

“The Prince is here,” she said urgently, taking her cousin’s hand and literally pulling her out of the chair. “He’s waiting in the foyer while his father and your father talk for a bit — he wants to see you, go, quickly!”

Sarah let herself be firmly pushed out the door and onto the stairway by her cousin, laughing a little. Finally, waving Nicole away, she descended, feeling strangely shy. She hesitated when the Prince finally came into her view. He was waiting, impatiently, at the bottom of the staircase, one hand on the railing. He was distracted, staring into space, and she had to lightly touch his gloved hand to make him look up.

But when he did, the look in his eyes made her breath catch.

“You’re beautiful,” he said quietly after a moment.

She smiled. “So are you.” He was also dressed in the traditional garments for a betrothal — his coat, waistcoat, and breeches were all a dark, rich red.

He let himself look at her a few minutes longer, gloved fingers lightly tracing the back of her hand. She shivered.

“I want you to have something,” he said abruptly, and he caught at her hand. Before she could react, he had slipped a ring of diamonds onto her finger: the *ricordino*. She held her hand up to the light, and it sparkled with cold fire.

“You shouldn’t give me this, yet,” she whispered. “Not until the second reception.”

“I know.” He climbed the few steps needed to match her height, and gave her a quick, fierce kiss — almost savage. “I wanted you to have it now.” He walked down the stairs and to the doorway of the portego, casting dark eyes up at her. “Run upstairs again,” he told her gently. “I’ll see you soon.”

She did so, ringed hand clenched tight against her heart.

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And then they were married.

She could hardly remember anything between the betrothal and the ceremony — honestly, Sarah could barely remember getting married. Just flashes, heart-pangs of joy and splendor revealed before her eyes. They were married on a Sunday at church, since her own house was seemed insufficiently grand to hold the ceremony in. As custom dictated, the ceremony was held at dawn. The only guests present were their families, due to the restrictions of sumptuary laws. She recalled so little... not the faces of the people surrounding her, not the words of the ceremony itself, not even her own words. All she could remember was the blare of trumpets and the singing of the flutes as they entered — also, the steady, reassuring presence of the Prince, constantly at her side.

The banquet afterward, however, she would never forget.

It was held in the Prince’s palace. They arrived together in a private gondola, newly married, and Sarah was reminded vividly of the first time she ever ascended these steps. Smiling at her, as if he knew her thoughts, the Prince led her inside.

As soon as she stepped through the doorway, the whole world exploded into light and music and shouting. Blinking to clear her vision, she saw that the main room was ablaze with sunlight streaming from the high, wide windows, scattered torches chasing away shadows in even the remotest corners. An orchestra was placed to the side, already entertaining guests with joyful music, and tables overflowing with fruit and meat and dishes covered half of the reaching floor.

And the guests — as soon as she stepped into the room, she was nearly lost to sight in the melee of hugging, laughing, crying friends. Her hands were grabbed, her cheeks kissed, and she was held so tightly she could barely breathe. Highborn and lowborn, all of her friends were there: Nicole, Ludo, Hoggle, Brian, Chaucer, and even Didymus, with new chain mail and a spotless white uniform for the occasion. She had so many shouted congratulations her ears rang.

Finally, everyone calmed enough to sit down to eat. Sarah couldn’t bring herself to eat much, really. But she laughed, and chattered incessantly. The bright crimson of her wedding dress was beautiful against her pale skin and pearl-studded dark hair. The Prince, garbed in traditional black, never ate or spoke at all. He simply sat, smiling quietly. His eyes never left her face.

Finally, someone (a member of the Ardent, who had all been invited to the feast) began calling for toasts.

Hoggle stood first, a tankard in one hand. The multitude of guests quieted as he climbed to his feet, standing on the bench so that his small stature wouldn’t keep him from being seen. Hoggle nodded towards the Prince and spoke to him directly.

“I’ve never liked you,” he said bluntly. The last of the whispers died, and every face looked, wide-eyed, toward the gnarled gondolier. “In fact, I don’t think I ever will.” Hoggle shifted, turning his gaze to the woman at the Prince’s side. “But I love her,” he continued. “And I always will. So, if she chooses you — that’s good enough for me.” Without another word he sat, raising his mug to hide the tears that threatened to fall from his eyes.

“Ahem.” A rail-thin, stooping figure climbed to his feet, wine in hand. “At the risk of following that eloquence,” Chaucer remarked dryly, “I shall make my own toast. To my Lord and my Lady,” he said, raising his glass high. “Two hearts and minds who have managed to find each other in an increasingly misleading world.” He was silent a moment. “Knowing you both,” he continued softly, “I cannot but be happy at the rightness of your union.” He nodded to them. “Sometimes, we frail mortals actually manage to get things right. This is one of those rare — and most joyous — times.” He sat, blinking rapidly.

Before she could open her mouth, Sarah found that Ludo was standing quietly by the Prince’s side. When his Highness nodded his permission, the large man performed: showing his empty hands to the assembly, and then blowing softly on them, rubbing his huge paws together... and then producing, as if from thin air, a delicate gold circlet set with three black pearls. Gravely, the Prince bent his head forward, allowing Ludo to place it across his brow. Then the buffoon moved over to stand beside Sarah, going through the same motions — and gently placing a band of white gold, set with rose-colored pearls, across her own forehead.

“Thank you, Ludo,” Sarah whispered. He smiled at her, bending down to hold her tightly for a moment before stepping back to his place at the table.

Sir Didymus rose as soon as his large friend sat, the leather of his brand-new boots breaking with the movement. Tears were already streaming down his face, and for several minutes he struggled to find the words. Finally, his shoulder slumped in defeat, and he shook his head. Swiftly raising his glass into the air, he roared, with a powerful voice that should have challenged mythical beasts and commanded entire armies, hoarse with emotion: “Long live the Prince and Princess!”

The room erupted into cheers.

As if this was their cue, the musicians immediately began to play. Turning, Sarah found a familiar face standing expectantly at her side.

Brian bowed. “A dance?”

They were graceful together, sweeping across the dark boards with the perfect ease of friends. He held her lightly and she smiled up at him.

“Let me guess,” he said only for her ears as he returned the smile: “The poetry was a mistake.”

She laughed outright, and his grip tightened to keep her from falling. “No,” she said, still giggling. “Not a mistake, exactly. It was very good, but perhaps --”

“Perhaps I should try it on a girl who isn’t in love with someone else, hmm?” He asked, a bit wryly.

She blushed slightly. “I wasn’t in love with him, then.”

This time, he laughed. “And if you believe that, kitten, I’m happy to see your pretty illusions haven’t suffered in this hard, cruel world.”

“Be nice.”

“Why should I be nice?” He grinned cheekily. “I’m the loser in this little game; don’t I get to throw my weight around a bit?” She pinched him — perhaps less gently than she should have — and he released her, still chuckling. “Such violent, unwomanly behavior — his Highness can have you.”

“I do have her.” An arm reaching around to drape across her waist, his presence beside her. “But I

don't need your permission."

Brian stepped back, holding up his hands defensively. "I wish you both all the happiness in the world," he said, honestly.

"I know." Her Prince's mouth quirked. "That's why you're still alive."

"Ah." Brian nodded wisely. "And here I thought it was my good looks." Grinning, he left them alone.

"I have something for you." His arm fell away, but he took her by the hand.

"You're going to spoil me with all these presents."

"Just one more." He led her out onto a balcony that looked down on the canals below and across the buildings beside them. She could see women drying their hair on the rooftops, children running through the streets below.

Smooth silk slid against her neck, and she turned away from the view. He was standing behind her, fastening a necklace of some sort — she picked up the pendant at one end, the better to inspect it. It was huge — the size of her palm — and very, very old. It was crafted from pure gold, the soft metal almost bending under her light touch: a sculpted owl, its outstretched wings circling behind its head to touch and meld. The silken cord passed under those delicate wings to tie around her neck.

"It's beautiful," she said. "Where did you get it?"

"It's something of a family crest."

She released the pendant, letting it fall against the fabric of her dress. "But I've seen your family's crest, and this --"

"A different part of the family." He held her from behind, draping his arm across her shoulders. "I want you to have it." He kissed her, bending his head to touch where the curve of her neck met the line of her shoulder. She watched the feast inside, silently, eyes on her friends as they moved through shafts of sunlight, dancing between glittering dust motes. She listened to the sound of their laughter, their talk, leaning back against her new husband. She was so happy. It was a physical pain: a tremor and an ache of the heart that made her gasp.

And she knew.

"This isn't real, is it?"

The music halted. Before her, the dancers paused — freezing in place like abandoned marionettes. Their laughter, their talk all died in the air, the silence vibrating like a plucked string. But Sarah hardly noticed. All her attention was on the Prince.

His mouth stopped. He paused, and then drew away from her. "What did you just say?"

Her eyes stung with tears, but she continued. "This isn't real."

He took a step backward, and then another. "You always surprise me, Sarah," he said, sounding as if from very far away, "with your commendable level of perception." And another step.

"No!" She whirled, the weight of her swirling skirts slowing her only marginally as she reached for him. She wrapped her arms around him, pressing her cheek to the rough fabric of his

waistcoat. "Please," she whispered softly. "Don't leave me."

He felt like stone beneath her touch. "How much do you remember?"

"I..."

"How much?"

She squeezed her eyes shut at the raw pain in his voice. "Nothing," she whispered. "But I know this is a dream."

"How?" he asked, the question like a stinging lash. "How could you know? Was this world still not up to your impeccable standards? Hmm? Weren't the courtiers adequately noble? Weren't your surroundings dazzling? Weren't the stars fucking bright enough?"

The torrent of words ceased, and he became deadly calm. "Or was it me?" he asked softly. "Will I never be enough for you?"

"Answer me, Sarah."

She breathed deep, taking in the dark, delicious scent of him. "It's too perfect," she said quietly. "Too wonderful. No one has this much happiness — so pure and perfect, untouched by pain. It can't be real."

For a long moment, he was still. Then he sighed, and the tension flowed out of his body, and he became human warmth again. His hands reached up to cup her face, and he leaned his forehead against her own.

"It can be, for us," he breathed. "We can have this kind of happiness. Here." His thumbs caressed her cheeks, running along her smooth skin. "How did you know I was doing it?"

Sarah laughed lightly. "Because you're the center of the world — my world," she admitted candidly. "Who else could it be?"

"Wicked child." He smiled. "Stay here with me."

"I can't."

"Love --"

"No."

"Sarah." He sighed, wrapping his arms around her. "Reality is harsh, and hard."

"But it's mine." She pulled away from his embrace, and that stubborn streak of independence held her head high, made her eyes flash. "And I won't be cheated of anything. Not even by you."

He gazed at her solemnly. She realized that the sounds of the celebration inside had long since faded away, and that the ballroom was echoingly empty. Indeed; the whole city surrounding them was eerily quiet, with no other person to be seen. The only sound came from the water rushing through the network of canals.

The Prince walked past her to the deserted ballroom. She followed him, watched him throw himself into the chair he had used during the feast. He leaned his arms on the table, hunching over in a strangely defensive posture.

"I don't want to let you go."

“You have to,” she responded simply.

“Give me one good reason.”

“Because I will hate you if you keep me,” she said. “And you will hate yourself.”

He drew a gloved hand over his eyes. “That last is inconsequential,” he murmured. “As for the former — in your precious reality, you hate me already.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“Don’t you?” His glare pinned her to the spot. “I am cruel to you, Sarah,” he spoke evenly. “And you fear me for it.” His wandering gaze took in the splendor of their abandoned surroundings. “This is the only place I am not afraid of losing you. Here, I am not ruled by petty passions.” He laughed, and it sounded too close to a sob. He ran his hands over his face. “Fear, jealousy, pride... they make me a monster.” He took his hands away, and his eyes burned in that too-pale face. “And I will let them, Sarah. It is the only way I can fight for you.”

Sarah could do nothing but shake her head, helplessly.

“And I *am* cruel.” His voice was dark, insidious — the danger that lies in wait, tempting its victim to step just a little closer. He climbed to his feet. “Do you know why I brought you here in the first place?” he asked, the words treacherously soft. Sarah looked up, fear in her eyes. “To buy time. There’s for your sense of romance, Sarah — it was a cheap trick, a dirty way of playing the game.” She winced at the self-loathing in his voice, watching him pace the wooden boards. “All of it. The glory, the beauty, the sheer magnificence — all of it.” He laughed, and it sounded painful. “I even brought your dear friends into the web, to make it more enticing. I gave them back their former sense of self, let them assume human bodies again and trespass into my perfect world. I *shared* you.”

He lashed out, suddenly, kicking a chair so violently it splintered, and Sarah jumped. He restrained himself after that first moment, pulling back, his breathing harsh. “And for what?” he asked himself. “For nothing. Just another shattered illusion.

“Because that’s all it was, Sarah — or at least what it was meant to be.” He looked at her, and there was an unspeakable weariness in his eyes. “You were winning a game I wanted you to lose,” he explained patiently. “You had an advantage I didn’t expect. I needed to rob you of that.”

She swallowed, mouth suddenly dry. “What did I lose?”

He looked away. “Enough for my purposes.”

“Then let me go.”

“No!” he shouted, whirling towards her. “I want you *here!*”

“I can’t stay.”

“Yes, you can,” he spoke through tightly clenched teeth. “Here, you have everything you could possibly want!” He strode over to her, catching both of her hands in his own. She tried to pull away, but he only held on tighter, insisting she listen, that she accept his words. “Why wouldn’t you want to stay? Why wouldn’t you want to live in a place where you are happy, your friends are happy, the entire world is at your feet --”

“A place where I can’t even remember your name!”

Her words, her last desperate defense against his temptation, rang through the empty room. He stilled.

“You will remember,” he promised, voice sounding empty. “Eventually.”

“When?” she demanded, the tears that had threatened to choke her spilling unheeded down her cheeks. “I’ve already pledged my entire life, my *soul* to you! What more can I give?”

He pulled her to him, burying his face in the darkness of her hair, and her fingers dug into his arms. “And if I stay any longer, even just for a few more days,” she whispered brokenly, “I don’t think I could bring myself to leave. Ever.”

His hold on her tightened. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it matters!” She tore away from him. “These things don’t just happen, they mean something!” Her shoulders dropped, and she looked away. “Don’t try to deceive me,” she said quietly, “when you can’t even lie to yourself.”

He shuddered slightly at her words, falling back. Behind him, a strange kind of mock-throne shimmered into existence. Its half-circle shape, draped with purple silk, was insistently familiar to Sarah. He dropped into it, swinging his leg over one armrest and leaning his back against the other, staring into space.

She sank to the floor a few steps away from his throne, crimson skirts billowing around her. For a long time, she contemplated the hands that lay listless in her lap.

“I want the reality,” she finally said. “I prize it higher, with all its sweetness and stings, than any sugar-spun fairytale you can create.” She lifted her eyes to his. “I want you. Every part of you — not just who you are when things are easy to bear. I will not forfeit that. Even if you are cruel to me.”

He looked at her, expressionless. “You didn’t always hold your dreams so cheaply.”

“Dreams must be achieved. They must be worked for, earned through sweat and tears. It’s what makes them so precious. They cannot be simply bestowed — *that* is what makes them cheap.” And then, with a flash of unthinking insight: “You never understood that.”

His eyes were faintly curious. “And you did?”

She smiled wryly to herself. “Not until just now.”

She rose to her feet, if a little unsteadily. “Let me go. Please.”

His eyes were a brilliant sapphire blue. “Don’t leave me, Sarah. Don’t leave me alone, with nothing left of you but a memory.” He let his head fall back, shutting his eyes and speaking so softly, she almost didn’t hear it: “Not again.”

She bit her lip against the urge to promise him she wouldn’t, promise anything he wanted. After she had regained her control, she went to him, stepping up to the dais and bending over her Prince. She kissed him on that tattered throne, her dark hair falling past his face like a curtain. He took her into his arms, cradling her close to him like something precious. She broke away from the kiss, curling up against him.

“I won’t let you win,” he said.

“And I won’t lose,” she replied simply. She turned her head, dark eyelashes brushing against the base of his pale throat. “But you have to let me go.”

He seemed to slump in the chair, the resistance leaving his tense frame. “As you wish.”

The ballroom melted away, its empty glory fading even as she watched. Flaming torches gave way to dripping wax candles, unlit and dusty in the thin, watery sunlight. Wide windows became half-circles cut into thick stone. The scent of incense and myrrh faded, was replaced by dirt and dust and feathers.

And she was alone.

She sat up stiffly, muscles protesting as if she had been lying on the throne for hours. She stretched cautiously; examining the strange, rough clothing she suddenly wore. Feeling bewildered, she climbed to her feet and moved over to the window. It looked out — not onto a beautiful floating city — but onto a dusty sprawl of houses, a forest beyond, and even farther the twisting, treacherous passages of...

The Labyrinth.

Her name was Sarah Williams. Her father... and her mother... and then Karen, and she had been *here* before, she remembered, she had tangled with the Goblin King (*Jareth*, some corner of her mind whispered) and she had to rescue her baby brother Toby — no, wait —

Brian.

It all came back to her in a rush, a bewildering barrage of memories: Brian, seeing Jareth again, Chaucer, Hoggle, Didymus and Ludo, the dragons, the stone garden, the naiads, the pendant, the moat, the Portrait Hall, eating the peach...

Of course, she wasn't just standing there as she was flooded with forgotten knowledge. No, she was moving, scrambling around the room, searching desperately for something she knew was here —

There. She could see the shape of it, hiding — someone had thrown a dirty sheet over it: a clock of thirteen hours. A clock that would tell her how much time — how precious little time — she had left. She threw back the sheet, coughing at the dust it kicked up and squinting to see the clock face.

She stood staring for a moment. Then she dropped the sheet, racing for the door with all the strength left in her body.

She had less than half an hour to save everyone — Brian, her friends, even herself — from the man she loved.

To Sleep...

Once upon a time there was a castle. No: a fortress -- with smooth, sheer walls that rose seamlessly from sandy rock as if they had been carved from it. On one side it was protected by a city, on the other by a dark, deep lake filled with insidious terrors.

The castle-that-was-a-fortress had high, far-reaching turrets. In these turrets were windows, and in one of these windows was a man. No: a prince ...or a King...

A King who cast his eyes, which once held such wicked joy, over the twisting, sprawling stretches of his kingdom. In his mouth was the taste of dust, and of ashes. It was the taste of defeat.

But he would not be defeated.

"Is the prisoner awake?" he asked. He sat, as he was prone to do, on the wide-window ledge, one knee crooked and resting on the smooth stone. One gloved hand lay listless in his lap; the other toyed with a gleaming pendant.

"Yes, your Majesty," a goblin growled, bobbing his head in a show of subservience. Its companion, standing silent, hawked and spat off to one side.

"Good. I want him brought here."

"Yes, your Majesty."

"And the others are all in place?"

"Just as you ordered, your Majesty."

Jareth closed his eyes. "Good. We can begin." For the first time, he turned his crystalline gaze on them. They shrank from the vicious loathing in them that he didn't even bother to hide.

"She is going to run through the Castle and *you* are not to touch her. Let her go as she pleases, and make no effort whatsoever to prevent her from discovering the others. Have I made myself clear?"

"But --" the second goblin spoke the first time -- a skinny fellow with broken teeth and a thin, reedy voice. "But if she finds them --"

"It will not be enough," Jareth cut in, voice rough. "She has twenty-seven minutes, exactly. That is not enough time." He turned away. "Even if she does manage to rescue them, it's the boy she needs. And I will not let her have him."

"Yes, your Majesty," the second one whimpered.

"And if I find that any of you disgusting creatures laid a finger on her, I will remove it and the hand it is attached to. Do you understand?"

They both chorused that they did, nearly tripping over each other in their eagerness to agree.

"Tell the others. And bring in the boy."

The scuttled out of the room as fast as their awkward feet could carry them, pushing their way to the door. Jareth listened as they exited, and when he knew they had left, he sighed deep.

I didn't want to do this.

From down the long corridor, he could hear the sounds of scuffling and fighting as they dragged a reluctant prisoner up the steps. Brian's ragged, desperate curses echoed faintly against the cold stones.

But I will.

Jareth heard as the goblins shoved their half-sobbing charge through the doorway, where he collapsed onto the floor, breathing harshly. Brian raised half-wild eyes to his captor, obvious fear shivering in every part of him.

I will do everything it takes.

"We meet again, my fine feathered."

Brian hugged himself tightly. "What do you want, Jareth?"

Jareth turned, swinging both his legs over the ledge. "There's one last game to be played." He braced himself, both hands gripping the worn stones. "Are you ready?"

The pendant, an archaic warping of silver and gold, swung freely from its cord. Its sinister twistings of metal glimmered in the torchlight.

"Let us begin."

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Sarah ran.

She barely knew where she was going — she let her feet lead her, stumbling and straining down dim, deceptive passageways that doubled back on themselves and coaxed her onward into darkness. The breath tore through her lungs, searing her sides and throat with pain. She scraped her palms raw, catching herself on rough stone whenever she threatened to fall, leaving faint smears of blood behind. Her feet pounded along the hard floors, sending jolts of pain through her legs that threatened to overwhelm her overworked muscles.

And still, she ran.

She halted every time she came to a doorway; throwing open the thick wooden door with enough force to almost wrench her arm out of its socket. As it banged against the opposite wall, she would thrust her head inside, eyes darting — to find nothing. The rooms held dust, dirt, broken toys, crumbling chairs, sooty fireplaces, rusted pots and pans — almost each and every discarded or worthless thing you could think of, but none of her friends. The searches took less than a moment, and she was back to running.

Sometimes the corridors would split into two or three different passageways — when this happened, Sarah didn't stop to think. She couldn't waste that much time. She simply barreled down one of them, not even pausing to consider the consequences of a wrong choice. She had to keep going.

Sarah didn't know how long she'd been looking, or even how much time she had left. She only felt as if she'd been running forever down the close, damp hallways of the Castle. Each moment she had to pause to catch her breath, every step that slowed because of her own tiredness — she felt as if she lost hours when those precious minutes were used for some other purpose besides searching. She wanted to cry, but knew the tears would blind her.

At one point, she finally stumbled through a doorway that held something besides trash and refuse. She paused for an instant, eyes narrowing — it was a book. A thick, leather-bound book lay on the floor, beside the empty fireplace. It was strangely pristine, considering its surroundings, vellum shining and white pages untouched by grime. Strangest of all, she could see it was bound shut — wiry lengths of twine crisscrossing across its surface in order to secure its pages shut. Bewildered, Sarah took a step closer —

-- and shrieked as suddenly the very air attacked her, her mouth and hair and eyes filled with light, battering touches. She held her arms up before her face defensively, squinting so see what exactly her enemy was... only to have her vision almost completely obscured by winged, flimsy grey bodies: moths. She was surrounded by moths, and they were attacking her, flying at her from all directions and becoming entangled in her clothes and hair, scratching at her skin with their tiny feelers, painlessly biting with their toothless mouths.

And now she could see what was really lying in front of the fireplace; not a book after all, but Chaucer. He sprawled out as if senseless, eyes closed. He was the one bound up with twine, the thin ropes digging into the skin at his knobby wrists and ankles. The moths rested on him, too, converging upon his thin, papery skin in a rustling blanket of malicious bodies.

"*Chaucer!*" She threw herself forward, pulling up the neck of her shirt over her mouth so that she could breathe without sucking tiny insects into her lungs. She used one arm as a shield over her eyes, hunching forward and struggling onward through the blizzard of moths. She almost tripped over his bulbous body, but with difficulty managed to kneel down without injuring him. Squeezing her eyes shut, she blindly reached for the wire-like ropes around his wrists.

For an instant, a breath, it was very bad — wings beating incessantly on her skin, tiny bodies managing to crawl underneath her shirt and along her neck. She wanted to open her mouth and scream, but that would have meant choking on a multitude of pests. Mercifully, she managed to feel along the ropes to find the knot where they tied together, and ripped apart Chaucer's bindings, her fingers stinging with the force of effort.

And it stopped.

Cautiously, she opened her eyes. The room was empty, with no bugs in the air or scratching along her skin. Shuddering, she started to untie the twine that bound Chaucer's ankles together, shaking him by the shoulders with one hand as she did so.

Within a moment, he blearily opened his eyes. Seeing her, he sat up, and wrapped his spindly arms around her. "My child," he croaked. "Thank you.

She pulled away. "We don't have much time," she said tersely. Chaucer watched her as he climbed to his feet. She made to stride out the doorway, but he called out to her.

"Stop, child, stop," he said, wincing with the pain of standing. "This is no way to do things. Stop, Sarah, and listen to me."

She whirled on him. "What happened to you and the others, after I fell into the moat?"

He wheezed, sitting back on his haunches. "We managed to reach the shore. Jareth's guards were waiting for us, of course. He took us prisoner, and then bound us all up in spells, as you saw before."

"But I thought —"

"We were also in your dreamworld," he interrupted, guessing her question. "Mentally, as were

you. Physically, we were kept prisoner in our separate rooms."

"How did you get there, though?" she demanded.

"We're Jareth's subjects, Sarah. His creatures, his to deal with however he pleases — even if that means casting us into the throes of a very elaborate — and convincing — illusion. He needs no poisoned peaches to ensnare us."

Her mouth quirked. "I bet Hoggle wasn't happy about that."

"On the contrary, he was furious. But there was nothing he could do — nothing any of us could do."

"Do you know where the others are being kept?"

He hesitated a moment. "Yes."

She turned to exit the doorway again. "Then let's go."

"Sarah." He climbed to his feet with difficulty. "Sarah, I understand you wish to rescue the others, and I applaud your intentions. But you are severely pressed for time, I expect. The only way you can win is if —"

"Shut up!" She whirled on him, and he started to see her white, strained face. She was shaking as she stood before him, fists clenched and arms held rigidly at her sides. After a moment, she spoke again. "I'm sorry," she said. "But you can't expect me to consider that. Not if the others are trapped like you were — in pain, maybe, expecting me to come and get them —"

"They will understand."

"No." She set her jaw. "I won't let him do this," she whispered. "Not to them, and not to me. I refuse to play by his rules."

Chaucer sighed deeply, knowing it was hopeless. "Then we had better get moving." He began to walk out the door, but halted when he found that Sarah wasn't following. Instead, she was staring at where he had lain before the fireplace — where, he saw, something was shimmering into existence.

Sarah walked over to it, kneeling in the soot and ashes. She picked it up in one hand. Over her shoulder, Chaucer could just about see that it was a dark blue glove. Meant for a lady's hand, a white rose was embroidered in the palm. A seed pearl glowed like an ember at its heart.

"You're not going to make this easy, are you?" he heard her whisper, running her fingers over the satin material.

"My child?"

She got up, letting the glove fall back to the ground where it crumpled like a fallen bird. Without looking at him she marched out the doorway.

"Come on," she called. "We don't have much time."

Things were so much easier, now that she had Chaucer to lead the way. She wasn't stumbling blindly through the menacing passages, but diligently following her guide, who moved with grim purpose. They still set a heart-racing pace, but for the first time Sarah felt hope. A nervous energy lent strength to her tired limbs, buoying them with a jittery excitement that made her shiver as they

sped through the Castle.

Through Chaucer's direction they began to climb steadily upwards. Sarah herself had been unconsciously barreling towards the bowels of the Castle, throwing herself headlong into subterranean passageways and forgotten chambers lodged deep into the earth. Chaucer reversed that process, forcing her to climb higher and higher up steep stairways into larger, airier corridors that boasted wide windows.

And the goblins.

Sarah realized with a jolt that she hadn't actually seen a goblin since the battle in the City, all those years ago. There had been no encounters with their kind on this trip — not unless you counted the little stone-switching hobgoblins, which she didn't. These goblins were an entirely different breed altogether. They were a bit taller than six inches, for instance, and infinitely more threatening. They wore bulky, rusting armor that clanked noisily with their every step, brandishing pikes and axes and scimitars in their gnarled fists. They came in a variety of shapes and sizes. Some of them were stout and bulky, barely up to Sarah's waist, peering at her with little piggy eyes from beneath pot helmets, jowls wobbling. Others were rail-thin, stretched out like rubber bands. They drooped, leaning on lances as if they couldn't support their own height. Some had snouts, or hooves, or horns — but none of them made any move at all to stop the two interlopers.

"Chaucer," she gasped, as they struggled to keep up their breakneck speed, "why aren't they attacking us?"

"Hmm?" He took a moment to see where she gestured. "Oh. Them. Probably don't have any specific orders, and so are at something of a loss. Goblins are rather harmless in the essentials," he remarked. "Rather like simple machines. Just point in the right direction, and give them a push."

Whether or not this was true, Sarah couldn't figure out — but their lack of interference was just another reason to hope that maybe, just maybe, they could get through this.

They found Hoggle minutes later, disguised as his bundle of jewels. As soon as Sarah stepped over the threshold, the room began to flood. She and Chaucer had to struggle together to lift up the unconscious Hoggle, keeping his head safely above water as Sarah's nimble fingers went to work on the knots in the twine that secured his own wrists and ankles. The moment they were undone the water receded, leaving them all soaked up to the waist.

As they both helped Hoggle up onto his feet and out of the room, Sarah spotted a flash of color out of the corner of her eye. There was a small table tucked discretely into one corner, and resting upon its rough surface was a white linen napkin. Lying on the napkin, in an extreme contrast of red against white, was a sculpted candy strawberry too perfect to be real.

Next was Ludo and Didymus, imprisoned together (naturally). The spell was a little different, this time — Sarah didn't know if it was because they were reaching the end, or simply as a kind of sadistic tribute to the two souls he held in thrall. Instead of inanimate objects, Ludo and Didymus were enchanted as, respectively, a field mouse and a hawk. And, of course, the moment Sarah stepped into the room the rotting tapestries that hung on the walls burst into flames. Coughing with the smoke, Hoggle and Chaucer managed to catch the Ludo-mouse (yet another change in the spell) and undo the tiny collar of twine knotted around his furry neck. Meanwhile, Sarah desperately tried to soothe the panicked Didymus-hawk, thrown into a raging frenzy with fear of the licking flames. Arms upraised to defend herself from his raking claws, she eventually got close enough to dart in and rip off the twin jesses looped about the hawk's feet, catching Didymus as he transformed in mid-air. She set the bewildered fox-like creature on his own two feet, coughing out the last of the smoke from her lungs as the surrounding fires died. The five of them shuffled out the door, but not before Sarah glimpsed a shining circlet of white gold, set with three rosy pearls,

lying innocently in the middle of the smoke-blackened floor.

*No*, she thought as she resumed the search. *No. I won't let you.*

They ran desperately through the remaining hallways, shouting Brian's name until their throats were stinging. Corridors upon corridors yielded nothing but empty rooms, vacant of even the evidence of living she had glimpsed in the lower levels of the Castle. Finally, stumbling and weary, they found themselves once again in the throne room. There was no one there, either — save a few startled chickens which ran squawking for cover.

Gasping for breath, pain lancing through her sides, Sarah dropped down onto the floor to rest. She threw a quick glance at the unnatural clock, still resting off to one side. They had accomplished the impossible, rescuing everyone from the spells in twenty minutes, exactly. Which left exactly seven minutes to find Brian, free him, run back to the Portrait Hall, and escape the Labyrinth.

*You're not going to make it*, a voice whispered inside.

"Sarah, look!"

She whipped her head around to see Hoggle, gesturing wildly. She turned to see what he was pointing at... another staircase, with thin, shallow steps, immediately opposite the throne itself. It was brightly lit by the sunshine that poured in from above and from a tall window. It was also sickeningly familiar. She had walked up those exact same stairs three years ago, and for years afterward in her nightmares.

"Did you look up there, Sarah?" Hoggle asked, subdued. He recognized the spot, too.

"No," she said, feeling a yawning emptiness open up inside her. "They weren't there before."

"Well, then," Chaucer said briskly as he made to walk across the room. "Having eliminated all other possibilities..." After taking a few steps, he hesitated, looking curiously at the other behind him, who hadn't stirred a step. "Ahem." He turned to face them, crossing skinny arms over his enormous paunch. "Am I missing something?"

"Twas at yonder staircase we last saw our lady," Sir Didymus supplied softly, "before she went forward into battle."

"What? What are you talking about, she's right —" Suddenly, the light dawned on Chaucer. "Oh. Oh, you mean... ah. Last time. I see."

"Ludo scared," the big beast rumbled, and Sarah stood to take his massive paw in her own hands.

"I know, Ludo," she said quietly. "I'm scared, too." Standing on her tiptoes, she managed to kiss him on his rough cheek. He hugged her tightly, almost lifting her off the floor, before sadly letting her go.

"Wait a minute, wait a *minute*," Hoggle growled. "If you think you're goin' back in there alone, *again*, you gotta 'nother think comin'!"

"I have to, Hoggle," she said dully, kneeling to hug Sir Didymus. The foxy creature looked up at her, clearly unhappy, his one good eye gleaming.

"If thou dost insist, my lady," he said.

"I insist."

With absolute aplomb, he kissed her hand and swept a bow, removing his plumed hat to do so. "Is there any task you would charge me, lady, before you depart?" he asked, looking up. "Any at all?"

"Look after Ludo. Make sure Chaucer gets back to his home safely — the Red and Blue guards like to play tricks on him, okay?" She hesitated. "And try to visit Hoggle once in a while," she whispered in his pointed ears. "He gets lonely all by himself."

"'Twill be done as you have charged, fair maiden."

"Thank you, noble sir." She stood, brushing off the dust from her jeans.

"No!" Hoggle roared, moving to block her as she made to mount the stairs. "No way! I'm not lettin' you go off by yourself again!"

"I agree with Hoggle," Chaucer said stoutly, standing resolutely beside the dwarf. He winced at the statement. "Though only out of necessity," he muttered.

Sarah looked at them both. "You guys, I have to do this. And I have to do this alone."

"Why?" they wailed together.

"Because!" Exasperated, she sat on her heels as so to be face-to-face with them. "You've both done so much already, don't you see that? Chaucer," she said, turning to the scholarly demon. "I could have never made it through the Labyrinth without you — never. And just now, finding everyone in the Castle. Do you honestly think I could have pulled that off on my own, with the time we had? No." She sighed, reaching for the hand of the misshapen dwarf in front of her. "And Hoggle... you were my strength. I know you felt bad about what happened last time, but you more than made up for any past mistakes." She squeezed his hand and, studiously not looking at her, he gave a gentle squeeze in return. "And Ludo and Didymus, too. You've all done so much." Sarah drew a deep breath. "But *this*," she began, and the way her voice shook let them know how afraid she was, "this, I have to do on my own. With no one else's help." She was quiet for a moment. "I made my choice when I came back to the Labyrinth," she said. "And now I have to bear the consequences of that choice. I love you all, so much," she said thickly. "I can't ask you to fight *all* my battles for me."

Releasing her friend's hand she ran up the stairway before they could stop her, hot tears blinding her. She took the steps two and three at a time, until their protestations faded behind her into silence. She walked up the stairs, feeling déjà vu so strong she could almost taste it, and out onto the platform.

And *reeled*.

It was the Escher room, just like three years ago — endless and impossible staircases that trickled along the ceiling and dripped down the walls, spiraling into oblivion. They thwarted the eye, tracing a headache on the viewer's skull until they wanted to scream to take it back, it wasn't right. It was the same room that had shocked her to the core, years ago. Only this time Jareth had done something different.

The room was filled with mirrors.

They were everywhere. They covered the walls in shining sheets, flowing over every step. Instead of an inverted maze of stone, it was one of mirror-reflections. All kinds of different mirrors. Some had a slightly greenish cast to them, others yellow or blue. Some were warped, their rippling reflections incongruous with their silk-smooth surfaces. But it was a room of mirrors, of illusions.



Whenever Sarah turned her head, thousands wearing her face — whether distorted beyond belief or a clear-cut image — mimicked her, unconsciously following the movement.

It turned the room, initially confusing and chaotic, into a kind of hell. She couldn't see where she was going, couldn't make out where she was coming from — she could barely distinguish the end of one step from the beginning of another. Everything was mirrors, a fluid and deceptive visage that shifted and kaleidoscoped with her every move. Infinitely careful, she began to pick her way down the first flight of steps, feeling along the steps with her foot.

"Brian?" she called, voice echoing and bouncing like light off the mirrors and around the room.  
"Brian, are you in here?"

She heard something. It wasn't clear — just a muffled explosion right beyond her field of vision: the obvious sound of someone trying to scream through a gag. Excited, she tried to speed up her progress — and slipped, stumbling on the slick glass surface. The room gulped; her own mirror images swelling and contracting as she was swallowed into that infinity of representation. Before she knew it, she was tumbling down the steps. She had to close her eyes against the chaos of her vision as she rolled down that steep stairway, trying desperately to gain purchase on the slippery surfaces.

She hit the bottom and groaned. She had protected her head with her arms as she fell, but everything else — her body already weary and worn from her trek through the Castle -- felt bruised from hitting step edges and the resisting planes of glass. Making sure she was on a wide surface, she sat up, blinking to clear her eyes of their multi-faceted view. She gave it up as a lost cause, struggling to her feet.

"Brian!" she called again. "Brian, can you hear me?"

The choked sounds came again, directly to her left. Cautious, this time, Sarah lowered herself to her knees and crept along the edge of a wall. She was careful to feel her way along the floor as she crawled around the corner to see —

Brian.

"Oh, God," she breathed. "Oh, man, Brian, I am so glad to see you..." She scuffled over to him, denim jeans sliding along the glassy surface beneath her. Her sweating hands squeaked against the slick sheets of mirror, but she used the rubber soles of her shoes to keep from slipping, scurrying over to where her friend lay. He was bound with the same thin ropes as the others, the twine cutting deeply into his flesh. On top of that, a spotless white handkerchief had been stuffed into his mouth, and another one tied over it and around his head to serve as a gag. Thinking violent thoughts about a certain Goblin King, Sarah scowled and bent her head to pick apart the knots. Using her nails to rip them undone, she got his hands free in a matter of moments. As he rubbed them briskly together to get the blood flowing she reached around to pull the gag off his head. When she had done that, he spat out the second handkerchief, shoving the damp cloth over to one side.

"Hey, beautiful," he said, with a ghost of his usual grin as he bent to untie his ankles. They were tucked safely into a corner, but the rippling and distorted reflections surrounding them still gave Sarah a headache. Brian looked just as he had in the dream — dressed in his normal jeans and t-shirt, of course, and a little gaunt around the eyes, but otherwise her Brian. Wincing, he managed to wrench off the ties from his ankles, stomping his feet on the shining mirrors beneath. "Took you long enough to get here, didn't it?"

Sarah threw herself at Brian, wrapping her arms around him tightly. Hugging Brian so hard he could barely breathe, she admitted to herself for the first time how much she had missed him: his

laugh, his easy manner, the *stupid* things he said. She had come so close to losing him... but it was okay. It was okay, now, they could go, and they could get out, they were safe...

She realized she was babbling like an idiot, half-sobbing, clutching at the material of his shirt as she spoke, clinging to him as if for dear life. He laughed a little, putting his arms around her and rubbing her back.

"It's okay, baby, it's okay," he said softly. "Everything's alright. I'm here. Give yourself a minute."

She gave a soggy chuckle, turning her face up towards him. "I know," she said, resting her head on his shoulder. "It's just everything that's happened, and I feel like it's been forever since I saw you -- God, at school. Can you imagine going back to school, after this?"

He smiled at her. "No," he whispered. His eyes darkened, and he used the gentlest touch of his fingers to coax her chin upwards. He couldn't resist kissing those smiling lips, taking her mouth in his. That was his mistake.

Because then she knew, of course.

Sarah wrenched away so violently she almost sent herself skidding along the slippery glass, her head throbbing with the sudden movement. Around her reflection-Sarahs did the same, their eyes wide with her own shock and betrayal. She stared at him, breathing heavily through her mouth. She snarled.

"You fucking bastard," she spat out. "Where is he? *Where's Brian?*"

Mismatched eyes laughed back at her, but the pale, aristocratic hand he rose to push back rough-cut blonde hair trembled slightly. The mirrors finally relinquished the truth: a multitude of Jareths, in Brian's clothing, faced her rage with a thin, vicious smile of their own.

"You won't find him," they informed her. "And even if you did, you won't win."

She stood, desperate to control her body as it shook from sheer weariness. "I guess you've made sure of that."

"Of course," came the soft reply. He stood, and the pretenders around him followed his lead.

"You surprised me the last time. Your devotion to your brother was quite... unexpected. But I have learned not to underestimate you."

"Fuck you."

Eyes narrowed. "Don't talk to me like that, Sarah."

"*Fuck you! Brian!*" she screamed, turning, fingers grabbing futilely at mirrored corners. "*Brian!*"

She lost all sense of caution, racing along beside mirror-stairways, not even careful where she walked or whether there was solid ground beneath her feet. Idly, she wondered whether Jareth would care if she fell and broke her neck. She shoved that thought aside and concentrated on finding Brian. She could almost feel the seconds slipping past her, the opportunities for escape fading away even as she called desperately for her friend, voice cracking with the strain. The surrounding Sarahs — on the walls, ceiling, floor, and even shadowed corners — seemed to laugh at her pitiful desperation.

She almost missed him -- it was a pretty close call. After all, they were both dark-haired, of roughly the same height, and she was half-crazed and jumping out of her own skin, she was so frantic. It would have been easy to casually dismiss him as one of her reflections — because that's

all he was. A reflection.

She stopped suddenly, arrested in her tracks. Slowly, she turned her head — and saw him. There was Brian, the real Brian. She should have known better, before. This Brian was exhausted and dirty from sleeping in the oubliette, his clothing wrinkled and a ragged beard beginning to show on his chin. He was reflected in the mirror right across from her. She whirled, joyous, expecting to see him standing behind... but there was nothing. Frowning, she turned back to the mirror — and for the first time, realized it wasn't showing her reflection, it was the only one that didn't show her reflection. Just Brian. And when Brian saw her eyes on him again, he pressed his hands up against the glass. She could see the skin flatten and spread as it hit the solid surface between them.

He was inside.

Hesitantly, Sarah approached the mirror. She touched her own fingers to the glass, lightly, pulling away at the unresponsive coolness. Brian shouted silently at her, mouth working furiously. He began to pound his fists against the clear divider between them, but — placing her hand back on the smooth surface — she could feel no answering vibration through the material. He wasn't on the other side of anything; he was truly inside the mirror. It was a spell.

He was trapped.

Sarah stared with growing horror. There was no way to get him out. He wasn't behind anything, so it wasn't as if she could somehow managed to break through the mirror, or peel back the glass to get him free. It was a spell, and she had no magic — she couldn't undo whatever Jareth had done. Brian became more and more anxious as he read the expression on her face, shouting hysterically, noiselessly, from his mirrored prison. Sarah choked on a sob. Knowing she was defeated, she couldn't bear to look at the friend she had utterly, miserably failed. She turned from him, hunching her shoulders against that despairing expression.

Only to see Jareth, tucked into the shadows a safe distance away from her. He was back in his customary hangings of black, delicate falls of lace spilling over his wrists and at his throat. The pendant rested against the iridescent armor that covered his chest. It shone softly in the ever-reflected light that bounced continuously between his mazes of mirrors. He gazed at her somberly.

She lunged at him. She didn't even think about it, she barely knew what she was doing — but she sincerely wished, for a few frightening moments, that she could tear his throat out. She flew at him, fists striking against his arms and his face and any part of him that she could reach. Her nails scratched uselessly against his armor, but then found skin, catching his pale cheek — and he had enough of her hysterics. Mouth thinning, he caught her wrists effortlessly in his own gloved hands, twisting them around and against her back. She cried out in pain, and he transferred both wrists to one gloved hand while the other arm wrapped around her waist, bringing her against him. He ruthlessly crushed her attempts at resistance, griping her so tightly tears of pain came into her eyes.

"Don't fight me, Sarah," he warned, as he braced himself behind her. And then — she could feel him lean his cheek, so softly, against the dark masses of her hair. "Please."

"You're cruel, you're so cruel," she raged, despising the fact that a few tears leaked from her eyes. "I hate you!"

"Perhaps," he answered in a strained voice. "But I finally have you, Sarah. I will not let you go."

Abruptly, she gave up, slumping dejectedly in his hold. Bereft of hope, she stood staring into the mirrors at their feet. Jareth waited a moment, making sure this wasn't another ploy. But when she remained so defenseless, so vulnerable, he picked her up like a child: one arm underneath her

knees, the other supporting her back. She offered no resistance. Jareth bent his head, briefly resting his lips on her flushed forehead. He stepped over mirrors, ignoring the flow and ebb of their reflections as he moved through that mirrored space. Gently, ever so gently, he carried her over to Brian. He stopped in front of the prisoner, paying no attention to the young man's grief-stricken expression.

"He won't be unhappy, Sarah," the Goblin King murmured into her hair. "He'll live within his dreams. There are some who would kill for such a fate."

She turned away. "Put me down. Please."

Wordlessly he complied, setting her back down on the ground with infinite care. But he kept his hands on her waist, allowing no escape. Sarah turned herself around to face the friend trapped within a reflection.

"And me?" she asked, meeting Brian's broken gaze. His mouth, loose and trembling, pleaded for her help. But she had no way to help him. "I'll become a ghost, or something."

Jareth's arms further encircled her waist, holding her close. "I would never do that to you," he promised. "As long as you stay here, with me, I will never keep you to our bargain."

"What if I don't want to stay?"

"Why wouldn't you?" Placing his hands on her shoulders, he turned her away from Brian and made her meet his own gaze. "Imagine it, Sarah. Rule by my side, reign over a world of absolute fantasy with every wish granted and every dream come true. It's everything you've ever wanted."

She didn't respond. He brought his gloved hands up to her face, a thumb caressing the line of her mouth. "I've stolen your soul to keep you with me, in a way." A grin tugged at his thin lips. "Surely that appeals to your romantic sensibilities."

"It isn't romance," she said, not moving from his touch. "It's captivity."

He stilled, his hands falling away. "It's all I know."

She sighed, leaning forward, falling into his arms. He accepted her surrender, holding her gently as she leaned her cheek against the unyielding material of his armor. One gloved hand smoothed her hair, as if she were a child that had just cried herself to sleep. Sarah closed her eyes.

"I never meant to take you through this." He spoke so softly his voice barely reached her ears.

"Really?" she asked, pliant within the circle of his arms.

"Truly," he acknowledged. "I never expected you to get this far," he said, wryly amused. "You are forever surprising me, Sarah."

She sighed, eyes still closed. "That's good, I guess."

"It's wonderful." He was quiet for a moment. "But no," he continued, "I never wanted to go this far. What I wanted was... I warned you reality was harsh, didn't I?"

"Yes. You did."

He sighed, his grip slackening as the tension flowed out of his frame. "I'm sorry," he said finally.

She lifted her head to look up at him. "It's alright." One of his hands came up to trace along her

cheek. "I'm sorry, too." He smiled — openly, warmly, the only real smile she had ever seen on his face.

Her heart broke.

But it was too late, now. She could hear the clock whirring as it prepared to strike thirteen. Her fingers were already closing around the delicate silken cord on which his pendant hung —

*("All we know is, it is an artifact of incredible power.")*

-- snapping it off with practiced ease (after all, she'd done this before) and turning away from him in the same fluid motion --

*("The exact opposite power of that which fuels the Labyrinth...")*

-- because she didn't have magic, she couldn't fight a spell... at least, not on her own --

*("He holds the greatest threat to the Labyrinth around his own neck!")*

-- and she dashed the pendant against the mirror with every bit of strength left in her body.

The world shattered.

The entire castle shook, foundations dancing merrily beneath her feet. The walls shivered, the staircases hiccupped, the mirrors rustled — it was as if the fortress, after taking a long nap, was finally shaking itself awake. The mirror cracked, of course. With the sound of tiny bells crashing together, slivers of glass flew everywhere as they launched themselves into the air, diving in arcs of reflected light. Sarah pitched toward the floor, the roiling of the stones beneath unbalancing her and driving her to her knees. She hid her face from the flying glass, feeling crumbs shower against her back. The ground rumbled, growled, screeched. More mirrors broke — she could hear them cracking musically, far above her head — and shattered glass rained down on them. And the clock tolled and tolled and tolled, the sound rolling over their heads like a call to arms. Existence jumped and pirouetted to that tune.

After a few minutes, thankfully, it subsided. Cautiously, Sarah lifted her head. The ground still grumbled, faintly, the stones beneath her feet shuddering at the sound, but the worse seemed to be over. And Brian was free.

He had fallen right beside her. She only had to sweep away some shining debris to step to his side, coughing through the pungent smell of burnt glass and warmed mercury. Stooping, she gently shook his arm.

"Brian?"

He lay on his side. When she touched him his eyes snapped open, wide and terrified.

"Brian?" She spoke softer, this time, afraid to spook him. "It's Sarah."

He sat up. He looked at her, pupils dilated with shock. Suddenly he grabbed for her, crushing her too him. After a moment of surprise she hugged him back. She expected to be exhilarated. They had won. But all she felt was sad sense of relief.

"It's okay." Exactly who she was reassuring, she couldn't tell. She could still see herself reflected in the broken shards at their feet, her face wan. "We're going home."

After a minute she managed to disentangle herself from his embrace. With a reassuring smile, she

stood. He watched closely, eyes begging her to stay by his side. But she had something to do.

Another figure lay sprawled a few feet away, this one swathed in cobwebbed fabric of deep black. His long limbs stretched out on the floor, legs encased in high boots, arms covering his face. She knew, with a distant sense of regret, that when the world had fallen to pieces he had made to move to shelter her.

Hesitantly, she reached over to touch his motionless shoulder. No response. She crept closer; kneeling on splintered glass to peer at his drawn, white face. "Are you alright?" She took his gloved hand in her own, absently. "Can you —"

His arm shot out, slamming into her chest and brutally shoving her away from him. With a gasp, she fell into the broken mirror across from them, her back scraping against remnants of glass.

"Hey!" she heard Brian shout. "Don't touch her!"

Winching at the pain, she opened her eyes — and the breath caught in her throat. Jareth had rolled onto his back, cushioned from the splinters by his thick cloak. But he was in pain — terrible, horrible pain. He gasped, eyes screwed shut, balled fists clutching at his heart, gritting his teeth against some undeniable agony. Bewildered, she made as if to stand and walk over to him... and then as she put her hand on the floor, something bit into it, lancing pain along her palm. Shocked, she looked down to see the broken pieces of what had once been a sinister coupling of gold and silver.

The pendant, lying shattered on the ground.

She felt the bottom drop out of her stomach. Her eyes darted back to the Goblin King. He struggled in silent anguish, surrounded by pieces of his own pain in the ragged shafts of mirrors. What was it Chaucer had said?

*("We can't survive without dreams. Not the real, true dreams...")*

*And if I destroyed his only dream?*

"Oh my God," she whispered to herself. "What have I done?"

That, Jareth heard. He turned his head toward her, eyes glinting with misery. Another wave of torment seemed to hit him, for he clenched his teeth as if to keep from screaming aloud. The ground rumbled beneath them both.

"I wasn't even suppose to have it," Jareth gasped out, almost laughing. "And now look where it's gotten me."

"No!" Sarah leapt to her feet and was at his side in a second. He pulled away from her, snarling as he leaned against a fragmented wall. One arm curled defensively against the agony in his chest — like a wild animal that can't bear to be touched when in pain. The wall against his back shuddered, and a few more mirrors cracked with musical dissonance.

Sarah halted where she stood, one arm outstretched, still reaching for him. "No," she cried, low and soft. "I didn't mean to hurt you!"

He laughed again. "Doesn't erase the fact," he murmured, "that you just did."

"Don't go near him, Sarah." Brian was at her side, fingers encircling her arm, holding her back. "It's a fucking trick. Just watch."

"Let go of me," trying to wrench herself out of his grasp. She would have succeeded had she not been so worn out from the past half hour that she could barely stand. They struggled, but eventually Brian ended up holding her firmly by the arms as she strained to reach the fallen king.

Jareth watched them both from beneath half-lowered lashes. There was a steady vibration, now, in the ground beneath him and the walls surrounding. He could feel it, even as the numbness began to seep into his body.

"The Castle is going to collapse," he remarked, conversational.

It didn't give the two children much pause. Sarah still struggled in Brian's grip, and the young man glared at Jareth. "Stay the hell away from us," he said, full of mistrust. "You come near us, and I'll cut you open, do you understand?"

"If you hold her still," Jareth only replied, "I can send you both home."

"No!" That from Sarah, who managed another desperate burst of energy. She almost pulled free - — really, quite impressive, considering the shape she was in. As it was, Brian had to yank her around sharply, fingers digging into her arms as he turned her to face him.

"Why are you doing this?" he hissed. "Are you that stupid? It's a trick! Just like the dreamworld! You think this is any less of a lie?"

"Let go of me," she seethed. "Now, Brian!"

"No." There was a terrible determination in his face. "You obviously have no idea what the hell is going on. Sarah, listen to me," he said, voice urgent. "You don't know what you're doing!"

"I know what I'm doing," she said. Her eyes met his. "I always knew," she continued steadily, "exactly what I was doing. Even in the dream."

Brian stared at her for a long moment. "No way," he said, trembling. "No fucking way." He wrenched her around again, drawing her in close to the circle of his arms. "The only reason she'd choose you," he said raggedly to the Goblin King, "is if she'd been drugged, tricked, or fucking bespelled! And you know it!"

"Of course I do," Jareth said. "Why do you think I started this charade? But if you don't get her to calm down, you're both going to die."

"No," Sarah choked out, still trying to twist her arms out of Brian's hold. "I'm not leaving you, don't you dare send me away! Jareth!"

He had been pulling himself upright: a slow, excruciating process, impossible if not for the support of the wall behind him. The pain was less, now — but the lack of sensation in his limbs, that was a bit worrying. At the mention of his name, hearing it from her for the first time... Jareth looked up, and his face was cold.

"Hold her still," he said tersely. "Otherwise, it won't work."

If anything, Sarah struggled harder at his command. Brian hesitated. Around them more mirrors shattered, fell, dissolved above their heads in a crescendo of disharmony. The walls started to tremble, and the floor beneath their feet pitched like the deck of a storm-tossed ship before subsiding. For the first time a hint of doubt entered Brian's eyes. He nodded warily, adjusting his hold on the writhing girl in his arms.

Jareth held out his hand. It shook rather badly. Shrugging, he began to concentrate.

"Let me go!" Sarah was on the verge of hysterics, tossing her head from side to side as she realized what was happening — and how powerless she was to stop it. She pulled one arm free, straining toward the Goblin King. He had no idea what she intended to do, but it didn't matter. He struck at the outstretched hand, sparing none of his failing strength in the violent motion. She gasped and stumbled at the rejection; it gave her enough pause for Brian to capture her back up in his arms, pinning her arms to her sides.

Sarah watched as Jareth, now a distant stranger, curled his fingers inward to his palm, as if ready to release some power. His eyes chanced to meet her wild ones — and he hesitated.

She stilled in Brian's grasp. "I'm sorry," she whispered brokenly. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

For an instant that cold gaze thawed.

"I know," he said. Then his concentration turned inward.

*"Jareth!"*

He opened up his hand, and they were gone.

As if that were a silent signal, the castle walls began to shake in earnest. The ceiling broke apart, huge bricks dislodging and tumbling down towards the earth, taking out structures as they went. Sheets of mirrors crumpled like paper, falling away from the stairs in rainbows of prismatic light. They crashed to earth like comets, splintering upon contact into showers of fragmented glass.

Jareth slid to the floor, tired of fighting his own helplessness. Idly, he tilted his head up. Through the broken ceiling he could glimpse patches of the evening sky: cold, clear stars shining against the darkness of the night.

Without ceremony, the Goblin King died.

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For Brian, reality faded into existence slowly. Jareth had only so much left to send them home with. It was a tired process — first the dim shape of things, as if his eyes were adjusting to total darkness. Then light bled into those shapes, and color... it seemed an excruciatingly slow development while it happened, but when it was over he blinked in startled surprise.

He heard the campus clock chime in the new day.

He wasn't holding Sarah anymore. He wondered if that were Jareth's doing, or the magic's. It didn't really matter. The way it ended up, when Brian was fully conscious of being back, he was standing amidst the mess of his papers and his books, surrounded by the plush red seats of the audience. Sarah, on the other hand... Squinting, Brian could see that she was onstage. She knelt before the gilt-edged mirror: head bowed and hair falling over her face like a veil. He walked over, picking his way through the audience and hopping up onto the stage. He hesitated before touching her shoulder, but the eyes she turned on him were clear.

"You okay?" she asked.

He looked down at himself. The dirt, the rips and tears in his clothing — it was all gone. So were his bruises, and the half-healed scratch from that damn owl attacking him. He rubbed his chin absently to find it smooth and shaven. There was sign at all of his days spent in the darkness of the oubliette — only that he felt a weariness that seemed to sink into the marrow of his very bones.

"Sure," he said. "I just need a long shower. You?"

"I'm fine." She turned her head back to the mirror. She confronted her reflection, as if trying to divine the depths of its thoughts. "He's dead, isn't he?"

Brian swallowed. "Yeah," he said. "I think so."

Her head dropped down again. Her shoulders began to shake, and he knelt down so he could comfort her — only to find she was laughing.

Then she began to scream. She screamed and she screamed and screamed — she screamed until there was no more breath left in her body, and then the darkness took her as she collapsed upon the stage.

... Perchance to Dream

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Nikki was twisting her tube of lipstick, pouting her lips apply the vivid crimson shade, when the door slammed open. She jumped and narrowly missed smearing her cheek with a streak of color. Hissing with exasperation, she capped the lipstick as she turned, scowling, ready to bawl out her roommate — and stopped short.

Brian Harr was standing in the doorway, breathing heavily and looking as if he was ready to keel over. Sarah was slung over his shoulder in a fireman's carry. Her eyes were closed, and she looked half-dead.

"Jesus Christ!" Nikki yelled, leaping to her feet. "What have you two been up to?"

"Shut up, Nikki."

"The hell I will! What happened to you guys? You both look trashed!"

"Something like that," he muttered. Grimacing, he managed to stumble over to the bed before dropping her dark-haired roommate. Sarah landed safely on her own mattress, bouncing slightly on the springs, but her eyes never even twitched. Brian yanked the covers out from under her, and made as if to cover her with the blanket.

"Wait, wait," Nikki interrupted. "Get her shoes off, first." They worked together, each untying one of Sarah's sneakers and kicking them underneath the bed before managing to get the unconscious girl under her sheets and blankets. When they were done, Nikki stood back and studied her roommate.

Sarah looked terrible. She didn't look like she'd been through any physical hardship — no blood, sweat, or dirt — but she just looked... terrible. Her face was too white — it made the dark circles under her eyes stand out in ghoulish contrast. She murmured something as she slept, too soft to be heard, tossing her head a little as if to avoid whatever dream held her in its grip.

Brian made as if to slink out the door, but Nikki skipped ahead of him and barricaded the doorway.

"Nuh uh," blocking him with outstretched arms. "Not until you tell me what's going on. Sarah went to get her notebook *hours* ago. It's past midnight, did you know that? And I waited and waited and waited for her to get back... I totally skipped out on my friends, I was so worried. I go back to sleep for a little, and when I wake up, she's still not home! Jesus, I nearly called the campus cops! And *you* weren't in your room, either, and your housemate didn't know where you were —"

"We're both fine," Brian interrupted. "Now, will you get out of the way?"

Nikki crossed her arms. "I know 'fine'," she said tartly. "I've seen 'fine.' We're good buds. You two — you are not 'fine.'"

Brian sighed gustily, leaning against the wall for support. "Listen, Nikki," he said. "We really are fine... at least, we're okay now. As for the rest —" He looked back at the sleeping girl in the bed. "We had a fight," he improvised. "It got messy. Sarah cried."

“Did you hit her?” Nikki asked in a dangerous tone.

“No! Damn, Nikki, you know me!”

“Then why is she out cold?”

He avoided her eyes. “Stress,” he said shortly. “She has a test tomorrow, right? And with auditions next week, and just... it’s her first semester at college. Lots of people lose it. Right?”

Her eyes narrowed, and she gave him a hard look. “Yeah,” she said finally. “They do. But when she wakes up, I’m asking her side of the story.”

“Fine with me.” He made as if to brush past her, then hesitated. “Nikki,” he began, voice low.

“Go easy on her. She really... she really has had a hard time. You know,” he hedged.

“Schoolwork and stuff.”

Nikki rolled her eyes, stepping aside so he could go. “Fine, fine, I won’t give her the third degree or anything.” She watched Brian walk down the hallway. “You should get some sleep, you know!” she shouted after him, heedless of quiet hours. “You look like you’ve been through nine levels of hell!” She frowned as he began to go down the stairs, not looking back at her. “You both do,” she muttered.

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She hurt all over. Every muscle in her body ached: her head throbbed, and her eyes felt sore. It was a struggle to open them — they were slightly swollen, and she was having a hard time focusing — but she could see the wide, cornflower blue eyes that stared back into her own.

“Hey, Princess,” Nikki joked, her pale blonde hair falling over her forehead as she cocked her head to one side. “Rise and shine.”

Sarah rubbed her hand over her eyes, squinting at the sunlight coming in through their windows. Slowly, she managed to drag herself up into a sitting position. She was still wearing her clothes. Falling asleep in her jeans and t-shirt made her feel itchy, and badly in need of a shower.

“Here.”

She mindlessly took the Styrofoam cup her roommate handed to her, almost dropping it when she felt how hot it was. Cautiously, she drank. She almost choked when she tried to swallow — her throat felt raw and it hurt like hell. But the coffee seared a path of warmth and comfort through her body. Wincing, she took another sip.

“I grabbed it for you at the dining hall.” Nikki plopped down at the edge of Sarah’s bed, sipping her own drink. “Aren’t you going to ask me what time it is?”

“What time is it?” Sarah croaked.

“Eleven. Your Chemistry test ended an hour ago.”

Sarah paused, searching her memory. “Right,” she said, faintly. “I had a test.”

“Yeah, you did. I tried to wake you, but...” She shrugged. “You were dead to the world. Sorry.”

Sarah shook her head. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Yeah, I suppose one test can’t kill you. Don’t they drop the lowest grade in that class?” Nikki

stood, stretching. “Well, it’s good to see you’re up and about again...” Her voice trailed off as she watched Sarah place the coffee carefully on her bedside table, then curl up again underneath the covers. “Um, Sarah?” She bent down to look at her roommate’s face, almost hidden beneath the blankets. “Don’t you have class?”

Sarah’s eyes were already shut. “Go away, Nikki.”

“Um, look, normally I wouldn’t get in a twist about it, but this really isn’t like you. You feeling okay?” No response. “Is this about Brian? He said you guys had a fight —”

“Go away!”

Nikki started, pulling back. She opened her mouth to make a sharp retort — but paused. Sarah’s face was tense and drawn, and she looked shockingly fragile — as a harsh word would shatter her into a million pieces. Nikki shut her mouth.

“Okay,” she said uncertainly. “Okay. Just — gimme a call if you need anything, alright?”

No answer.

Biting her lip, Nikki slipped out the door.

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He could hear the incensed pounding on his door even through the Dylan he had blaring on his computer. Wrenching off his headphones, Brian angrily strode over to unlock the thin door and pull it open.

Nikki was standing there, one arm upraised to knock. The other was resting on her cocked hip. She let both hands drop and walked into his room as if she owned the place, sitting down on his bed.

“Shut the door,” she ordered.

He gave her a quizzical look. “Thought you were out with Steven,” he said, naming his housemate and her off-again, on-again boyfriend. She was still made up, eyelids and cheekbones shimmering. Her shiny black boots chasing up her legs — which were primly crossed — to just below her knees.

“The club sucked. The new DJ’s raw. We came back early, and I wanted to talk with you.”

Brian shrugged. “Okay.” He shut the door. When he turned around he almost jumped in surprise — Nikki was off the bed and in his face.

“What the *hell* happened to Sarah?” she hissed, deliberately invading his personal space. “You tell me right now, Brian Harr, or I will grab your balls and I will —”

“Okay, okay! Jesus, Nikki, what’s wrong with you?” he demanded, trying to inch away. Usually she wasn’t this intimidating, but those boots had three-inch spike heels, and she looked just the right height to kick his ass, given half the chance.

“With *me*? What the hell is wrong with *Sarah*?”

He gaped. “Okay,” he said slowly. “I give. What the hell is wrong with Sarah?”

Nikki crossed her arms across her chest, resting back on her heels. “She hasn’t gotten out of her

bed for three days,” she admitted. “She just sleeps all the time. I finally started bringing her food and stuff from the dining hall. She was really freaking me out, y’know? But she doesn’t eat it. Well, she eats *some* of it — not enough — and throws the rest away!” She stamped her foot, and Brian could see she was perilously close to crying. “This is scaring me! She won’t talk, won’t say what’s wrong.” She sniffed. “And the last person to see her *sane* was you. So tell me what is going on, right now! I want to know.”

Brian sighed, slumping against the door. He thought for a moment, and then:

“I... I really don’t know. I mean, I think I do, but... I’ll give her a call. Okay? I’ll talk to her, and then I promise to let you know what’s happening. Deal?”

“No way.”

“Nikki!”

“This is no time for your macho Papa Bear bullshit! Do you hear me? Sarah is in serious trouble! Now, either you fill me in, or I’m calling her parents.”

“No!” He lunged for her, but she stepped back. He hesitated, controlling himself. “You can’t tell her parents — I mean, they wouldn’t know what to do. Please, Nikki,” he begged. “Just let me call her. Then... I don’t know. I just need to talk with her.”

For a long moment he was afraid she would refuse, as she stood there considering him. Finally, she uncrossed her arms and made to exit his room. “Fine,” she said, not looking back. “Call her right now. Steven and I are going to catch a movie. I’ll be back at the dorm in a few hours.”

He breathed a sigh of relief as she went, and made to shut the door.

“Hey, Brian!”

He looked out again. She was paused on the top step.

“This better change something,” she said evenly. “Otherwise, I will set out to make your life not worth living.” And she stomped down the rest of the stairs.

Brian firmly shut the door, throwing the bolt in place. He collapsed into his chair, staring at the computer screen in front of him. Then he reached over and picked up his cell phone.

He had been avoiding this. There was way too much she could say to him that... wouldn’t be nice. It would be *right*, he granted, but not particularly nice. He dialed her number before he had a chance to brood about it.

Her phone rang five times before voicemail picked up. He disconnected, dialing again. On his third try, she finally picked up.

“Hello?”

Brian realized he’d never actually talked to Sarah on the phone before. They’d exchanged numbers, but seen each other so much on a day-to-day basis that there really wasn’t any need. He swallowed, struck by how fragile her disembodied voice sounded.

“It’s Brian. Don’t hang up,” he interjected quickly. “Listen, I just need to talk with you for a minute.”

“I wasn’t going to hang up.”

“You weren’t? Oh, good.” His fingers started tapping as he searched for something to say. “Nikki says you aren’t feeling too good.”

“I’m fine.”

“You been to class?”

“No.”

He sighed, frame slumping. “Sarah, that’s not cool ... Please tell me what’s wrong.”

Nothing.

“Sarah, I’m sorry for what I did.”

Silence.

“I really am sorry.” This was worse than listening to any (justified) accusations on her part. It was harder to admit to this stuff — every word was a struggle. “I was jealous, okay? Is that what you want to hear? I was an asshole.” He swallowed. “I’m sorry I didn’t let you go to him, when... when everything happened.”

Just the sound of her breathing.

“Jesus, Sarah,” he yelled, leaping to his feet. He paced over to the window, free hand shoved deep into his jeans pocket. He leaned against the wall, watching the rain fall steadily outside. “I’m sorry! What more do you want? Why are you punishing me like this?”

“I’m not punishing you.”

“Then who?”

“I don’t know!” And then, in a small voice: “Me, maybe.”

He pressed his hand against the cold, moist windowpane. The raindrops slanted and streamed against it, obscuring the world outside into a blurry smear of lights and darkness. “That’s... there was nothing you could’ve done.”

“Don’t try to lie.”

“Listen, he had you backed into a corner. Both of us! What other choice did you have?”

“It’s my fault he died.”

Brian grimaced. “You didn’t mean to.”

An easy, empty laugh that frightened him more than sobbing would’ve. “Doesn’t change a thing.”

“He would’ve forgiven you! And besides, this is your response?”

“Everyone has days when they can’t look at themselves in the mirror,” she said. “I’m just having a whole bunch of them. And don’t you dare try to lecture me — you, of all people.”

The quiet anger in her voice made him pause, but he blundered on regardless. “Sarah, shutting yourself away from the world isn’t going to bring him back.”

“Neither will getting out of bed.”

She hung up.

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Nikki opened the door quietly, unsure of whether her roommate was still sleeping. She tiptoed in, but soon saw her stealth was wasted. Sarah was sitting up in bed in the grey t-shirt she'd worn for the past three days. She was hunched over, elbows resting on her lap as she buried her face in her hands, threading her fingers through her dark hair. The phone was sitting next to her.

"Oh. You're up."

"Yeah." Sarah lifted her head, revealing red-rimmed eyes. "I'm up."

"That's good... Did Brian call you?"

"Yeah."

"Ah." Nikki sucked on the inside of her cheek. "Okay." She walked over to her own bed, sitting down to pull off her boots. "Anything you want to talk to me about?" she asked, trying to be tactful.

Sarah's shoulders hunched again as she bowed her head, keeping her eyes fixed on the coverlet. "No. Not really."

"Sarah. Tell me what's wrong."

A long, deep sigh, and the curtain of Sarah's hair rippled slightly. When she spoke, it was in a small, scared voice that trembled with unshed tears. "I don't know. I really don't. It just... it seems so hard to put both feet on the ground."

Nikki looked at her sadly, tossing her boots into her narrow closet. She turned where she sat, tucking her legs underneath her and laying both hands in her lap.

"Once," she began in a subdued tone that was wildly uncharacteristic of her usual attitude. "Once, I was really unhappy. Not depressed or anything, just... unhappy. Don't ask why, it's a long story. Anyway, for a long time I was in bad shape. And then my dad got on my case. In a good way. He was worried, I guess. He told me to do what was necessary — anything at all — to get over it. Just decide what's necessary to move on, and then do it. Whatever it is."

Sarah pulled her knees to her chest. "Sounds pretty simple."

"It's not," Nikki corrected quietly. "Figuring out what needs to be done, yeah, that's easy. But actually doing it..." She trailed off. "It takes a lot of effort. Because you just don't want to let go. You know?" She turned to her roommate, who watched her with wide green eyes. "Just think about it?" she asked. "Please?"

Sarah nodded. "I promise."

"Okay." Nikki grinned, and was back to her usual self again. "Otherwise, I'm going to have to ship you out. And that would suck. I mean, where else can I find a roommate with your semi-comatose qualities?"

Sarah grinned. "I always told you I was special."

Nikki snorted. "Special, my ass," she said inelegantly. "I'm just grateful you sleep through anything."

“Why?” Sarah asked suspiciously. “What have you been doing?”

Nikki grinned. “Nothing. Yet. Oh, hey, that reminds me,” she said, walking over to her dresser as she began to wipe off the makeup and glitter on her face. “You were in my dream.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. It was a couple days ago, actually. You know how you’ll be doing something, and it’ll just suddenly remind you of a dream you had a while ago? That happened today during my European History class. They were talking about Venice and the Inquisition and stuff, and wham! I totally remembered this dream you were in.”

Sarah froze. The fingers that had been playing with her long strands of hair stilled, dropping onto the blanket.

“It was actually a kickass dream. I had servants and stuff, and lived in Venice... You were there, like, visiting or something. Can’t remember too well.” Sarah heard the snap of a hair band as Nikki pulled her blond locks into a ponytail. “And there was dancing, and parties... oh, and this guy!” She whirled, face animated as she talked to her roommate. “Oh my God, he was so gorgeous. I mean, pretty strange-looking -- weird hairstyle, and his eyes were all freaky. You know how dreams are. But he managed to pull it off.”

Sarah’s hands gripped the blanket so hard her knuckles were white.

“The only thing that sucked was that he didn’t like me.” She turned back to the mirror, reaching for lotion, and paused. “I mean, it felt unfair... it was my dream, after all. Why’d you have to come in and ruin it?” she teased.

After a few failed attempts, Sarah found her voice. “Ruin it?”

“That gorgeous guy? Only interested in you. I mean, I was okay with it... I had fun anyway. And besides, you should’ve seen the way he looked at you. No way I could compete with that.” She threw a grin over her shoulder. “Even if it was only a dream.”

Sarah managed to unclench her hands, raising them to smooth across her eyes. “Nik?”

“Yeah?”

“Is your full name ‘Nicole?’”

“Um, yeah. Don’t call me that, though. It’s ugly.”

Sarah swallowed. “I won’t,” she promised in a low voice. She fell back against her pillows, staring up at the ceiling. Her pupils dilated with surprise. For a long moment, she seemed to hesitate... And then...

“Nikki?”

“Yeah?”

“You got one of your friends to turn off the alarm in here so you could smoke, right?”

“Yeah.” Nikki turned. “Why, does that bother you?”

But Sarah wasn’t listening. She was already up, throwing back the covers and ducking under her desk. She pulled out a beat-up aluminum wastebasket, only slightly filled with discarded papers.



After shoving it out into the open, Sarah leaped onto her bed, arm straining to touch the ceiling. She ripped off a poster that hung there, crumpling it up and tossing it into the wastebasket. Then she leaned over and ripped another poster off her walls, so violently the corners tore off and remained stuck on the wall. After throwing that in with the other, she stepped off her bed and reached for her desk, for the bouquet of dried flowers that rested there. She added that to the pile.

Nikki glanced into the basket. Besides the flowers, Sarah had apparently thrown out her poster of *Hylas and the Nymphs*, as well as the homemade dragon collage that had been taped to the ceiling. She looked up to see Sarah, standing with a box of matches from her drawer.

“Sarah,” Nikki began guardedly. “What are you doing?”

Sarah struck one of the matches, tiny flame flaring to life. For a second she stared at it burning uselessly between her fingers. “What’s necessary.”

And she tossed it in.

“Christ!” Nikki yelped as the contents of the wastebasket burst into flame. It surprised her – not just Sarah’s actions, but how quickly the contents were engulfed. It wasn’t natural, how quickly they were crumbling, turning to dark ash. She kicked the wastebasket with a slippered foot over to the window, and then struggled to get the sash open. She finally managed to push up the glass and screen, letting the smoke billow out into the cool night air.

“Sarah,” she began as she fanned the smoke outside. “Next time you decide to make a gesture, please remember our RA isn’t quite as dumb as she looks. This could so get you suspended.” There was no answer, and she left off her task to turn around. “Sarah?”

Her roommate was still standing in the middle of the room, eyes fixed on the floor. When she sensed Nicole’s eyes in her she brought her head up, pushing her hair away from her face as she managed a watery smile.

“I’ll remember,” she promised.

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“Ye gods and little fishes,” Brian murmured to himself through trembling, numb lips. “It’s *cold* out here!”

He stomped his feet briskly against the sidewalk as he went, forcing the sluggish blood to flow through them. He burrowed his face even deeper into the collar of his jacket, nestling his frozen skin against the soft material, and pushed his gloved hands even deeper into his pockets. The wind whipped about his ears, howling its disquiet at the empty night. He walked faster.

The trees rustled quietly as he passed them, leafless branches knocking against each other in the brisk wind. Happily, the campus streets were sparsely lit, but the inky shadows slipped about Brian’s feet as he shivered in his down jacket. Teeth chattering, he hurried past the darkened buildings, shoes slapping against the cold cement. He scrubbed a hand across his frozen mouth as he jogged up to the side of a dorm. He glanced up at the sounds of laughter and music that came from the shining windows above his head. Reaching over to a metal phone-box installed into the brick, he punched in a number and stepped back, bouncing on the balls of his feet to keep warm. The phone rang -- once, twice -- and then a female voice answered.

“Hello?”

“Hey, let me up!” Brian called into the speaker. “Save me before I freeze to death!”

“... Did you pay for the tickets yet?”

“No,” he said through clenched teeth.

Laughter. “Okay, I guess I still need you. Come on up!”

The lock on the door clicked open, and Brian hopped through. With a deep sigh of relief as he entered the warm building, he began to trudge up the two flights of stairs that would take him to Sarah and Nicole’s room. Their hallway was busy with people hurrying around, playing on their computers, and he could smell cocoa and coffee and various dinners as he passed open doorways. Nodding to people he knew as they passed by, he made his way down the hall to room 3113.

Hands braced on the doorjamb, he leaned his head in.

“Ready to go?”

Sarah sat at her desk, head in one hand as she studied out of an open book. The lamp cast warm light over her hair and neck, making a pretty picture. She looked up at his voice and smiled.

“Are you kidding? She’s not even close,” she said, laughing. “Nik’s putting on her makeup in the bathroom. It’ll be at least another ten minutes,” turning back to her schoolwork.

Brian grimaced, throwing a quick look at the glowing red numbers on the clock by her bedside.

“We’re going to be late,” he said. “How long does it take five feet and two inches to get dressed, anyway?”

Sarah grinned, not looking away from her book. “In this particular case, size really doesn’t matter.”

Brian sighed loudly, leaning against the doorway and crossing his arms across his chest. He watched her for a moment.

“Sure you don’t want to come?” he asked.

“I’d love to see a movie with you guys, but I’ve got way too much work.”

“Really?”

“Nah,” she replied cheerfully. “Just don’t want to be the odd man out.”

Brian winced. He’d been dating Nikki for a couple of weeks. It wasn’t anything serious. In fact, they hadn’t even been dating the first few days; just hanging out, going to clubs: enjoying each other’s company. It was only later they decided that, as long as they were spending so much time together, they might as well get some action out of it. It was fun, and he cared for Nikki. But it wasn’t love, and it probably never would be. And sometimes he found himself glancing wistfully across the room at the same pale profile and dark green eyes he was faced with now.

But that was supposed to be over with.

“You know you wouldn’t be.”

She shrugged, still not looking at him.

After a moment of hesitation, he strode into her room. He sat awkwardly onto Nikki’s bed, mattress springs creaking a protest. Shoving aside rumpled sheets and a few discarded pieces of clothing to get more comfortable, he settled, leaning back on his hands. He turned his gaze back to

Sarah. She didn't seem to notice his scrutiny — her eyes moved steadily across the pages, lips moving as she read to herself.

"Hey, Sarah."

She blinked, taking a second to shake off the spell of the words before her. She turned her head to see him, cupping her chin in one hand as she smiled. "Hey, Brian."

"We're good, right?"

She frowned a little. "Of course."

"Yeah." He kicked one foot, aimlessly. "I thought so, I just... you know, wanted to check." He concentrated on digging the toe of his sneaker into the rug. "I mean, with everything that's happened."

Her expression was serene. "I know."

He darted a quick glance at her face. "Yeah, I guess you do." He shook his leg with nervous energy. "It's just — you know, it's been a while —"

"Little over a month."

"... Yeah. And you seem... I don't know. Not like yourself."

Her gaze dropped. Slowly, she sat back in her seat, drawing her arms into her lap. She stared into space. "I'm surprised you still believe it actually happened."

He cringed a little. "Don't get me started. I half-believe it *didn't* — but, well, you're not crazy, and you remember it, too. Besides," he continued quietly. "I still have nightmares."

She gave him a somber look. "I'm sorry."

"I'll manage. But I'm worried about you."

She tilted her head to one side. "Me?"

"Yeah." He licked his lips. "You remember when I talked to you on the phone? When I told you..."

"Yes."

He swallowed his unspoken words. "Well, Nik told me what you did afterward."

She stilled.

"Must've been hard. I mean, you cut all ties, right?"

She turned her head away in a violent motion, hair swinging to obscure her face from view. Brian shut his mouth, pressing his lips together and taking a deep breath.

"He told me, in the oubliette," he resumed harshly. "How it works. Indirectly, but still, I pretty much understood. He took things from your life, didn't he? And he used them. He put them into the — the maze, and the dream, or whatever. So it feels familiar. Safe. And you don't want to leave." He ducked his head, trying to catch a glimpse of her, but she was safely hidden behind the dark fall of her hair. He settled back again. "I mean, when you burned all that stuff, you pretty much severed any connection with Ja —"

“It was hard,” she interrupted.

She raised her head, and her eyes burned in her pale face. “Is that what you want to hear? Yeah, it was. And it hurt.”

He looked at her; uncertain as to how he should continue. “Did it help?”

Her mouth twisted into a wry smile. “No,” she admitted. “Not really. But at least I don’t think about him every second.”

He frowned without thinking. “How often do you think about him?”

“Every other second.”

He scowled, picking at the pads of his fingers. “You’re an idiot.”

“Smile when you say that.”

“I’m serious!” He threw up his hands. “Sarah, do you know how many guys would kill to go out with you? How many of my friends keep asking if I think they have a chance? You’re pretty, smart, nice — hell, all you have to do is close your eyes and point! You could have any guy you wanted!”

The banked energy in her eyes seemed to fade, and Sarah slumped in her chair. She looked at him, a little bit sad. “I thought you were dating Nikki.”

He stood and turned away from her, pacing violently along limited expanse of floor. “This isn’t about that.”

“It isn’t?”

He stopped. Standing with his shoulders hunched, he growled: “So what now? You’re just going to sulk in your room forever?”

“No.”

“Then why not me?” he demanded. “God dammit, I rescue the princess just like in the fucking fairy tales, and I don’t even get to keep her!”

“You —” She looked up at him, eyes wide. Laughing a little breathlessly, she shook her head in disbelief. “No, never mind, I don’t even want to get into it.” She went back to her work.

“Well, I do!” He knelt down right by her chair, clenched hands resting on his knees. She couldn’t hide from him, this close, and she couldn’t ignore him either. “Sarah, this is ridiculous. Whatever you had with him, it was in a dream! I’m *here*. And I,” he added mutinously, “never tried to kill your baby brother. Sarah, I remember Venice. Of course I do — every damn minute. In there, I didn’t even know what the hell was going on, and neither did you! How can you call that love? It was an illusion! It wasn’t real!”

She swiveled in her seat to face him, meeting his gaze directly. Her soul was in her eyes — and for a moment, he saw her as she really was. All that she was. A girl who had bested a labyrinth of living, twisting stone — twice. A girl who had befriended monsters. A girl who had rejected her dreams in order to do what was right. A girl who had suffered in a garden of roses that flamed fire and lost regrets. Who had swum with naiads. Who had faced dragons. Who had turned to lifeless marble in the gentle moonlight. Who had fallen into a sea of her own self-doubt. Who had

watched her love die for lack of a dream.

“What is?” she asked simply.

He snapped his mouth shut, sitting back on his heels. “Why do I get the feeling,” he muttered, “that if he hadn’t up and died, you’d be with me.”

“Because you’re an arrogant asshole,” she replied crisply. “Now leave me alone,” picking up her book.

“Sarah —”

“Listen,” she said, never looking away from her work. “I’ll have to move on eventually. That’s a given, right? I mean, I have to get over it at some point, right?” Her hands trembled slightly as they held the book. “One day I’ll see someone, and I’ll think — that’s the one. He can make me forget. That has to happen at some point.” She released a shuddering breath. “But not today. And not with you.”

Brian blinked. Then he rose awkwardly to his feet, moving so quickly he nearly stumbled and lost his balance. “Um, yeah,” he said vaguely, shoving his hands deep into his pockets. “Right. Well, damn, I wonder where Nikki is? Talk about a way to ruin a date, spending all night on your makeup.”

He paused. He was already outside the door, having walked as he rambled. He could feel Sarah at his back, still hunched over in her chair. The tension in her body made her back as taut as a drawn bow. He slumped, leaning against the door frame.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly. “I keep doing this. It’s just — no. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t.”

“It’s okay,” she said, voice tiny. He could tell she was on the verge of tears.

“Sarah,” he began again, “you’re my best friend. You’ve done so much for me. I really am sorry.”

“You don’t have to keep saying it.”

“I just wish there was something I could do! I keep screwing up. I wish I could make it right, somehow.”

“I know,” she said, almost too quietly to be heard. “I love you, too. I just don’t need this right now.”

“Yeah,” he said sadly. He shifted so that he faced her, with his back to the lighted hallway. He reached over to touch her rigid shoulder. When she didn’t jerk away, he stepped closer.

“Sarah?” No response. He ran his hand over her hair, parting the soft strands with his fingertips. “You okay?”

She reached for him blindly. Wrapping her arms around his waist, her fingers clutched at the soft material of his sweater, and she buried her face into his stomach. He held her as she began to cry: dry, racking sobs that wrenched themselves free without the softening release of tears.

“God,” she choked out. “For the first time in my life, I understand my father, I just want to do something — have someone — to make this go away.”

“I know,” he soothed. “I know.” Her shoulders shook beneath his hands, but his sweater remained dry. Her fruitless outburst was short-lived. Within moments she was pulling away from his

tentative embrace, rubbing her red eyes with the back of her hands. She gave him a shaky grin.

“Sorry,” she said, voice a little husky. “Still trying to...” she trailed off and closed her mouth, shrugging her shoulders in a defeated gesture.

“I get it.” He felt suddenly awkward, hooking his thumbs through the belt loops of his jeans and staring intently at the floor. “You lost friends, too, didn’t you? I mean, he talked about them. Sometimes. Didn’t you have help from friends?”

“Yeah,” she said softly.

He shook his head. “God damn. I’m sorry. I mean -- I’m guessing the whole thing went, right? That whole world, destroyed.”

“No,” she said quietly. Tucking an errant strand of hair behind her hair, she adjusted herself in the seat so that she faced her desk. She grasped her discarded book, settling back into her role of devoted student. Resurrecting the high walls around her heart.

“Um, what?”

She bent her head, but continued speaking in that calm, distant voice. “Not everything was destroyed; just the Castle. It’s a ruin now — crumbled walls standing alone on a plateau of rock, surrounded by debris. Moss is already creeping over the pitted stones... things grow fast, there. And no one else was hurt. They managed to get out, when I — when the Castle began to shake. When they found out their King was gone, well, they turned to those that had conquered him. They’re not vicious, you know, not on their own. They just need guidance after an eternity spent under his thumb.” She turned a page, and the paper leaves rustled in the sudden silence.

“So now,” she resumed after a moment, “there are four new heroes of the realm; four new kings. A scholar, a gardener, a knight and...” She paused. “A bard of few words. You never did hear Ludo sing — call the rocks — did you? You never met any of them. I wish you had.” She turned another page. He could hardly imagine she was concentrating on her work, but her eyes traveled steadily along the printed words, just the same. “I think those sound like good rulers. Don’t you?”

He stared at her, mouth gaping. “Sarah... you can’t know... how could you know all that?”

She looked up at him. Her eyes had lost that terrible wild look. And she smiled with the shining joy of a child with a precious secret.

“I dreamed it.”

Nikki barreled through the doorway. The thin bracelets that covered her arm from wrist to elbow clinked musically as she put up one hand to brace herself against the doorjamb.

“Okay,” she said, still breathing hard. “I understand this is, like, appropriate grounds for breaking up with me, but I am finally ready. You good to go?”

Brian looked over his shoulder at Sarah, now absorbed with the thin volume in her hands.

“Yeah,” he said. “I guess so.” Nikki grabbed his hand, tugging to make him follow her into the hall, but he managed to pull away. “We’re probably going to hang out, afterward,” he said to Sarah. “Sure you don’t want to come?”

“Yep.”

“... okay. It’ll be late when we get back.”

“I won’t wait up.”

He kept looking back at her as Nikki pulled him out the door — a solitary figure, resting in the only shelter of falling light amidst gathering shadows.

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They had fun at the movie. They threw popcorn at the heads in front of them, in between laughter and making out in the back row. They held each others' slightly buttery hands, and Nikki burrowed her head into his shoulder when the film got a little intense. It was fun, and by the time the credits rolled and they stood, stretching stiff muscles, he felt like himself again. Like a normal, ordinary guy. The person he was supposed to be.

“I don’t want to go back yet,” Nikki said, making a face. “Wanna find a club or something?”

“Sure. Let’s see if there’s anything good going on.”

They hopped the bus back, huddling together on the plastic seats as they wove their way through dark streets, tracing the way back to the campus. On the way there they kept a lookout for places that might be open — but there wasn’t much. It was a Thursday night, and though most students could afford to stay out late because of late afternoon classes, or none at all, on Fridays, the college wasn’t big enough to fuel its own weekday nightlife. Most bars or clubs or shops had closed hours ago.

There was always the Cat, though. The Grey Cat was a club — eighteen to enter, twenty-one to drink — right on the edge of the campus grounds. A two-level building with a stage, a bar, and a set-up for DJs in the basement, it catered entirely to students. It was run by a few hippie alumni of the school, who loved to book a variety of unknown and eclectic acts: from a jazz pianist to a death metal group — if they didn’t think you were terrible, you could play the stage. The Cat was open sporadically, depending on whether anything was booked. It was open that night — crowded, even. Brian got into the long line outside the door while Nikki bounced ahead, checking out the crowd, finding what everyone was so excited about.

“Rock band,” she promptly informed him, ducking under his arm, to get close to his warmth.

“Parently they have a cult following – couple self-produced albums, so on. So they’re touring clubs to break into mainstream.”

“Any good?”

“These people seem to think so,” she said blithely. “Oh, and Steven’s up front. Actually, I think he played their stuff for me once.”

“So this is cool?”

“Yeah, let’s stay a while.”

They managed to get inside within a few minutes. People were moving fast, eager to get out of the freezing cold. Money handed over and the back of their hands stamped, they chatted idly as they ventured inside, arms around each other. A chaos of equipment — half-constructed drum set, unplugged guitar, etc. — apparently meant the band was just beginning to set up, but there was no one actually standing on the low stage. Leisurely, Nikki and Brian made their way to the tables clustered in the back since the area right in front of the stage was jam-packed with excited people.

“I’m getting a soda,” Nikki said, as Brian pulled out a chair for her. “Want anything?”

“Nope, I’m good.”

She had barely taken a step away when her date's hand suddenly latched around her arm. Without thinking, she made irritated noise and tried to pull away — but his grip only tightened. Perturbed, she turned back.

Brian was white. The blood had drained from his face, leaving his eyes dark and startlingly wide. He was in shock; staring blindly ahead at the stage. Nikki started, realizing that, except for his sure and firm grip on her forearm, he was trembling from head to foot.

“Brian?” He didn't even turn — she had to meticulously pry his fingers off of her, one by one. “Brian, darling,” she continued, honey-sweet. “Stop being skitzo.”

He finally looked around, but didn't really seem to see her. He focused on some point beyond her, shell-shocked. Gently, Nikki took him by the shoulders and gave him a brief shake. At that, he focused. His face was unaccountably haggard, beads of sweat on his pale forehead.

“Brian?”

He closed his eyes and drew a long, shuddering breath, firming his mouth with resolute decision.

He took Nikki's small hands in both of his own. “Nik,” he began, “I need a favor.”

“What?” she asked ungraciously.

“Nothing much.” He took another steadying breath. “I just need you to go back to the dorm and get Sarah.”

“Ah,” she said. “Tired of blonde? Already?”

“Nikki,” he continued. “I'm serious. Please — just go back and tell her to get over here. It's only a couple of minutes away, right? Please. It's really important.”

Nikki slumped where she stood. “It's ten minutes running,” she sulked. “And it's cold out. Besides, she's asleep already. Can't it wait until tomorrow?”

She turned away without waiting for an answer, preoccupied with her original goal. But she didn't get far. Her well-manicured hands, still resting in Brian's, were suddenly crushed in a bruising grip. With an involuntary squeak of surprise and pain, she whirled back to her captor.

Brian was scaring her. He was still too pale, and his eyes held a wild light — as if reality had pulled the rug out from underneath him, and he had yet to regain his balance.

“Nikki,” voice hoarse. “Go get Sarah. Now.”

She stumbled as he released her hands. She rubbed them together absently as she backed away.

“Okaaaaay,” she muttered. “Be back later.” Still throwing dubious looks at him over her shoulder, she made her way out the door and into the night.

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“I'm going to kill him,” Sarah mumbled as she jogged through the frigid air. “I'm really going to kill him. Nothing too fancy — maybe with a broken beer bottle. Something poetic like that.”

Nikki had roused her out of warm and wonderfully dreamless sleep with rough shaking, accompanied with some loud mutterings about finding a new boyfriend.

“Listen,” Nikki had said, sitting down heavily on her own bed. “I don’t know what’s going on. But Brian’s really freaked out, and he wants you go down at the Cat.” She had started to pull off her shoes, tossing them into a corner. “So. I got you up, and told you what’s happening. I’m done.”

“Aren’t you coming with me?” Sarah asked groggily, half-sitting up in her worn PJs.

“Nope. I’m done,” Nikki had reinstated, beginning to change. “Done. Go do your insanity without me.”

Still partly asleep, Sarah had goggled at her roommate. Then, shrugging to herself, she had thrown on some clothes and clattered down the stairs.

Now she was running along the campus streets, freezing, because she had forgotten to put on a heavier jacket and gloves in her urgency. Teeth chattering, she quickly made her way through the lighted pathways towards the club.

She saw Brian immediately as she ran up to the familiar building. He was waiting outside for her, hands shoved deep into coat pockets and shoulders hunched, head bowed in thought.

“Hey!” she called as she ran up to him, watching his head snap up. “What’s going on?” she asked. “Nikki said it was important.”

“Um, yeah,” watching her intently as she sidled up to him. “Sarah, listen, there’s...” He blinked, as if really seeing her for the first time. “Jesus, you’re not even wearing a coat!”

She smiled, hugging her light jacket close to her body. “The walk over warmed me up, but can we go inside? Please? If I stay out here I’ll turn into an icicle.”

He blanched. He wasn’t looking too great, Sarah thought with a frown; a little too wide-eyed, jumping at shadows.

“You okay?” she asked suspiciously.

“Fine, fine,” he replied automatically. “Do you want to go grab coffee somewhere? I’m sure we can find something open.”

“No, this is okay.” She hopped into line without waiting for his response, anxious to get out of the cold. There were only a few more people waiting to get in. Apparently, the show had already started — they were close enough to the door to hear music drifting out into the winter air. Sarah listened as a chord faded softly into silence, signaling the end of a song. “You’re going to have to spot me the ten bucks,” she said, bringing up the entrance fee. “Least you can do after dragging me out of bed.”

Brian stepped in beside her, uncharacteristically hesitant and quiet. Sarah watched his pensive face, his eyes following each person ahead handing over their money and getting their hands stamped. Inside, she heard a bass guitar launch into the next number: individual strings plucked softly to create a thrumming heartbeat.

“What did you want to talk about?” she asked.

His expression darkened. “Somewhere else,” he finally said. “I wanted to talk about it somewhere else.”

Inside the club, someone began to sing. It was a low, dark voice that glided between the subdued notes, significant pauses between the lines of artlessly delivered lyrics. Against the simplicity of

the bass guitar, the voice became entreating, coaxing; a song to a lover that might, as any moment, become frightened and run away.

(Do you remember the first kiss?)

“What’s wrong with here?” Sarah asked absently.

(Stars shooting across the sky)

“Nothing,” Brian said. “Nothing’s wrong. It’s just – Sarah, I really don’t know how to *tell* you this!”

(To come to such a place as this --)

“Tell me what?” Sarah asked, exasperated. “Brian, what’s going on with you?”

“Money and ID,” the doorman barked.

(You never left my mind)

Sarah pulled her wallet out of her back pocket as Brian handed over the money, frowning as she rifled through its contents. Brian was still babbling, mumbling in stops in starts about how the hell was he supposed to tell her this, couldn’t they please go somewhere else, and Sarah, please listen to me...

Because she wasn’t — not really. Even as she futilely searched for her student ID, she was listening to the music inside. The song had quickened; the drums beating a gentle tattoo along the soft surety of the bass, adding sudden urgency to the melody. As the tempo heightened, switching gears, the singer was silent for a few moments.

“Damn,” she murmured. “Not here. I wonder if... Here, Brian, can you hold this a minute?” She handed him her wallet without looking, beginning to search all her jean and jacket pockets.

“I can’t let you in without an ID,” the doorman said.

“I know, I know, give me a minute.”

And then that voice came back again, that soft, smoky voice. He was more confident now, although he never rushed the slow, deliberate delivery of the song. He went from a near-whisper to full-throated singing: an alluring, lilting sound.

(I’m watching from the wall)

“Got it!” she said triumphantly, finally bringing up the elusive slip of plastic. Grinning, she handed it over. “Hey,” she asked Brian, “Who’s inside? I think I’ve heard them before.”

(As is the streets we fight)

“You have?” Brian asked. It was barely even a question – more like an inevitability he was determined to face.

“Yeah,” Sarah said. “It sounds like...” She listened, really listened, for a moment — and stilled.

(This world, all gone to war)

She turned to shove through the milling people right outside the club door.

Dimly, she could hear Brian yelling behind her.

(All I need is you, tonight)

The main guitar came crashing in at the same moment she did (pushing through the double doors, heedless of the people in her way). Everything came together in a realization of triumph and pure, perfect exhilaration.

She saw him.

He stood on stage (of course). With his feet braced shoulder's-width apart in a stance so familiar it made her heart clench, he was the only one of the group who didn't huddle in the shadows. The bright lights falling over his slender form chased strands of gold through his shining cap of pale gold hair as he threw his head back — and sang.

*(And I draw a line
To your heart today)*

Scuffed jeans ripped at the bottom, rough black boots. A pristine white shirt that glowed under the bright lights, an open cuff falling away from a lean, aristocratic wrist as it rose to beckon the audience into his spell. The light caught, sparkled, and she could see a diamond glittering sharply in one ear.

*(To your heart from mine
And pray to keep us safe)*

Clothes were different, hair was different, even his attitude was different — comfortable in his own skin, lazily confident and relaxed in a way he had never been, around her. And the face. Sorrow, defeat, desperation — they might not have left lines on him, but they left their mark in the darkness of the eyes, the tightness of skin drawn over thin bones. None of that was there now. He didn't know any of that, now.

The song paused to catch its breath, slowing its tempo. He grinned recklessly at the listeners before him, promising the world with his words.

(All through the rising sun)

She felt Brian run up behind her, finally finding where she stood in this bespelled audience. But she couldn't look away from the burning, bright creature onstage.

(All through the circling years)

He saw her. His head lifted, his eyes focused on her, hiding in the dark. He turned and sang right to her.

(You were the only one)

His voice was like two hands wrapping around her ribcage, squeezing all the life and all the breath right out of her body.

(Who could have brought me here)

She turned and ran.

She ran away from Brian, who lunged, too late, to grab her arm and pull her back. She ran from him, from the look in his eyes as his words pierced her heart. She didn't even know where she

went, but she shoved her way through the milling, unresisting chaos of humanity around her, desperately trying to hide from the voice that seemed to seek through the darkness.

(And I draw a line

To your heart today

To your heart from mine

One line to keep us safe)

She found a door. Opened it, tumbling down the badly lit stairs she found behind it. She recognized this, recognized where she was in the club. Made her way through a damp, dark hallway, found the women's restroom and hid inside. Slammed the door behind her, leaning up against it as she panted for breath, eyes closed against the pain.

The music followed her unerringly. Even as she barricaded the door with her body against whatever dangerous threat lay in the world beyond, she could just make out those last, lingering words.

(Watch the stars hang, moving

Across the sky

Keep this feeling

Safe tonight...)

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She didn't know how long she stood like that, pressed against the door, tense and waiting for yet another assault. But there was nothing — just silence. Probably a break between sets. She sighed, making her way over to one of the sinks. She flipped on the cold water, taking a brief look at her own weary face in the smudged mirror before dunking her hands under and splashing the wonderfully cool liquid over her hot skin. She stood like that for a few minutes, hands gripping the smooth porcelain bowl of the sink, listening to the comforting sound of the water running. With another sigh, she turned it off.

Which seemed to be Brian's cue to burst in through the door, looking a little worse for the wear himself.

"Are you okay?" he asked, striding over and turning her face to the light. Wincing at his rough grip, she jerked free.

"I'm fine," she said. "You could have warned me."

"I tried to!" he said, watching as she walked over to get paper towels for her wet face. "You were the one who wanted to stay here, I thought this whole thing could calmly be discussed after coffee." He ran one hand through his hair, making it stand up in dark spikes. "If you can discuss resurrecting the dead calmly," he muttered. "How the hell did this happen?"

She paused in the act of wiping her hands dry, rough paper crinkling between her fingers. She thought about it for a moment, and smiled. From what seemed — oh, so long ago — she remembered that same dark voice echoing in the theater, wrapping itself around her, and the crystal he held...

*"Do you remember this? This is just a receptacle... I want the real thing."*

"I guess..." She hesitated, tasting and testing her words before she presented them as truth. "I... the pendant was something of a container. When it was destroyed, it didn't really hurt him, it — it released whatever was kept safe inside. Set it free. And him."

She smiled. “Good,” she said to herself. “I’m glad.”

She tossed the paper into a waste bin and made to walk out the door. “Coming?” she asked. “I know another way out.”

He blinked at her. “Pardon? A what?”

“Another way out. Through the basement.” She pointed towards the ceiling, and they could both heard guitar chords leaking through the plaster. “They’re back on stage, and I don’t really feel like walking past. Do you want to come, or do you want to stay?” She gave a wry grin. “I understand if you do. It’s good music.”

“The *hell*?” Brian exploded. “What are you talking about? That’s it? You’re just leaving? What about — what about *him*?”

“What about him?”

He gaped at her. “Ooooh, no,” he said, pulling back. “Don’t you dare. Don’t you dare try and pull this. Sarah, you spent three days collapsed in your bed because you thought he was dead! And now we know he’s not, so you better go and fucking do something! Talk to him! Let him know where you are!”

“No.”

He checked the urge to shake her. “*What? Why not?!*”

She met his eyes. “Because he doesn’t know me.”

Brian dropped his clenched hands, shocked at the pained resignation he saw in her face. “Sarah,” he began, “what are you talking about?”

“He doesn’t know me. He has no idea who I am. I’m a stranger. Are you getting the picture, yet?” She had begun to tremble a little, but she paused. Taking a calming breath, she continued simply: “He doesn’t remember anything — not even who I am. You could see that. I could see that when he looked at me.”

“What the hell does that matter?” Brian demanded.

She sighed, and lightly placed her hands on his arms, gripping the soft material of his jacket between her fingers. “The pendant contained his dream, Brian: caged it. This is what he wanted, what came true. Humanity. Freedom. From everything that used to make him what he was — even the memory of it.” Her hands relaxed. She smoothed the fabric over his arms. “Even the memory of me.” For a moment, her head was bowed and she was silent. Then she looked up, determined. “How can I take that away from him?”

“No, no.” With a worried look in his eyes, Brian reached out to hug her close. He stroked her back, astonished at how frail her shoulders felt. “Baby, there’s no way he would deliberately want to forget you. I mean, he may have — but that was probably part of a package deal, you know? I mean, why wouldn’t he want to come back to you?”

“Because I killed him.”

He froze, hand stopping over the slick material of her light jacket. Very, very carefully, he took her by the shoulders and held her a little away from him, sure to look directly into her eyes.

“No,” he said. “That’s not true. Remember? Man on stage with the weird eyes? I know he got a

haircut, but it's still the same deranged maniac you seem to be keen on... Sarah, he's fine."

A strange little smile quirked the corners of her mouth. "That may be," she acknowledged. "Jareth got his fairytale ending. But not because of me."

He released her with a sigh. "Sarah, you can't keep blaming yourself for that."

"Why not?" she asked, stepping back. "It happened. It's true."

He gave her a sad look. "You had no choice, Sarah. You can't save everyone."

"*I should've!*" The scream was brief, painful, as if torn from her throat without her consent. She fell back, breathing hard, and bumped into a sink behind her. Her arms twisted around to rest against the cold smoothness, fingers digging futilely into the resisting surface. "I should have," she repeated, too soft for even a whisper. And the tears began to fall: the first tears she allowed herself since returning to the real world. "That's what I do. Brave Sarah, *kind* Sarah," she choked out. "I thought I could save everyone! And because of that, he almost died!"

"But he didn't!" Brian said, almost pleading with her, hands upraised in a defensive gesture against her spitting self-loathing and guilt.

"That doesn't matter! Don't you see?" The tears were overwhelming her. She had to sit, collapsing off trembling legs that would no longer hold her weight into a heap on the tiled floor. "Before I could get you, I had to save my friends," she said bitterly, swallowing the tears that slipped into her mouth. "And before I would even think of Jareth, I had to get you. Save you." She wiped her eyes with one hand, scrubbing at them with more force than would necessary. "And I would do it again," she despaired. "Even if I didn't know he'd come back, that it wasn't real — I'd do it again." With another sob, she pulled her legs up and buried her face in her knees, shoulders shaking.

He got to his knees, crawling over to her. He wrapped his arms around her tightly. "I know," he said as she sobbed. "That's who you are, Sarah. And he knew that, too. Of course he did." He sighed with one last, final defeat. "He loved you."

The door creaked open to reveal a hesitant woman dressed in partying clothes — low-slung skirt, tight top, purse in hand. Her makeup was a bit faded, and it was obvious she was there to reapply. Seeing the two of them, she paused in the doorway.

Brian gave her a pointed look. "Yes?" as if he weren't hugging a distraught young woman.

"Um..." The stranger in the door avoided his eyes. "This is the girl's room."

"I'm gay," he snapped. "So don't let me bother you."

With a wide-eyed look she backed out of the doorway and let the door swing shut.

A watery chuckle drew Brian's attention back to the mess of a girl in his arms. Sarah smiled at him, tear tracks all over her face.

"You're not gay," she said, mock-solemn.

"*She's* not going to find that out," he muttered, and Sarah giggled again. Heartened at this, he pushed the hair away from her face. "Feeling better?" She nodded, and he stood. Getting a few paper towels out, he ran some cold water over them until they were nicely damp, and then handed them to Sarah so she could wipe her face. She did so, still breathing a little irregularly. When she was done she crumpled the wet towels into her hand, clenching it into a fist as she stared at the

floor. Brian hunkered down until he was on her level.

“The thing is,” she continued as soon as he was close, “say I do go out. Say I introduce myself. He’s lived an entirely different life -- what if he’s a different person? What if he can’t love me, anymore? What if I can’t love him?” Sitting up a little, she tossed her trash into the bin with a violent gesture. “Or what if,” she continued, “we hit it off, and things go great, and it doesn’t work out. For stupid, normal reasons.” She was silent for a moment. “I don’t have a guaranteed happily-ever-after, here.” She swallowed hard. “I couldn’t stand to lose him. Not again.”

He stroked the hair away from her forehead as he thought about it. “Then that’s it?” he asked, not pushing too much. “You just want to leave it like this?”

She let her head fall back against the wall. “He’s happy. He’s alive.” She shut her eyes. “I have that, at least. It’s enough.”

“You sure? I mean, Sarah... there’s got to be a reason he’s alive *now*. You know, here, with us. With you.”

Her face spasmed briefly as she fought to control herself. “Don’t ask me to go out there, Brian,” she whispered. For the first time, he sensed how afraid she was. “Please.”

“I think you’re making a mistake.”

She sighed, and seemed to suddenly become smaller. “I know I am,” she said, almost crying again. “But I can’t go out there. I — I’m so afraid I’ll ruin it again. I can’t talk to him. I just can’t.”

He stroked one thumb across her cheek. “Nikki said Steven has their CDs. We can figure out how to find him later. When you’re ready.”

She leaned into him, relaxing against his strength like a small child. “I’d like that.”

He caught at her hands, gently pulling her up off the floor. He put his arms around her shoulders, she wrapped her own around his waist, and thus entwined they walked out into the night.

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The walk home was quiet. They didn’t really talk much, just huddled together for warmth. They reached Sarah’s dorm in very little time, where Brian gave her one last, friendly hug, and separated himself.

“You’ll be okay walking to your car?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he assured her, though he shivered theatrically. “Just do me a favor — call the rescue squad if you don’t see me in class tomorrow. I’ll be the frozen block of ice, sitting in the parking lot.”

She grinned. “Thank you, Brian. For tonight.”

He simply smiled in return, and began to walk off. Sarah made to walk into her own building, when a sudden thought brought her up short.

“Oh, hey, wait a minute!” she called out to him. Obliging, he turned. “I’m sorry, I forgot to ask for my wallet back.”

“Oh, right.” Frowning, he stuck his hands deep into his coat pockets, searching. His eyes widened, and he gave her an uncertain grin. “Er... oops?”

Sarah stilled. “What’s ‘oops’?” she asked in a dangerous tone.

“Eh heh.” He smiled weakly. “I don’t have it on me.”

She groaned, falling back against the side of her building. “Great,” she said. “Perfect ending to this night.”

“Now, wait a minute,” Brian said. “Um, you gave it to me outside the club... and then you went inside and I...I could’ve sworn I stuck it in my pocket, but I guess I must have put it down somewhere...” He winced. “Sorry. I’ll go back and get it.”

“No, no.” Sarah lifted away from the brick wall. “I’m closer. You should be getting home, anyway. You’ll be way too tired to drive if you stay out much longer.”

“But, Sarah...”

“It’s okay.” She waved away his concerns. “It’s really not a big deal. It’s only, what?” She checked her watch. “Whoa, okay, three o’clock in the morning. If I run, I’ll catch them just closing up.”

“But, um... what if...”

She gave him a brilliant smile as she began to walk away. “I’m everyone’s packed up and gone by now. I’ll see you tomorrow in class!”

She hurried along the cement sidewalks that twisted around tall oak trees and tiny little landscaped areas, lit by wrought-iron streetlights. Her campus really was beautiful, especially at night: far enough from any metropolitan areas to see the stars shining in the sky, high above her head. She kept her hands balled up in her jacket pockets as she ran, a little angry at herself that she didn’t think to get something warmer when she was at the dorm, but it was too late, now. It was wonderfully quiet around her — the sounds of a few cars passing by as she neared the edge of campus, and now and then she would catch sight and sound of people talking together as they sat out in front of dorms, but that was about it.

She slowed as the Grey Cat came into sight. Walking fast, she made her way lightly up the steps and to the open door. She crept inside, one hand on the door.

“Hello?”

The bartender was wiping down his work area and stacking abandoned glasses as he went. He smiled as she came into sight. “You’re a little late for the show, hon.”

She returned the smile and walked up to the bar. “I was here earlier, and I think I lost my wallet somewhere.”

He winced. “Sorry, no one’s turned anything in. But you’re welcome to look around.”

“I’ll do that, thanks.” Blushing a little as he winked at her, Sarah walked over to the tables in the back. The chairs weren’t even stacked yet, and the ground was littered with torn receipts and cigarette butts. Crouching, she ducked her head to peer underneath the tabletops, squinting to see if anything more substantial lay abandoned on the chairs or floor. Nothing. She sat back on her heels, clicking her tongue against her teeth in annoyance.

“Damn. Damn, damn, damn.”

“Looking for this?”

Her heart skipped. Her hand, clinging to the rung of a chair for balance, clenched reflexively. Even as she climbed to her feet she knew who was behind her.

Of course she did.

He stood with one hand in the back pocket of his jeans, the other holding out her wallet. He looked just as he had on stage, only now he wore a dark leather jacket that fit like he had worn it for years. Strands of fine blonde hair fell over his mismatched eyes, giving him a boyish look that was at odds with the harsh planes of his face. But the look in those eyes was anything but boyish.

She mutely held out her own hand. He placed the wallet in it — his fingertips lingered against her palm, sending an electric tingle up her arm and through her body.

“I have to confess,” he said, drawing away, “that I nicked it between sets in the hope that you’d come back for it.”

“Between sets?” she asked, a little stupidly. She blushed when he spoke, and her hands trembled a little as they closed over her prize. She found it hard to look at him directly, fighting the urge to hide beneath her hair.

He smiled. “You and your boyfriend disappeared downstairs. I saw him put it down,” and he shrugged, “thought I’d save you the trouble to introducing yourself.”

“He’s not my boyfriend.” Inane, yes. But it seemed a very important point to make.

“He isn’t?” He apparently agreed -- some hitherto unknown tension left his frame, and he strode over to a table with new energy, swinging around a chair so that he could straddle it, resting his folded arms on the back. “Good. Then I won’t have to fight him for you.” Eyes slanting up at her from beneath that pale hair, he gave her a wicked grin. “Though some part of me was looking forward to it...” He sat back, a teasing grin making his lips twitch. “That’s your cue to scold me roundly, and tell me I’m a very bad man.”

Sarah could only stare, open-mouthed. He cocked his head to one side, eyes curious. “Well?” he prompted.

She shut her mouth. “Um, thank you for my wallet,” she said. “Uh... I think I should be going home now?”

He placed his chin on his folded hands. “Sure you want to do that?”

“Um... Yes?” she asked weakly.

He tilted his head so that his cheek rested against the back of the chair. “That’s too bad. I had planned on getting to know Sarah Williams better.”

She froze. “How do you know my name?”

He crooked a finger at her. “It’s on your ID. Which is inside that lovely wallet.”

“You looked inside my wallet?” Beyond the shock — which was beginning to wear off — Sarah could feel the faint stirrings of familiar outrage.

He was the picture of wide-eyed innocence. “Of course! What if you didn’t come back? How else would I return it to you?”

She put both hands on her hips. “You could have waited until I *didn’t* come back,” she said

archly. Oh, yes. Definitely familiar.

He cleared his throat theatrically. He drew a pack of cigarettes out of his jeans and pulled one from the bunch. “Yes, well,” he said, deftly placing the cigarette between his lips and producing a lighter. “You took your sweet time about it, didn’t you? I got bored.” He held out the pack. “Want one?”

“Nope,” she said cheerfully. “I don’t smoke. And I hate being around people who do. Disgusting habit.” Ignoring the simple fact that most people involved in theater have a serious nicotine addiction. Somewhere inside her a voice was screaming, *You idiot! What the hell are you doing?* But she just couldn’t help it.

“Ah.” He took the one out of his mouth, giving it a sideways look. “Oh, well,” he sighed. “We had a good ten years.” And tossed it and whole pack into a trashcan behind him.

Sarah stared. “Why did you do that?”

He arched one eyebrow. “Can’t you guess?”

She gave him a hard look. “You’re British, aren’t you?” she asked, responding to his clipped, cultured accent.

He nodded. “London-born.”

She tilted her head back, appraising him. “And how old are you?”

“As old as my tongue and slightly older than my teeth, to quote. Ask me another ridiculous question.”

She crossed her arms, trying to swallow the smile that refused to stop tugging at her mouth. “You’re a lot older than me.” Late twenties at most. She was picking a fight. But oh, it was so much fun...

“Don’t put me in my grave just yet.”

That made her falter, but only for a second. “I hate it when older men hit on younger girls,” she said, mimicking his mannerisms of disdain. “Don’t you?”

He smiled winningly. “You could always save me the trouble.”

That made her laugh, but she had to stop — she was afraid she’d start crying again.

Then the reality of what she’d been doing for the past few minutes hit her, and she went cold. She turned away. “I have to go,” she said. “Thanks.”

He sprang to his feet, graceful as any cat. Silently, he followed her right out the door, hooking a hand beneath her elbow as they entered the colder air of the outside. He nodded his head to one side, and for the first time she noticed a motorcycle leaning up against the side of the club. “Ride?” he asked.

She jerked away from that touch. She wanted it too much. “No, thank you,” she said, softening her tone. “I’m only a few minutes away.” She was not ready for this. She knew she wasn’t ready for this — it took every ounce of her control to not stop and scream at the world to slow down, she didn’t understand what was happening, was this real? She knew what she needed: to calmly step away from the situation, go someplace else, and think about it.

The “situation,” however, didn’t seem to have any intention of leaving her alone.

“I’ll walk you there,” he offered, very friendly, falling into step beside her.

“No,” she murmured. “It’s okay. It’s a safe campus.”

“Then I shall feel pleasantly redundant,” he said, smiling. “I always do my best when expectations are lowest.” He shrugged out of his jacket, letting it fall off his arms and into his hands, catching it before it hit the ground. He swung it up into the air and around her shoulders before Sarah could blink, tucking it around her in an oddly intimate gesture before moving away a safe distance.

Her hands came up to grip the worn leather without thinking. It smelled of motor oil and cigarette smoke, and beneath that was the dark, delicious scent so familiar to her senses it made tears prick at her eyes. The warmth of his body lingered in the smooth silk lining, seeping into her own. She shivered with pleasure so acute it was almost painful.

“Why did you do that?” she asked, subdued.

“You’re cold,” he stated, still matching her stride.

“What about you?”

He shrugged, slanting a smile in her direction. “I’m fine.” And it was true that he didn’t appear to feel the wintry bite in the air. The wind whipped around his slender frame, lifting his shirt away from fragile collarbones with all the delicacy of curved wings, but he moved easily and without discomfort.

Sarah’s heart was beating like a caged bird, throwing itself against her ribcage with such force that she wondered he didn’t hear it. This close to him, she could barely breathe.

“I don’t want you following me,” she barreled onward, heedless of his words, the playful lilt to the way he spoke that she loved so much. “You could be a psycho stalker for all I know.”

“But I’m not,” he returned with a wounded look. “And you know that — you saw me perform, after all.”

“That could just be your day job,” she muttered mutinously.

She was rewarded with his shout of surprised laughter. She loved the way he laughed. He threw his head back, hair falling away from his eyes with an exuberance she had never seen in him before. There was no fear in him, she realized. She had never thought of him as fearful, before, but she could see it now in the contrast. Fear had made him brittle, and hard, and cruel — given a sharp, defensive edge to his every word and whim.

Once, and only once, had she seen him a little like this. And that was a dream she thought lost forever.

Otherwise, he was the same... exactly the same. Even in the ripped jeans and the plain white shirt he still looked like a king. Something in the way he walked, the angle at which he held his head; all the child-like conceit of someone who has seen the world and said: “Yes. This is mine.” A kind of charisma that made you accept his sheer, unrepentant arrogance, because it was innocent. Even now, as she stared at him open-mouthed, his thin lips only twitched as he submitted to her scrutiny. He was in no way unnerved by her wide-eyed stare. He was waiting.

“So,” she said, a little breathlessly. “Um, to what do I owe the pleasure of your company?”

This is insane! a voice inside her hissed. *You are not trying to flirt with the resurrection of your lost love! Because things don't happen this way! Life doesn't happen this way!*

She shoved the persistent voice into a mental closet, locked the door, and threw away the key.

Her companion stopped to lean up against a tree. Sarah paused when he did, still wrapped up in his coat. He smiled when he saw that.

“Have you ever seen someone from across the room,” he began gravely, “and thought: ‘I must talk to that girl. I have to find out who she is.’ Well,” he continued wryly, “I hope you haven’t had those *exact* thoughts. Without a pronoun switch, I really am out of luck.”

She grinned. “So,” she replied lightly, “you steal her things? Follow her home?”

“Anything wrong with that?” he asked.

Sarah shrugged. “It’s a little experimental for my taste,” she said. “Call me old-fashioned, but I’m much more in favor of traditional methods: holding her hand, giving her your number, maybe even telling her your name —”

He kissed her. It happened so fast, she didn’t even know what was happening until she was already thoroughly involved; kissing him back with enthusiasm. He had taken a short step forward, maybe. Placed a hand softly against the curve of her jaw as a warning, perhaps. Even murmured “Is this traditional enough?” into her lips before beginning — but she really couldn’t be trusted to make an accurate report.

And — ah, gods — it was the same. It was the exact same. The way he touched her, the way he held her, the way his mouth moved against her own — all of it exactly and completely the same. It was the most wonderful kiss in the world.

It made her heart his.

Sarah began to cry again. She couldn’t help it, and was immediately infuriated with herself for doing so, but she really couldn’t seem to stop. All the frustration and joy and sorrow that had built up in her for the past few hours — the past month — came out in a soft torrent of tears that slipped down her cheeks and onto their mouths. So that, when he kissed her, he tasted like her own sadness and her own excruciating happiness, all mixed together in salty sweetness.

Instead of pulling away, he deepened the kiss, as if pulling out all of those tangled and terrible emotions out of her soul. Like drawing poison out of a wound. He kissed her thoroughly, until there was nothing left but a deep, overwhelming sense of peace. And of rightness.

He broke away, finally, and she was still sobbing in vexing little hiccups that she just couldn’t control. His arms came up to hold her.

“Now, this is new,” he murmured into her hair, one hand tangled in the dark, unruly softness of it. “I don’t think I’ve ever gotten this particular response to one of my kisses. Claims of adoration, that’s a popular one. Phone numbers have also been frequent. I’ve even had a couple girls swoon for sheer joy, but crying...” He caught her as she stumbled, her tears converted to heedless laughter at his outrageousness. He used it as an excuse to wrap his arms around her even more tightly. “Careful,” he warned. “You’re no good to me with a cracked head. You’ll begin speaking in tongues and such, and — all evidence to the contrary — I think being in love with a lunatic might not be the best of all worlds...”

“Giving up already?” she asked recklessly, still caught up in helpless giggles.

“Never,” he proclaimed. “You’ll have to come up with more than a bit of hysterics to frighten me away. Though I’d like to know why you’re still crying, beloved...”

“I don’t know. Obviously because I’m nuts, there’s no way this is actually happening. It can’t be.” She leaned into him, cheek pressed to his shirt. “Why’d you call me that?”

“What?” He looked a little surprised at himself. “Oh,” he said slowly. “I’m not sure.” He looked down where her head rested against his chest, her fingers curling into soft fabric. “But I don’t plan on stopping anytime soon.”

“Really?” she asked, and couldn’t help but smile like an idiot. “Are you so devoted to every strange girl you meet, or am I special?”

He grinned. “Very special. To be honest, women usually chase after me. Honestly, aren’t you being a little rough on your suitors, making them run you down?”

She was cold, suddenly, dashed into the freezing water of reality and shock. She tried to wriggle free of his embrace, half-heartedly attempting to shrug off his long arms. He relaxed his hold, allowing her to move comfortably — but didn’t let her go. She stopped, shivering, hair falling over her face.

“I think I should go home,” she whispered. “This is just... I need to go home. Please.”

He hesitated. Sighing, his arms relaxed to the point where they weren’t quite falling away from her body but it would have been easy to break free. Somehow, Sarah couldn’t bring herself to do that, yet. She stood, head bowed.

“I’m sorry,” he said in a distant voice. “You’re frightened. I’m scaring you.”

“No,” she said. Her glance darted upwards. “Yes. I mean, it’s just... why are you doing this?”

He smiled, leaning forward to rest his forehead against hers. “I told you already. I saw you. And I wanted to know you. And so I followed you.” He grinned, shrugging a little. “Pretty standard, actually. We just cut through the silly bits about pretending not to care.”

“But you don’t even know me!” she protested. “How can you be so — I mean, you can’t really... Things just don’t happen this way...”

Promise me this is real. Promise me.

He laid his thumb gently across her mouth, a soothing touch to silence her unspoken pleas. He half-smiled, hair falling into those dangerous eyes. “Do you always live life according to such boring rules?”

Fifteen years old. Calling on a fairytale. A king resplendent in glittering hangings of black, who had captured her heart and mind with one glance. Offered the world — and refusing it.

“No,” she whispered. She was mesmerized by the feeling of him — his hand against her cheek, on her lips; his heart beating beneath her fingertips. She spoke as if in a trance, hardly realizing what she said. “I don’t think I ever did.”

“Then this is no time to start, is it?”

She smiled reply, and he hugged her tight. She gave an inadvertent squeak as a good deal of air was squeezed out of her lungs. Wide-eyed, she looked at him — mere inches away from her face, now.

“Something wrong?” she asked, a little breathless.

His hand shifted, threaded into her hair and cupped the back of her head. He stood back a little. “I just don’t want you getting any ideas,” he said. “You have the tendency to run away when things are just getting interesting, sweetheart.”

“Where’d you get that idea?”

“You don’t have the best track record.”

“Oh,” she said in a small voice. “Right.”

“Mm hmm. That kind of thing tends to decimate a young man’s self-confidence, you know. Luckily, I possess a miraculous ability to bounce back.” He grinned. “And a very good grip.”

She reddened. “Give a girl a second chance?”

He gave her a mutinous look from beneath lowered lashes. “Only if you promise to hold still.”

She smiled, still slightly flushed. “I’ve got to have a good reason,” she said, tone gentle and flirtatious. “What are you offering?”

He returned the smile, fingertips gently pushing a strand of dark hair away from her face. “Anything. Everything. How does the whole world sound? Mm, too clichéd. What if I turned it upside-down?”

“I have turned the world upside-down...”

“That should be fun,” he continued, stroking her back, oblivious to the tension that filled her. “And we’ll rearrange all the constellations to your liking.”

“I move the stars for no one...”

“Stop!” she said wildly, flooded with memory and a startling sense of double-existence. “Stop!”

He hesitated, eyes growing dark. His hands came up to grip her forearms tightly. “Sarah,” he said. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

She stared at him. He was the same — he really was. This was the man she loved. She realized in a sudden, sweeping rush, that this, *this* was what she had fought for. All that terror and pain and heartbreak and struggle – it had all been worth it. Against all expectations, it had been worth it.

Because she had won.

She had a happy ending.

She felt weightless, buoyed by an overwhelming sense of wonderment and joy. It was like free falling — the realization that everything was finally going to be okay. Laughter filled her, spilling out of her mouth as she threw back her head in a wild celebration of sheer happiness. The world tilted, spinning towards destiny.

“Dear God,” he said in mock-despair, struggling to keep them both upright. “You really are a lunatic.” At that she laughed even harder, and finally slipped, taking him down with her. They sprawled out together on the cold cement sidewalk. He gave a bemused look where she lay next to him, incoherent with giggles. “It’s a good thing I don’t have any parents,” he said. “Because they’d never approve of you.”

“I don’t care,” she laughed, hardly aware of what she was saying. “I don’t care anymore! The world’s crazy, and *I don’t care!*” She threw her arms wide, embracing above her a sky that shimmered with stars.

He rolled over to lie on his side. They were too close — or just close enough, depending on who you asked — and he ended up placing his hands on either side of her shoulders to support himself. The line of his leg pressed against hers: warmth belied by the winter night. He looked down at her; hair falling into his mismatched eyes, thin lips in a secretive smile. She simply gazed back up at him. She shivered violently with both the cold and an unbearable excitement. But she was oddly content to lie there, caught between him and the frozen earth. Breathing in the familiar, dark scent of him, Sarah listened to the world around her. Insects chirped, complaining of the bitter season. The stark branches of trees rustled together, creaking to each other in the dark. And somewhere not too far away, someone had the radio turned on. It was set to a rock station, and this early in the morning they were playing forgotten old favorites; half-remembered songs from her childhood. The music was just loud enough for her to make out the words, faint and ethereal.

*(No one can blame you
For walking away...)*

“I should get you inside,” he said. “You must be turning to ice.”

“Getting there,” she whispered through trembling lips.

*(But, too much rejection –
No love injection.)*

But neither of them made to move, but only lay there, limbs tentatively entwined. Shifting his weight a little, his hand came up to her face — fingers lightly tracing the shape of her mouth, the line of her cheek.

*(Life can be easy
It’s not always swell)*

“I’m not sure I should let you out of sight,” he said. “Promise me you’re not just a dream.”

She couldn’t help it.

“You first.”

*(Don’t tell me truth hurts, little girl
'Cause it hurts like hell)*

He tickled her mercilessly, ignoring her pleas and protests as he targeted the soft places on her stomach and sides. “Cry uncle and say you love me,” he suggested cheerfully.

*(But down, in the Underground
You’ll find someone true)*

She managed to catch at his wrists, saving herself any further humiliation. “I’m going to *kill* you,” she threatened with unholy glee. “Better — I’ll get Brian to beat you up. He’s big, and he’s mean, and I can promise already, he doesn’t like you --”

He relaxed into her, letting his head drop close enough that she could feel his eyelashes against her cheek. “What if I kissed you again, instead?”

(Down, in the underground)

A land serene,
A crystal moon)

She stilled beneath his touch. “Didn’t you already get a free pass?” she asked. “I don’t like to give boys ideas.”

*(It’s only forever...
Not long at all)*

He took a moment, and their closeness suddenly became a trifle awkward. “Ah,” he said meticulously. “I can see you might have a point. I certainly am getting ideas.” And with that began to draw away.

*(Lost and lonely...
That’s Underground)*

Quick as thought, she wrapped her arms around his neck and drew him down again. She kissed him with all the sweetness and promise she had to give. Everything she had once withheld.

(Underground)

Above their heads, the cold stars sang.

Daddy, Daddy, get me out of here!

Ah, hah – I’m Underground (where nothing never hurts again)

Heard about a place today (daddy, get me out of here)

Where nothing ever hurts again (wanna go underground)

Daddy, Daddy, get me out of here! (wanna go underground)

Ah, hah – I’m Underground (get me underground)

Sister, sister, please, take me down! (daddy, get me out of here)

Ah, hah – I’m Underground (wanna go underground)

Daddy, Daddy, get me out of here!

No one can blame you

For walking away

But too much rejection

No love injection

But down in the Underground

You’ll find someone true (down underground)

Down in the Underground

A land serene,

A crystal moon...

It’s only... (it’s only, it’s only...)

It’s only

Forever

It’s not long at all

Lost and lonely

That’s Underground

Underground...

Daddy, Daddy, get me out of here!

Heard about a place today (heard about a place today)

Nothing never hurts again (where nothing never hurts again)

Daddy, Daddy, get me out of here! (daddy, get me out of here)
Ah, hah – I'm Underground (wanna go underground)
Sister, sister, please, take me down! (wanna go underground)
Ah, hah – I'm Underground (get me underground)
Daddy, Daddy, get me out!

WANNA LIVE UNDERGROUND!

Chapter End Notes

"A Forfeit of Dreams" was originally posted on Fanfiction.net in chapters from October 8th, 2001, and was completed on March 5th, 2003. It was removed from that site on May 11th, 2012.

I owe a debt of many thanks to Lady Caitlin and Sapphira2 from Fanfiction.net for their initial beta work on the story, as well as Megan Green, dmacabre, troubleinchina, kyoki_kiss, and (especially) akwilliams on Livejournal for their help in cleaning up the final draft. (Anyone want to catch more typos for me I'll put your name up here as well with my thanks.)

The author's note for Chapter 11 originally read as follows:

Officially, I claim that all historical anachronisms are Jareth's fault, and done on purpose. After all, he created that world. But for the curious, I'll point a few things out.

Everybody got their scorecards? Cool.

Alright. The biggies here are the stocking clubs, which did exist — but in the Renaissance. I have no idea whether or not they survived into the late 1700s, which is when this story is set, but found no evidence as such. The buffoons were also huge in the Renaissance. They did exist later, but in far less official terms. Also, Alexandre Dumas wasn't even born until 1805, and Queen Margot published several decades later. I included it because I wanted to, and because the French film version, with Isabel Adjani, kicks major ass. I also have no idea when Ascension Day (which did actually exist), during Holy week, was actually held in the course of the year. I put it right before summer in order to make my life easier. Another tiny flaw — coffeehouses officially banned women from admittance around this time, and they had casini instead. However, I had no idea what in hell a casini was, so I just had Sarah go to a coffeehouse. There was a good deal of fudging on my part, overall — but wherever I put in specific details, it's historically accurate to the best of my knowledge. The sumptuary laws, gambling, betrothal and wedding ceremonies, summerhouses, frequent horseback riding, canal races during Holy Week, secrecy among gondoliers, etc. — this is all straight from the history books. (Wow. I put too much work into this chapter. Note to self — never write period pieces, ever again.)

I did not, also, make up how often these people partied. Venetians had fun. Even the women, though that freedom came after marriage. Nor did I make up the easy mixing between the classes — for instance, it was quite common for nobles to run off and crash a sagra, where all the good dancing was. Venetians thought the rest of the

world nuts (and rather suicidal) for being so class-conscious.

Again, this is all to the best of my knowledge – the bulk of which comes from Maurice Andrieux, author of "Daily Life in Venice at the Time of Casanova." I owe him much gratitude. He was not my only source, but he was my favorite, and I stole several phrases from him.

This version contains lyrics for "One Line" by PJ Harvey and "Underground" by David Bowie.

ETA 7/6/12: I've succumbed to my own perfectionism, going back to slay a few stray adverbs and make some other cosmetic changes. It may be a slow process, but if you see anything that looks different, that's why.

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