Things You See Underground

by PaintedGlass

Summary

One of them wants her help, the other one wants her heart ... literally. The Labyrinth/Repo! The Genetic Opera crossover no-one asked for.

Notes

Just a heads up: this is going to primarily focus on Jareth/Sarah, set in the Repo! universe. You might notice a couple of little nods towards other characters as we go on, but if you're looking for a voguing contest between Jareth and Pavi, then I'm afraid you're in the wrong place. Chapter titles will most likely all be lyrics from various Repo! songs. Enjoy!
It looks like I'll be joining you

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Waking up from the sweetest of dreams can sometimes seem like the worst ordeal in the world. You're torn away from your heart's hidden desires, forced out from the comforting warmth of your thoughts and your bed to face the cold, cruel world. So, too, it would seem, that waking from a nightmare is always a blessing, when you're stolen away from whatever ghouls stalk the night and the relief floods through your bones. However, if the world you wake up to is far worse than any nightmare might depict, the picture each morning paints bleaker and blacker by the day, then you might find yourself in envy of your sleeping mind, whatever nocturnal terrors it chooses to curse you with.

Sometimes, reality can be the greatest horror show of all.

On what was to be the last day of her life, Sarah Williams woke from one such nightmare, squinting in the light of one more dreadful morning. Sweat-soaked sheets were her lone companion, and she shed them quickly, the same way she had cast off anyone else who might have shared her bed, or even her company. In her relatively short, lonely life, there hadn't been many to begin with. With the world the way it was, she found it hard to trust anyone but herself. She slipped out of bed, hissing to herself as her feet touched down on icy cold wooden floorboards. Heat was a rare guest in her apartment those days as well.

As she crept into her apartment's small bathroom to pee, she cast a wary glance at the ancient mirror over the sink, and deemed her long, dark hair worthy of one more day without washing. There was hardly enough left on the electric meter for a shower as it was, and there seemed little point in using up what small amount remained in her bank account to top up anyway, all things considered. The mirror, like its current occupant, had seen better days, scuffed and cracked in one corner, its bare edges pitted dark brown with age. Still, it covered up most of the patch of black mould which had cropped up on the wall months ago and still refused to be banished.

As always, Sarah diverted her gaze from the mirror as she undressed, eyes deliberately turned away from the silver line of scar tissue that bisected her chest. It had healed well since her surgery, but some wounds, despite their clean lines, continue to spread and fester beneath the surface. Sarah refused to acknowledge her own deep-reaching scars as she tied back her hair and slipped under the weak spray of a lukewarm shower.

The heart transplant that had saved her life had come at the expense of her mother's, and though Sarah wasn't technically to blame for the older woman's brave sacrifice, she had never quite forgiven herself for it either. The two of them had lived together in a place only slightly bigger than this, living from hand to mouth as Linda Williams' acting career stalled and stagnated, and the odd jobs she relied on to pay the rent grew harder and harder to find. When an epidemic of organ failures first swept the nation, claiming wave after wave of innocent lives, they had managed to fool themselves into thinking they had somehow avoided the plague. As it turned out, the two of them were just late to the party.

First came the breathlessness, the nagging pains and the non-stop sweating, swollen ankles and total exhaustion already at the advanced age of twenty-five. As much as Sarah tried to turn a blind eye on her own symptoms, she couldn't ignore her mother's, especially when the coughing started, thick phlegm laced with blood. Together, they had both bitten the bullet and found the money to have the relevant tests.
Heart failure. Already serious, already moving towards the final stages at an advanced pace, too far gone for any medication to touch. Surgery was the only escape. GeneCo, a company which had quickly risen up in the face of the organ crisis to become be all and end all of transplants – not to mention the only name in the business who offered financing – had said they would operate the same day. Customer comfort and satisfaction were their top priorities. The repayment plan for a new heart was insanely high, but Linda Williams had wasted no time in signing over the contract, urging Sarah to do the same.

Her mother insisted that Sarah went first: “What kind of mother would I be if I let my baby girl suffer any longer? You take today, sweetie. I'll be right behind you, once you wake up.”

It was only after the operation, after the weight and cost of a new heart had been added to her chest, that Sarah realised it had all been a ruse. Linda had never intended to go ahead with her own operation. Between the two of them, the monthly repayments for one heart would be difficult; for two hearts, it would be impossible. After that little revelation, the pair of them had argued a lot, but that was then – back in the days before Linda Williams became too sick to do much of anything any more.

Sarah's whole world had pretty much gone to shit in the couple of years since then. Some days, she mourned that her mother had died so soon; others, she was glad that Linda had at least gotten out before things really turned messy. As GeneCo's profits sky rocketed, their ethical code continued to deteriorate. If you couldn't pay, they took it away – a fair enough business practice for any company that didn't deal in vital organs. If you couldn't afford the borrowed organ in your chest, then GeneCo took it back. From what Sarah had heard, the cold-hearted Repo Men they employed to reclaim their property weren't that picky about customer satisfaction, or even leaving their victims breathing. They were a looming shadow behind your back from the moment you missed your first repayment, paving the way to the grave for anyone stupid or stubborn enough not to sell their very souls in order to keep up with those gruelling payment plans. That morning, a full eighty-nine days behind with her plan, Sarah could feel those Repo Men breathing down her neck.

As she dried off with a threadbare pink towel, she wracked her brain to think of any way she could have tried harder. She had been marked as a flight risk the second she missed the first monthly repayment, and the first of the unforgiving late fees began to pile on. There was no chance of skipping town unnoticed. Her credit rating was already in the toilet. She had begged and pleaded with her boss for another advance on her salary, but as she was often reminded, the company she worked for was a bank, not a charity. If she died tomorrow, there would be plenty of other drones willing to take her place. She had torn her heart in two by pawnng her mother's old jewellery, scrimped and saved on her groceries and on every other bill, and sold everything in her apartment that wasn't nailed down. The only thing she had left to cash in was her dignity, and even that wouldn't go for much. The sex industry was as fucked as everything else in the city, over-saturated with Zydrate junkies and other desperate souls who would do just about anything for their next hit, or even a hot meal.

Sarah's stomach took that as a reminder, grumbling louder than ever. Shivering, she dragged herself out of her stupor and into a white blouse, a charcoal grey pantsuit, and a pair of low heels. As she twisted her hair into an easy updo, she figured that she was far too sensibly dressed to sell herself on the streets that day anyway.

Breakfast was a quick and joyless affair: plain oatmeal and instant coffee served black. She ate slowly, tasting nothing, a growing weight in her stomach that oats just couldn't account for. When the meal was over, she rinsed off her dishes and snagged her keys from the hallway table, followed by her bag and jacket from the hook upon the door. She locked up the apartment behind her like any responsible, dutiful tenant who didn't have less than twenty-four hours to live.
Some people might have spent their last day on earth making peace with the end of their life, or visiting the places that held meaning for them one last time. Sarah didn't have the urge that day to do either. She had no family or real friends to say goodbye to, and no treasured possessions to give away; her only pleasant memories in that rat-infested city had died alongside her mother. She preferred to keep busy, refusing to wait out the day in a state of restless panic, and work was as good a way to kill time as any. Like any wage slave living on borrowed time, she was paid daily for the hours she put in, and nothing more. Today would be no different. At least the last small credit she received would cover a decent meal, and one last gift.

Work was pleasantly mundane, allowing her mind to wander but never too far. When Sarah emerged, the evening had already begun to close in, staining the streets in inky shades of grey and black, with only the infrequent street lamp to cast down its weak yellow glow. Her walk home was a slow one, hindered by dark thoughts and small, timid steps. *Dead woman walking*, she thought, and felt her dry lips creak into some vague semblance of a smile. At least she would finally be able to tell her creep of a landlord to get fucked, instead of having to keep up the polite, subdued woman act any longer. She could finally tell him to take his leering eyes and his wrinkled old dick and choke on them – the last highlight of a particularly shitty day. *Huh, my mother always did say I was an optimist.*

A sheath of colourful flyers had been spilled across the slick concrete, ground into mush in places by rain and footfall. Sarah stepped over the mess with only a brief glance downward, recognising GeneCo's latest prima donna smiling up at her, selling that month's Genetic Opera. As curious as Sarah was about the whole freak show, she refused to pump more money into the hypocrisy; the rich and glamorously grotesque came together over music and champagne to praise the incredible surgical skills behind their nose jobs and tummy tucks, while those truly in need of medical care went without. It all seemed repulsive to her. It also helped that even the cheap seats were well out of Sarah's price range.

During her grim walk, she stopped off to buy flowers for her mother's grave, choosing one of the few boutiques that still favoured real blooms over the sickly-smelling artificial alternatives. At the counter, she parted ways with most of the cash she had on hand for a decent sized bouquet, choosing pinks and oranges and purples – anything that might brighten up a cold grey headstone. Her mother had always been drawn to flowers; no matter what limp, glorified weed Sarah had brought her as a child, they had always been welcomed and marvelled at without a hint of false joy. Whatever pitiful graveside bunch she had received in the past, dependant wholly on her only daughter's struggling bank balance, Linda Williams was never one to complain. Sarah felt it was the least she could do to leave her with one last splash of colour in all her grim surroundings. She kept the flowers clutched to her breast, inhaling their sweet scent to block out the smoke and stink of the streets as she made her way to her mother's final resting place.

The change in volume was striking as she slipped away from the post-work crowds and into the almost empty cemetery. As Sarah passed through the wrought iron gates, the temperature seemed to drop, and she pulled her jacket a little tighter around her body, hearing the bouquet's paper wrapping crinkling against her chest. Only a couple of other mourners were in attendance that evening, and they paid her no mind as they attended their own loved ones. The place was lit sparingly, more so than the streets, and she found herself minding her footing more than watching the path ahead. She knew the way well enough by then. For a time, there was only the dull crunch of heels upon gravel, and the pounding of her borrowed pulse at her temples.

Linda Williams lay at rest at the end of a long row, positioned between a stone for *Terrance Bousman, Beloved Husband and Father*, and a massive stone mausoleum that left all the nearby graves in its shadow. The size of it screamed money, but in all of Sarah's past visits she had never once seen it visited. As she drew closer, it surprised her to see that one of the mausoleum's twin
doors had been left open a crack.

A pair of half-crushed soda cans sat atop her mother's granite headstone, and Sarah set them aside with a frown. Security patrols came and went, always keeping mourners and any would-be miscreants on their toes, and yet the trash still managed to sneak through. With all their morbid beauty – the elegance and gothic romance of the elaborately carved monuments and sepulchres – the city's cemeteries were a popular choice for a cheap first date. Despite living in a world full of death, it was all a little too morbid for Sarah's taste. Thinking about being dead was bad enough, but the thought of doing it while teenagers tried to get to second base just above your head was pretty galling.

“I'm sorry, Mom. I hope they weren't too … never mind.”

With a rueful smile, Sarah went to work. First she cleared away the cans, and then the dry, dead flowers from her last visit. Her mind was blissfully blank as she went through the familiar routine, tossing out the old water and refilling the small metal grave vase, before unwrapping the bouquet she had brought. As she knelt by her mother's grave, snipping the stem of each flower to size, it was actually a relief to realise no one would have to do this for her. Sure, there were a handful of colleagues and acquaintances who might care enough to notice she was gone, but there was nothing left in her account to cover a proper burial. Hell, even now that the annual death rate was finally starting to stabilise, it was almost impossible to find an employer who provided a decent funeral package. Mass graves for the poor might not have been a popular water cooler topic, but everyone knew they existed. For some of them, it was all they could hope for. As Sarah cut, and placed, and repositioned, she realised she had started to shiver.

With the flowers finally arranged to her liking, the gravestone itself wiped clean of dust and grime with an old handkerchief, Sarah sat back on her heels for a little family time. She talked to her mother about mostly trivialities: the new girl at work, the re-reading of one of her favourite books, and the new soup recipe she'd created. What she neglected to mention was that the soup had been made out of the dwindling remains of her mostly empty store cupboard, and that the book was one of the few that had been too dog-eared to sell. She omitted the fact that the new woman at work, the one with the kind eyes and the sympathetic smile, had no doubt already moved her things into Sarah's empty desk, ready to replace her when the inevitable happened. She talked and she talked, the occasional heavy tear leaking out from under her eyelids, until there was no way of putting it off any longer.

“This is … I guess this is the last time I'll be able to come here to see you, Mom. Things have been getting worse, and … and it's not looking too good right now. I've got until midnight tonight to pay up, and I just don't have the money. They're … they're going to take my heart. I'm sorry. I know we both … we both wanted more than this, but I've been trying so hard for so long, and I'm just so goddamn tired. There's nothing else I can do. I guess at least I'll be with you pretty soon.” She swiped at her eyes and sniffled, before letting out a moist little laugh. “I just hope you're not too disappointed in me when I get there. I'll be … it'll be fine. Listen, I love you, okay? I hope you know that. I really hope you know.”

As always when she was ready to leave, she pressed her fingers to her lips and then touched them to the place where her mother's name was engraved, sighing at the feel of the cold stone. Linda Williams was far past giving her opinion on anything. Unfortunately, the dead never talked back.

“Hey, you out there!”

The hissed salutation made Sarah jolt forwards almost fast enough to leave her shoes behind. A low cry left her lips when she found her hands resting on her mother's grave for support, and she stumbled upright in a hurry. When she went looking for its source, tossing her head left and right, she
found nothing and no one, making her wonder if she had simply dreamed it. “Hello?” she called.

“In here,” came a slightly louder hiss from her right. It seemed to be coming from the old mausoleum. “Listen, I'm sorry to interrupt your time with your mum, but I could really use your help in here. I think I can make it worth your while. We might … we might be able to help each other.”

Sarah frowned at the grand structure. Only a fool would trust a hidden whisperer in a graveyard. Only a fool would feel some minuscule stirring of hope with death already looming on the horizon. Nevertheless, she felt her feet moving forwards.

Chapter End Notes

P.S: for those waiting for an update on IHH, I swear I haven't forgotten.

Title from: Things You See in a Graveyard
The mausoleum's metal door was stiff and heavy, and it gave an unearthly groan as Sarah urged it further open. Beyond the entrance, utter darkness stretched out before her. There was only the faint ghost of what must have been a tomb – nothing more than a vague silhouette – and the threat of the unknown lurking beyond it, setting warning bells jangling in her head. It was disconcerting to see so little, knowing that someone inside could be watching her. She paused in the doorway as the stranger's voice came whispering out from within.

“Over here. Please, you have to hurry.”

“Yeah? Well, the way I see it, I don't have to do shit.” She squinted into the blackness, keeping one hand clamped around the door's edge, as if it might prevent her from being sucked into the void.

“Can't you find a light in there?”

The stranger's voice rose out of the dark, louder this time, letting her know it was male. “Not in my current predicament, no.”

“I'd feel a whole lot better if I could see you in there, and a whole lot less likely to just walk away.”

A sigh that perhaps should have been hushed only resonated off the structure's thick stone walls, morphing into the dry, angry hiss of a snake. It did nothing to ease Sarah's misgivings. “Look, I realise how this all seems, but I swear to you, I'm not trying to lure you into my bloody lair or anything. I really need your help.”

Sarah loosened her death grip on the door but refused to move forwards. “I bet that’d be reassuring, coming from anything other than a disembodied voice in a graveyard.”

“Oh, for the love of … look, I'm not going to do anything to you, all right? I couldn't hurt you even if I wanted to. I'm a bit stuck here and I just need you to get me down. I'm not joking. Haven't you got a light or something – a torch, a lighter, anything – so you can see that?”

After a moment's consideration, Sarah reached into her bag. “Fine. I have a flashlight on my cell, but if you're thinking of stealing it, or my bag, you should know they're both pretty much worthless. You'd only be wasting your time.”

The man in the dark scoffed. “I'm not trying to rob you.”

That slight emphasis on his last word made her pause, but eventually she fumbled the device free. A couple of taps caused a bright white glow to leap out into the vast chamber, pushing back a little of the blackness. Sarah swung the light back and forth, picking out a pair of dusty tombs, a litter of tools and tiny glass bottles, and a thick mass of cobwebs, before finally settling on the vague shape of a man.

He was suspended, upside down, from the mausoleum's vaulted ceiling, at least five or six feet off the ground, with one booted foot caught in what appeared to be a thin wire of some kind. It cast off an evil glint in the light, and Sarah winced at the thought of it cutting into her own skin. Thankfully, the man's boots looked thick enough to act as a shield. It was hard to get a proper glimpse at the man himself; from the dishevelled look of him, he had been twisting and struggling to free himself for a while. There was a whole lot of fabric surrounding him, whichever angle she looked at him from,
and a lot of tangled pale blond hair, which he casually attempted to brush out of his eyes. For a moment, she could only gawk at him. The man seemed surprisingly calm as he stared back.

“Satisfied?” he asked, after hanging under her scrutiny for several seconds.

“What the hell happened to you?”

The stranger flashed her a tight-lipped smile. “I picked a fight with a sneakily placed snare, it would seem. I'll leave it to you to figure out which of us came out on top, as I seem to be suffering from a serious rush of blood to my head at the minute. I don't suppose you could …?”

It all quickly fell into place. The trap, the need for secrecy and urgency, and the man's desperation to get moving. Every wall of the cemetery was plastered with the warnings: **Graverobbers will be executed on sight.**

“You're here to steal from the dead?” Sarah spat.

Even upside down, the man made a valiant effort at a shrug. “It's not the most admirable of pastimes, I'll admit, but needs must when the devil drives, as they say.” He flung his arms down – or up, as the case would be – to gesture at his trapped leg. “Can you believe these people? Someone could get seriously bloody hurt one of these days.”

“Yeah, the nerve of them, wanting to keep their dead relatives from being dug up and desecrated,” she sneered. “I'm surprised the GeneCops haven't found you yet. They switch up their patrols at night to stop the wrong people sneaking in.”

He actually had the audacity to wink at her. “Well, I guess you must be my lucky charm for the night. I thought I might have passed out before the authorities came to shoot me down. That would have been embarrassing. Now, if you wouldn't mind giving me a hand – and perhaps turning that light away from my eyes?”

Sarah folded her arms, flashlight still in hand, aimed staunchly at him. “Why should I help you? For all I know, you could have been planning on digging up my mom next. Hell, if I dropped dead right now, I bet you wouldn't have any hesitation when it came to messing with a nice fresh corpse.”

The man shook his head and chuckled. “What's your name, love?”

“… it's Sarah.”

“Very well, Sarah. I'm Jareth. A pleasure to meet you. Well, Sarah, from what I overheard, that sounds like it might not be all too far away for you – the dropping dead part, I mean. You have a heart you can't pay for, and when the Repo Man calls, he isn't gentle. Pass judgement on my habits all you like, but at least I wait for people to die before I take the parts I need from them.”

Sarah screwed up her nose. “What does anyone need from dead bodies?”

The man – Jareth – quirked an eyebrow. “You've heard of Zydrate, haven't you?”

“Yeah, who hasn't?” Zydrate was GeneCo's drug of choice when it came to treating post-op pain. Offering a more powerful high than any haze morphine had to offer, it was highly effective at chasing away those surgical blues … and hugely addictive. Those without the proper prescription for the real stuff had to settle for the black market version to scratch their itch.

“Well, where do you suppose it comes from? GeneCo certainly aren't giving it away. It's far too precious for that.” He nodded at the nearest tomb. “You don't think so many choose to risk their lives
robbing graves just to scrounge up something as commonplace as old clothing or the odd piece of jewelry, do you? No – the dead hold something far more valuable. The base compound for the drug is inside everyone; every good human brain is a goldmine for the stuff, all that dopamine and those lovely endorphins your body uses to chase away your troubles. So much of it goes to waste, just lying underground and rotting away. It just takes a person of a certain constitution to … recover it.” From somewhere within the layers of his clothing, he managed to draw out a small syringe and, with a vaguely sinister smile, tapped it to the side of his nose. “In and out, quick and easy, no harm done. It's not as though they can feel it any more.”

His words seemed to itch at her gorge. Something greasy and heavy turned over in her stomach, and all of a sudden, she could feel her heart hammering at the back of her throat. “You mean … from their brains? You mess with the dead just so you can … what? Steal the Zydrate from them just to turn a profit? That's disgusting – way worse than just looting the bodies! I'd shoot you myself if I could.”

With another sigh, Jareth made the syringe disappear again. “I do wish you'd listen to my proposal first – especially seeing as my particular trade will help me help you get out of the city safely.”

That got her attention. Hope bubbled up high and giddy within her chest, and it was impossible to squash it back down completely. “Bullshit,” she insisted. “What are you gonna do, bribe the guards with Z? Don't tell me you're thinking of something stupid like trying to actually drug them. They'll kill you before you get close enough to try.”

He rubbed a hand across his eyes. “I don't expect I'll be able to make you understand, least of all when I'm hanging upside down. The long and short of it is, you need safe passage out of the city, and I can provide it. For now, let's just say that the drug gives me certain connections and leave it at that, shall we?” From his prone position, he managed to twist just enough to point at something lying on the ground, far beyond his reach. When Sarah followed his finger, she spotted a small silver knife. “I managed to lose most of what was in my pockets when I was snared, including some rather invaluable tools. All you need to do is-”

Sarah's frown deepened. “What kind of connections do you have?”

Jareth smirked. “Cut me down and I'll tell you.”

“Tell me and I'll help you down, if I like the answer,” Sarah countered.

“If I told you, you wouldn't believe me. I'm afraid you're just going to have to trust me until the right time comes.”

“Hardly a compelling argument,” she grumbled.

With an irritating degree of nonchalance, Jareth managed to slide his hands into his pants pockets. He shot her a much brighter smile. “From where I'm hanging, love, it might seem like a poor offer, but it's the only one you have right now. Either we both agree to help one another, or we're both dead before the dawn. The least you could do is give me a chance.” His expression sobered. “It might not mean anything coming from a stranger, but I give you my word that I'll do all I can to help you in return. I promise I won't abandon you. I can't do much more than that unless you let me down.”

The rational part of Sarah's mind told her to simply walk away. It would save her the hassle of setting loose a dangerous criminal, but more than that: it would prevent her from letting that vague spark of hope she felt truly catch fire. She was already doomed. Death was the only outcome she could expect, and yet, if she left the man – Jareth, she reminded herself, he just had to give me his name – there for the GeneCops to find, she would have all but sealed his death warrant as well. As jaded as
she was with life, despite how little of it she had left, Sarah didn't think she could live with that on her conscience. The grave robbing son of a bitch had no doubt watched the growing guilt in her expression as she came to her decision, as he spoke up again.

“So, in the spirit of helping each other cheat death, would you mind …?”

Sarah found herself taking a small step forwards. “I really shouldn't.”

Jareth's winning smile grew warmer. “And yet I'd be ever so grateful if you did.” He nodded again towards the knife. “Please, Sarah. First thing's first, all you need to do is pick it up.”

The sound of her sensible shoes echoed in the cavernous space. Even with the light from her phone, the cold and the darkness seemed to be closing in all around her like a shroud. She kept her eyes on the stranger as she bent down, still half-expecting some trap to be sprung. The little knife slipped easily into her palm. It was surprisingly warm to the touch, and felt far weightier than it looked. Though the handle appeared to be silver, it cast up a strange golden glow under the light from her phone. “I really don't think this will be enough to get through the wire.”

“Trust me, it'll work. You're doing so well. Now, it might be easier for you to do the cutting instead of me bending myself in two. Would you be up for that?”

Sarah sighed. “Okay, but how am I supposed to reach it? I can't …” The words died on her lips as she followed Jareth's pointed gaze to the nearest tomb. Between its stone base and the deep casket itself, it came almost up to chest level. Balanced atop it, it would be easy for her to reach up for the wire. “Oh, god. You really don't have any respect for the dead, do you?”

“Of course I do. I respect them immensely when they serve such a worthy purpose. If it makes you feel any better, try to imagine it as just standing on a big rock.”

“Yeah, a rock with a real dead body inside it.” Still, she set her bag, phone, and the knife down atop the tomb's wide lid.

Seeming to sense what she had in mind, Jareth offered her the flat of one gloved palm for support, twisting his hand to suit her needs. What a gentleman. Sarah chose to ignore him as she toed off her shoes. She hissed as first one foot and then the other absorbed the full brunt of the freezing cold, gritty floor. It was probably better not to think about what kind of graveside crap she might be standing in. Laying both her hands upon the lid, she slipped a foot into one of the deep grooves decorating the tomb's high sides. From there, it was easy enough to boost herself up.

The tomb's surface was smooth, enough so to feel slippery in places, and she felt grateful for abandoning her heels. Even so, her balance wavered as she came to stand up atop it, and she had to brace herself on the nearest available object. Unfortunately, said object just so happened to be in the region of Jareth's hipbone – or what she hoped was his hipbone. Judging from the fucker's silent smirk, anything was possible. The brief warmth of his body seemed to have sunken beneath her skin, itching at her fingertips. It made her all the more determined to get things over with as quickly as she could.

Careful not to overbalance again, she bent to scoop up her tools. The strange little knife warmed her hand, and when she examined it again, the blade did seem awfully sharp. Maybe there was a hope in hell of it working after all. Clutching the knife and wedging the phone between her chin and chest, she shuffle-walked her way to the very edge of the tomb. To even reach the wire, she had to get far closer to her target than she had intended; she turned her chin as much as possible to avoid having a far too intimate moment with Jareth's thigh. When she dared to glance downward, Jareth's face was only a foot or so away from her knees, and he was wearing a filthy little smile as he gazed up – or
down, as it was – at her.

“Excellent – very nice, love. You're doing wonderfully. Now, as much as I'm enjoying the view from here, I want you to slowly.”

Sarah stretched up, seized hold of the wire, and pressed the knife to it. The blade sank through as if she were cutting nothing more than cotton thread.

Jareth hit the stone floor on his hands and rolled, coming to land on his back with a graceless yet satisfying thud. He sat up with a groan, wincing as he rubbed at the back of his head. “Did you have to be quite so rough? Normally I like that in a woman, but not when I've been held prisoner for almost an hour with all that blood draining into my head. There could be lasting damage.”

Sarah lowered herself down with considerably more care. “Well, you're in luck: from the way you're letching, it looks like not all your blood went to your head.” She watched as he struggled back onto his feet, and then thrust the knife into his waiting palm – handle first, fortunately for him.

“The fact that you were close enough to notice almost makes it all worthwhile.”

He took a moment to shake himself off before starting to recover his fallen tools, and Sarah used his distraction to look him over. No visible diseases or any other weapons, at least. Right side up, she expected him to seem more normal, but the man was anything but. The hair that fell loose and wild to reach his shoulders was a pale gold, streaked here and there with bright shots of blue and silver, and there were sweeps of shimmering white above each eye. He was lean but not skinny, his face angular and well-defined without seeming gaunt as he turned his head to straighten out his clothing. He was dressed like some kind of nobleman who was down on his luck, all leather and lace and velvet, but all of it old and well worn. The overcoat that draped his body had once been grand, a rich golden fabric with detailed embroidery along the lapels, but now it was held together by little more than a prayer and spiderwebs of fraying fabric in places. The navy blue of his shirt peeked out from underneath, with ruffles along the front and lace dripping from the cuffs. Where the shirt lay open, a wide silver pendant hung midway down his pale chest, urging her gaze lower, past his belt buckle and along a pair of long, leather-clad thighs.

By the time he had refilled his pockets and turned to look at her again, there was an uncomfortably warm throb between her legs. It's just because I'm going to die soon. Anyone would be desperate for one last fling, no matter who it was with. You need to focus on if he can help you live, Sarah, not how well he can fuck you. The handsome smile he offered her did nothing to help the runaway train of her thoughts.

“Regardless of how it was done, I have to thank you for freeing me. Not everyone would have done the same, had they been in your shoes. You won't regret this.”

Sarah breathed out a sigh as she bent to slip her heels back on. “Little late for that,” she grumbled. With her ass in the air, the sensation of being watched prickled all along her spine. Straightening up in a hurry, she cast a wary eye over at her new cohort. His gaze was settled in all innocence on the tomb beside her, but the lazy smirk on his lips hinted that it had wandered. A not entirely unpleasant shivered coursed through her, and she busied herself with zipping up her bag. “So, you said you can help me. Where to next?” she asked, in lieu of more squabbling.

Jareth considered as he turned up his collar against the cold. “Well, if you're able to wait, I still have some business to conduct here.” The syringe he had shown to her made a reappearance from between his gloved fingers, and he pointed it at the nearest tomb. “While we're here, I don't suppose you'd mind if I …?”
Sarah groaned and flapped her arms in defeat. “Sure, why not? Hey, it's not like my life is on the clock or anything.”

Jareth, who by then had the plunger of the syringe between his teeth as he tested the tombstone's weight, gave a grunt of exertion. “It paysh to be payshunt, lub,” he gritted out.

“Maybe when you've got time to spare, you can afford to be patient.”

“Hmm. Litthul do hyoo know.”

She crossed her arms and frowned as she watched his struggle. To his credit, he did not ask her to help him. Her disgust at his misuse of the dead must have shown plainly on her face. By the time he finally got the lid moving, the heavy huffs of his breathing were audible even over the loud grind of stone upon stone. He shoved it over just enough to gain access to what was within; if it fell to the floor, the two of them had no chance in hell of picking it up again.

Unable to watch the desecration itself, Sarah turned away, but not before the face of the corpse had been bored into her brain. All at once, the sweetly musty stink of that whole death box was too much for her. She hurried over to the mausoleum doors for a much needed gulp of fresh air, both of her arms hugged tight around her midsection as she fought her churning stomach into submission.

It was good to peer out into the real world outside of their little chamber as she prepared to ignore whatever grisly noises Jareth made as he went to work. As she clutched herself and shivered, she realised she had started to hum under her breath – some catchy little jingle she vaguely remembered from one of the old GeneCo ads. It seemed a fitting accompaniment to the morbid events that were unfolding behind her. The tune on her lips quickly died, however, when the harsh white glare of a searchlight swept by. Sarah froze in place, her rented heart pounding beneath her ribcage. The GeneCops had commenced their evening prowl, guns at the ready, and she was standing only feet away from an open tomb. Now that her new friend had reawakened the ridiculous notion of hope in her mind, she found that she really didn't feel ready to die yet after all.

“Oh, Jareth? If you still … um … have your hands in the cookie jar back there, I suggest you get them out right now, 'cause we've got company.”

Chapter End Notes

I couldn't resist sneaking a couple of references into this chapter. You may recognise Jareth's outfit is based on Bowie's 50th birthday concert, and his unfortunate predicament is a tribute to the deleted Needle Through a Bug scene from Repo!

Title from: Chase the Morning
“Rub your eyes and turn your head into my shoulder.”

“Are you serious? I've already—”

“Just trust me,” Jareth whispered. “If you want this to work, then stop arguing and just turn your head. Hell, pretend we're in love, if you want.”

Biting back a reply, Sarah did as she was told, turning her face into her new-found companion's golden overcoat. At once, the arm around her shoulders tightened its hold.

“There, love, that's right, just keep on walking.”

His voice was pitched low – the soft, rumbling purr one might use to soothe a frightened child or pet. It was only natural to take some small comfort from it, or so Sarah told herself. The scent of him filled her nose with every breath – warmed leather, and an oddly fresh, woody smell that took her senses right out of the dank city. With his coat as worn as it was, the soft fabric against her cheek made him seem almost cuddly. It was only when she reminded herself of exactly where his hands had just been, that she remembered to shudder. Oblivious to her disgust, Jareth went on, his voice rising and falling where appropriate to keep up their pretence.

“She's in a better place now. Don't look at them, just keep on holding onto me. You might want to try sniffling a little. Remember, they're looking for hiders and runners, not respectable mourners. It's all right, pet. There, there. Cry all you need to, darling.”

Instead of moving away from the advancing patrol, Sarah realised that Jareth actually seemed to be steering towards them. She had to force herself to keep pace. Her lungs seemed to shrivel up within her chest, making it harder to breathe as the nearest armed guard paused to size them up. There was an LED lamp on the end of the guard's gun, and Sarah winced as its brightness came to rest on them, letting out a deliberate whimper as she pressed the side of her face to Jareth's chest. She could feel the weight of that gun resting on her; all it would take was one little squeeze of the trigger to bring their charade to a bloody end. Her whole body felt like it was shaking, the age old struggle of instinct as she prepared to fight or flee, or even worse – to freeze in a panic. An image of just kicking Jareth in the shin and running wildly for her life flashed into her brain. She felt a surge of self-pride when she managed to turn a mad, unquestionably suicidal burst of laughter into a sob instead.

“Hold it right there,” a stern female voice called, bringing the pair of them to a sudden stop. “Little late to be out here, isn't it?”

“I'm so sorry,” Jareth said, and the words came out so earnestly that Sarah herself almost believed them. “We're not interfering with your rounds, are we? Only she was upset about her mother today and it's so hard to get the proper degree of privacy nowadays, what with those gaggles of teenagers you find lighting up cigarettes here after school's out. Honestly, they treat the place like it's some kind of dreadful social club. Still, I'd hate to be a bother if it'd be best for us to come sooner …”

“Hmph. Move along, civilian,” the guard grunted.

Jareth demeanour was as smooth as silk as he bowed out of the confrontation. “Oh, of course, of course. Again, we're sorry to have disturbed you. Keep fighting the good fight. Come along, love.
Let's get you home.”

Sarah managed to keep it together as Jareth escorted her out of the cemetery and a little ways down the street, before her knees just unlocked. He was forced to wrap both arms around her as she sagged against his chest, gasping for air and unable to stop herself from shuddering.

“I thought we were going to die. I actually thought we were going to die.”

Jareth managed to take hold of her shoulders as he turned to face her properly. His pale blue eyes were striking, and Sarah noticed for the first time that the left pupil was a good deal larger than the right, only adding to his strange beauty. As he peered down at her trembling form, a frown descended over his face, finally wiping away that insouciant expression. “You’re shaking like a leaf. Come on, we're getting you a place to sit down and something to drink before we do anything else. Stay with me, love.” It was something of a relief to hear that his voice had lost its note of false pity.

Still dazed, Sarah allowed herself to be propelled along the dark streets on shaky legs, until they reached a small late night coffee shop. With one arm still hooked around her, Jareth guided her inside and left her at a clean table next to the window. He watched until she had sunk down into her seat, and then, after giving her shoulder an awkward pat, he headed off to the counter to order.

Sarah was grateful for the chair beneath her, and for the almost empty space. As she sat at the table, the warmth of the little café began to seep into her bones, easing away some of her shock, and that awful numb feeling in her chest. Slowly, the neurons in her brain began firing again, until she was conscious enough of her behaviour to be embarrassed about that little panicked damsel in distress performance. It was more than a little humiliating to know that, without Jareth, she would probably still be in that graveyard, still frozen in panic. Or dead. She felt certain she had to be blushing as Jareth sidled over to her again, one hand braced on the table top as he leaned in for privacy. Silken threads of his hair brushed her cheek as he spoke close by her ear.

“I don't suppose this is a good time to ask, but you don't have any money on you by any chance, do you? Only I'm a little low on funds right now.”

Sarah rolled her eyes as she reached into her bag to extricate a couple of bills. She thrust them into the air beside her head, and Jareth accepted them with a wink.

“Thanks, you're a star. I'll pay you back, I promise.”

“Yeah, I doubt that,” Sarah grumbled, but it was to empty air; Jareth had already sashayed his way back over to order, and had his arms rested on the counter. He leaned in to murmur something that made the grown woman behind the register giggle like a teenager.

Sarah made a coarse sound of disgust at the back of her throat. “Oh, spare me,” she muttered. She wiped a hand through the layer of condensation that obscured the window, making herself a clear patch to stare out of while Jareth completed his transaction.

He returned after a few minutes, bearing a tray. He slid into the seat opposite her and nudged a pile of loose change, and a cup of hot chocolate over to her side of the table. “I figured you needed sugar, and it’s too cold out for something like orange juice. I hope that's okay.”

Sarah accepted the money and the cup with a small nod of thanks. She remained wary of the alliance she'd managed to involve herself in, but still, that cup of hot chocolate felt nice, cradled between fingers that still shook slightly. It had been a long time since anyone had tended to her needs, even if it was with her own money. She watched as Jareth concentrated on his own half-cup of coffee, turning the dark brew almost white as he added enough cream and sugar to tranquillise a medium-
sized child. When he noticed her watching him, he grinned and gestured to the mound of sugar packets and individual creamers that took up nearly half of the tray.

“Usually, this many accompaniments would cost extra, but I think the girl at the till is a little sweet on me,” he said, and went back to his mixing, as though that explained everything. Under the café’s artificial lights, his eyes seemed bluer than ever, and they sparkled with good humour.

The pair of them sat in an almost companionable silence for several minutes – the graverobber and the nearly dead girl, two good friends just taking a moment out to watch the world go by. It seemed like the beginning of a particularly dark joke, and Sarah couldn't help feeling a little disgusted at herself for sticking around for the punchline.

“So, you said you could get me out of the city,” she said, to get them back on track.

Jareth took a slow sip of his drink and smiled in satisfaction. “That I can.”

Sarah drained half of her own cup in three long swallows. The creamy liquid was still hot enough to scald her throat, but it was worth it to feel heat bloom inside her belly. “Well, what are you waiting for? Let's drink up and go. It's not like I have a lot of time right now.”

Jareth ran a gloved finger across his mouth, tugging on his lower lip to reveal a bright flash of jagged white teeth. “I might have neglected to mention something.” His eyes dipped to the table, where he began to toy with his pile of dead sugar packets, tearing each one into neat little strips as he went on. “Getting you past the city gates safely will take a fair amount of resources – far more than I have on hand at present. I'm afraid you're going to have to bear with me a little longer.”

“And by 'resources', you mean …?”

“Zydrate, yes.”

All that sweetness she had ingested seemed to curdle on her tongue, making her wish for water instead. She shoved her drink aside. “You said you had connections. You didn't say anything about needing to score more drugs.”

“I knew you wouldn't be happy. Look, I can't really explain at this moment in time, but the connection I have depends on a certain amount of Z, if we're to make sure you actually get past the gates. Now, we have two options. The first one involves a rather lengthy trip to the other side of town, where I'll be able to get my hands on a small stash, and then the journey back.”

Sarah raised a cynical brow. “And the second option?”

Jareth's mouth turned up into a sheepish smile. “I don't suppose you'd want to risk another trip to the cemetery tonight, would you?”

The day had been hard enough on her emotions, and Sarah finally decided she'd had enough. “You know what? You should just admit you're full of shit, that way you'd save us both a lot of time. You can't do anything to help me.” Her chair legs squealed against the vinyl flooring below as she pushed back from the table. “It's been real nice saving your ass today, Jareth, but I might as well head home. Maybe if I pack now and get moving, I can at least get a head start on the fuckers. Don't worry about paying me back for the coffee, I doubt I'll care much about a couple of dollars when they finally find me.”

As she whipped around the table, Jareth stood to intercept her. “Sarah-”

“Forget it. You lied, and that's your problem, but hey, I was stupid enough to let you get my hopes
up. My mistake. Have a nice life, Jareth – at least until they catch you digging up dead bodies, that is.”

She stormed out onto the street without looking back. Only a moment later, she heard footsteps pounding against the concrete as Jareth raced to catch up.

“Sarah, please, you have to hear me out—”

“I told you, I’m done talking to you. Now leave me alone.”

Apparently, Jareth was too stubborn to listen. When pleading with her and attempting to cut off her path proved futile, he settled for simply walking along beside her, his mouth turned down and his head hanging slightly. Seeing him that way made Sarah feel like she had kicked a puppy – until she caught him watching her out of the corner of one eye, seeking out her sympathy. Once again, he was trying to play her. She gritted her teeth and sped up, heels clattering against the sidewalk as she made a valiant attempt to lose him. Unfortunately for her, she was dealing with one sick puppy who was determined to follow her home.

“Don't you have anything better to do?” she finally snapped at him.

Evidently not. He remained a stubborn shadow at her side, keeping pace with her no matter how long and deliberate she made each stride. He followed along as life and funds drained out of the city they walked through; as the store fronts they passed began to advertise graffitied wooden boards instead of merchandise, and the dark mouth of every alley vomited trash out onto the sidewalks. The two of them didn't speak, each one seemingly resigned to the other's company.

What little hope Sarah had harboured that Jareth might actually be of use to her had died, but she had to admit, it felt sort of good to know she would face her final few hours with a distraction at her side, however annoying. Even if he only wanted to alleviate his own guilt by seeing things through to the end, even if he was simply hoping for the chance to pick over her few possessions since she'd no longer be needing them, at least she wouldn't have to die alone. Going out peacefully sounded like a better option than running anyway – at least until that inevitable fear of death reared its head again and changed her mind.

By the time they had reached the end of her block, she was already half considering stopping off to pick up some Chinese food, and a couple of cheap bottles of wine to see them through the night. Her half-hatched plans went out of the window the moment she spotted the sinister stranger standing outside her apartment building.

He was dressed from head to toe in black, a long leather trench coat draping his body, a full face helmet concealing his features. Even from a distance, Sarah recognised the white and red GeneCo patch on his sleeve, and the large leather medical bag clutched in his hand. The Repo Man had come to pay a house call, and he had already found her landlord.

“Fuck.” Sarah stopped dead in the middle of the sidewalk. Thankfully, the two men appeared to be deep in conversation, their attention on the run-down building that Sarah called home. Jareth, who had been taking in their surroundings, rather than the path ahead, carried on for a couple of paces before he, too, came to a halt.

“Problem, love?” he threw back over his shoulder. Sarah saw the new tension take hold of his body as he spied for himself just what the problem was. “Fuck,” he echoed.

Concurring after only a shared glance, the two of them ducked into the nearest alleyway to hide, each seeming to read the other's mind as they sank down to a crouch behind an overflowing
“Well, he's early,” Jareth muttered.

“You're telling me.” With her back against the wall in more ways than one, Sarah put her head in her hands. “He's probably going to stay close to wait for me to come home. Oh, this is just great.” From between her fingers, she saw Jareth hesitate before he placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

“Wait, the actual repossession can't legally occur until after midnight, correct? So what's the issue? I won't allow him to intimidate you before then.”

“The problem is that he and my fuckhead of a landlord will be staking out my place until then. Even if I wanted to leave again, I'd be trapped, nice and cosy until midnight comes.”

The hand at her shoulder gave a gentle squeeze. “Do you have to go back? I mean, is there anything there that you really need to make an escape?”

Sarah dropped her hands down between her knees as she considered her near empty apartment. “Old photos. Books. Maybe some more practical shoes if I really am gonna run after all.” She sighed. “I could cope without the shoes, I guess, but if I'm never going to be able to come back here, I won't be able to visit Mom's grave. Those pictures are all I have of her.”

Jareth began to stand. “Then I'll get them for you. Give me your keys.”

Sarah pulled at his arm, urging him back down. Her fingers caught in the soft webbing of his coat, briefly binding the two of them together. “Thanks, but that won't work. The whole building might look like it's falling down, same as the rest of the neighbourhood, but there are cameras all over the entrance. Mr. Sapochnik may be a piece of shit, but he knows his tenants. The second he sees a stranger heading up to my floor, he'll be all over you – especially if he's been paid off to watch out for me. He'll most likely demand the keys back, or just call in Mr. Repo Man to get you talking.”

Jareth was silent for a moment as he stared at the brick wall opposite. Some gifted grafitti artist had chosen to breathe life into the drab alleyway with a little political piece. Painted across the brick, at least three feet high, stood a dragon, the head of which had been lovingly caricatured into that of Rotti Largo, GeneCo's owner and founder. The GeneCo beast towered over a scorched and blackened city, still belching out bright red and orange flames down onto the dying citizens below. Wherever GeneCo left its mark, people suffered.

As Jareth stared at the grim tableau, he began to rummage through his pockets, until he managed to draw out a battered book of matches. He held them up for Sarah's inspection, a sly smile beginning to curl his lips. “Tell me, Sarah: does your building have smoke detectors as well as cameras?”

Less than ten minutes later, they were running.

With the Repo Man still out on the prowl on the streets and Sarah's landlord no doubt watching the front entrance like a hawk, the only conceivable way into the building was through the rear. After a hurried ascent of the fire escape, and a little assisted entry from one of Jareth's tools, the fire exit door finally opened onto the third floor landing. With the door's automated alarm already blaring in their ears, the two of them quickly went to work.

As Sarah hammered the elevator call buttons, Jareth struck a match and held it up to a cone of old newspaper, hand picked out of the dumpster. The paper had just started to catch alight when the first elevator arrived. The moment the doors slid open, he tossed his flaming handful inside. Sarah sent the elevator car back down to the first floor, where it would open directly in front of the manager's dumpster.
The second elevator received the same treatment. Soon enough, the smoke alarms below would lend their voice to the deafening symphony already blaring out from their floor. With any luck, things would be too busy for anyone to start worrying about what might be happening on the floors above.

Satisfied with the overall confusion they had caused, the pair of them bolted for the fourth floor – Sarah's floor. Only once they were inside her apartment, the door locked and dead-bolted behind them, did Sarah allow herself to breathe again.

“I still think we should have set a fire or two in the stairwell for good measure,” Jareth said, as he paused to catch his breath.

Sarah shook her head, already focussed on her new task. She dragged a battered old rucksack out of her small closet. “We wanted a distraction, not for anyone to get hurt. If we're not careful, this whole place could go up. Now come on, help me.”

The pair of them got started without wasting energy on more words, emptying out what they could of the sparsely stocked residence. As Jareth raked practical items of clothing down from their hangers, Sarah slipped into the bathroom to change into jeans and a sweater, and a sturdier set of footwear. She was in too much of a hurry to feel ashamed of her meagre home, and Jareth was too set on packing to care, tossing handfuls of socks and underwear into the bag without comment. Sarah managed to fill a smaller bag with the few material possessions that held meaning for her, as well as a few emergency tins of food from the kitchenette. There was a single fifty-dollar bill beneath her thin mattress, and she tucked it away into the right pocket of her jeans. Finally, for better or for worse, they were ready to go. The two of them met up again before her front door, all her worldly goods carried between them.

“Good. Thanks,” Sarah said. “Now we just need to figure out how to get out onto the street again.”

She was already reaching out to unlock the door when someone on the other side began to knock, forcing her to shrink back. Jareth tapped her on the shoulder, drawing her attention as he pressed a finger to his lips.

’Gee, ya think?’ Sarah mouthed, and earned herself a sour look.

Their silence meant nothing. After just a few seconds, the unwelcome caller began to knock again, harder this time. Sarah got the feeling they wouldn't be leaving any time soon. She and Jareth began to edge backwards, away from the door, as the brisk knocks became a forceful pounding, which left the door shaking in its frame. Whether it was her landlord or the Repo Man himself, the person behind that door wasn't taking no for an answer.

It would be stupid to let them in, but Sarah thought it might prove to be even more stupid in the long run to force them to break the door down. So far, it seemed to be two against one, and Jareth did have that sinfully sharp little knife of his, but could he really stick it in an actual person, just to make an escape? Could she? Confrontation didn't seem like a smart option, but the remaining choices were severely limited.

“Shit,” Sarah hissed. “What are we going to do? There's the window, but we're talking a fifty foot drop at least. Oh, fuck!”

Jareth huffed out a sigh. “I wanted to put this off for as long as possible – at least until we were much nearer to the gates, and I had a larger supply – but it seems I have no choice.”

Sarah turned to find out what he was babbling about. To her amazement, she saw that Jareth had
shrugged off his overcoat and was in the process of rolling up his right shirt sleeve. From somewhere
around the small of his back, he drew out what looked like a bastardised attempt at a gun, thrown
together with screws and cannibalised scraps of metal, its short grip bound by masses of thick black
tape. A long needle protruded from the end of the gun's stubby barrel. Even as she gaped at it,
Jareth's hand was already back at his belt, securing a small vial filled with a glowing blue liquid. His
fingers moved with practised ease as he slid the vial into its place at the rear of the gun like a bullet,
and then removed the cap from the needle.

“Zydrate, seriously?” she seethed. “You're really going to fuck up your senses at a time like this?”

“Not exactly.” His focus lay solely on his task as he selected a spot on the meatier part of his upper
arm, just beneath the shoulder. He pressed the tip of the needle to his pale skin, and then pulled the
trigger. His upper body jerked with the impact, but he still held the gun in place. In a matter of
seconds, he had emptied the full vial of Zydrate into the waiting muscle.

“I don't believe this! I have a Repo Man on my ass already, and now you're shooting up in my
fucking apartment. Are you insane?”

Deaf to her complaints, Jareth groaned as he recapped the gun and slid it back into its hidden holster.
The drug did not seem to have affected his reflexes as he slid down his sleeve again, and snatched up
his coat, along with Sarah's rucksack. Still, from the way his whole body seemed to sway into every
movement, it didn't seem like he would be able to remain on his feet much longer. His voice was
thicker, fuller, as he addressed her again, a certain urgency driving his words up through a sea of
torpor. “Listen to me, love. Whoever's pounding on that flimsy door of yours is soon going to realise
that they're strong enough to put it in. Now, do you trust me?”

Sarah's eyes narrowed. “Not in the slightest.”

When Jareth glanced up again, both his pupils were fully blown, glassy and black. His irises had
been pale and striking before, but to Sarah's horror, she realised they had now taken on the Zydrate's
neon blue radiance. They gave out an unnatural glow as they came to focus on her, and nothing else.
“Wonderful,” he said, as one cold, gloved hand reached out and seized her wrist. “Now, come with
me.”

His grip was hard and heavy, far stronger than she would have thought him capable of. His long
fingers clamped down, squeezing delicate skin and bone until Sarah let out a small cry of pain. From
the wide-eyed intensity of his stare, the way that alarming gaze now seemed to devour hers, he did
not seem to realise nor care for his own power. She fought against him, throwing her weight
backwards and thrashing back and forth at the end of his arm like a hooked fish, but Jareth did not let
her go.

“Hurting me,” she managed to gasp out.

“Come,” Jareth insisted.

His words made no sense, trapped and unmoving as they were, but even as Sarah tried to wrestle
free, she could sense the room around them was changing. Her arm fell limp, putting up no real
resistance as one by one, the few familiar pieces of her furniture began to ripple and fade, and then
simply melt away. The world grew colder, blacker around the edges, and she had just enough time to
wonder if that was what passing out felt like, before the darkness swallowed her whole.
Chapter End Notes

What, you didn't think I'd made the Goblin King himself *human*, did you? ;)

Title from: Zydrate Anatomy
The new world that impenetrable blackness birthed was blinding. Sarah shielded her eyes against the sudden glare using her free hand. The other was still held prisoner, though the cruel fingers that seized her had loosened their grip some. Squinting, she shifted her hand bit by bit, forcing herself to adjust to the light that slipped through her splayed fingers. When her eyes finally opened, she tumbled head first into a dream.

Gone was the dreary home she had thought would be her tomb; gone was the crumbling city, the poverty and the despair that oozed from every grey brick. She was standing beneath a sky painted in cinnamon and honey, and breathing in great gulps of air that tasted twice as sweet. That vision above stretched on for miles without so much as a single cloud in sight, and Sarah couldn't remember the last time she had seen a skyline so unimpeded, or so much wide open space. Mother Nature had taken that land back for her own, and she had graced it with nothing but hills and forests and – fuck – even what looked like mountains, as far as the eye could see. For a lifelong city dweller, it was almost too much to bear.

Her eyes rolled in their sockets as she tried to absorb it all at once, taking pleasure in what her brain knew could make no sense. She had to be hallucinating, finding comfort in what could only be a fantasy while death came knocking at her door. She wondered if she had fallen somehow, cracking her head hard enough to launch her into some desperate delusion that felt all too real. There was sunlight on her skin and grass beneath her feet – real grass, soft and springy beneath her heels, the fat green blades tall enough to reach up to her ankles. She couldn't recall the last time she had stood on anything other than hard floors, or the harsh, military buzz cut of the cemetery's lawn. The air she inhaled was purer than she could have ever dreamed it could be, heavy and rich. Every breath that slipped past her lips tasted of life, and she knew without thinking that to breathe too deeply would be to become drunk on it. Who needed drugs – hell, who needed anything else – when just breathing in could feel that way?

Sarah closed her eyes and tilted her face up towards that sweet orange sky, letting its warmth rain down on her body, and for the first time in years, she felt alive.

“Yes,” she whispered.

She had almost forgotten her strange companion, when Jareth squeezed her wrist, coaxing her back down to earth. His voice came in a low murmur.

“I know, pet, I know, but there isn't time for this. We need to move.”

Just the sound of his voice sent ripples of pleasure through her body, and Sarah turned to face him with a sleepy smile. She had feared the man only moments ago, but now she felt almost hypnotised by his beauty. There was an almost angelic aura to him, a halo of golden hair falling around that perfect face, and that heavenly, dazzling blue light which sparkled in his eyes. His pale skin now seemed to glow with health. Even the tattered clothes he wore had been restored to their former aristocratic glory, draping him in rich, bright colour. He seemed unreal, and she had to touch him, for her own peace of mind. Her fingers trembled as she reached out a hand to his face. His skin was smooth and warm, and it sent tingles running all the way up her arm. He radiated power – some pure, white energy that, away from the grim city, could finally reach its full potential. Still, she was not afraid.
With the warmth of his smooth cheek cradled in her palm, she almost felt like she could love him.

“Why is this all so perfect?” she breathed.

Jareth sighed and turned his face into her palm, a faint smile curving that gorgeous mouth. He pressed a light kiss to the base of her thumb before he urged her hand away. “This place wants you, love, but it knows it can't keep you – that's why it's fighting so hard to charm you. I need you to concentrate for me, all right? I need you to put one foot in front of the other and follow me. Can you do that?”

Sarah tried to do as she was asked, but even trying to take the smallest step was like trying to drag her feet through a pit of molasses. Every last blade of grass seemed to cling to her shoes, begging her to remain right where she was. Her legs felt far too heavy, all the way down there at the end of her body, when all the rest of her longed to just float away. Her eyes rolled up towards that beautiful sky once more, and all she wanted to do was soar. A woman's merry laughter tinkled in her ears, and she began to giggle all the harder when she realised it was her own.

“Sarah! Damn it all! Snap out of it!” Jareth cupped her face in both hands and stared into her eyes. “Look at me, Sarah. Look only at me.”

It was a command she obeyed all too happily. She drank him in like she would never be able to get enough, eyes wide and amazed, filled with him. Every blink of his eyes, every slight twitch of muscle in his face was fascinating to her. She watched as he pursed his lips, and her heart tipped over in her chest. Her eyes fell closed as she waited, breathing slow and heavy, for his sweet kiss.

What met her lips instead was a warm puff of air. Her eyes flickered open just in time for Jareth to blow gently into them. She gave a soft mewl of protest, but as he drew her into his arms, she did not resist. He continued to give her his breath, letting it roll over her nose and cheeks and each ear, but the more he gave, the worse it felt. Reality began to creep its way back through her senses, and the elation she had felt began to fade. He was taking it from her, bit by bit, stealing the heaven that surrounded her, and all she could do was squeeze her eyes shut, moaning her dismay as Jareth held her against his chest.

“Gi' back …” she heard herself mumble.

“Shh, love. It's all right. It's all right, but you have to snap out of it now, okay? Come on, move, that's it, it'll be better now.”

He nudged her head away from his chest, and Sarah pulled back, blinking, turning her face back into the light. The world around her was still the same – sweet vernal ambience and golden-hued skies – but now she could simply savour its beauty, rather than reeling in starry-eyed surrender. Speaking of surrender …

Clarity crashed down on her like ice water, and her eyes widened. When she realised she was still curled up in Jareth's arms, pawing at his soft coat and chiselled face like an affectionate kitten, she jumped back with a small yelp. What in god's name had she been thinking?

Rather than being offended by the action, Jareth only seemed amused by her distaste.

“Much better. I was beginning to wonder if I'd need the use of a pry bar to get you off me. Now-”

A weak sound of humiliation crept up from her throat, and she could feel her face growing hot. “I didn't mean to … I mean, it's not like I wanted to …” Her companion's smug little smile was enough to push her from shame to irritation. “Okay, what the hell is going on? What was that? It was the Z,
wasn't it? Otherwise I would have never—"

“Sarah, as much as I'd enjoy hearing the full extent of your thoughts as the injured party here, I'm afraid it'll have to wait. We have to go.”

“But I don't understand how we could have—”

“There isn't time for you to understand. We need to run, and fast. Now move, damn you!”

He had given her no reason to trust him, but the urgency she saw in those glowing eyes of his got her moving. Rather than fighting his hold or demanding answers, she took her first shaking steps forward into a new world. Walking quickly became a jog, and soon she was struggling to keep up with Jareth's frantic pace. She stumbled on after him, her shoes sinking into the fresh earth beneath her as she lagged at the end of Jareth's tight grasp. The sun beat down upon her shoulders, but soon enough it grew colder, as the bright world around her began to close in. Black-winged butterflies began to flutter and dance before her eyes, and she fell down into the soft grass, where even the dew that kissed her skin quickly dried to dust.

Jareth came down beside her, clutching at her shoulders. He seemed to be trying to lift her, dragging her into his arms, but her body would not comply.

“-up, Sarah. Please, you need to get—”

His desperate plea followed her down into the dark.

When she came back to herself, she was buried up to her ears in gold, and struggling to breathe. Coughing and spluttering, she pulled back, tossing her head to free herself from the ticklish strands that surrounded her, clinging to her cheeks and lips. The scent of leather and wood smoke hit her a moment too late, as did a certain heavy warmth between her thighs. Only when she had finally managed to free her face from her companion's wild hair, did she realise that she was sprawled across his lap. The two of them appeared to have landed in yet another dark alleyway, judging from the grimy bricks and trashbags surrounding them. It was hardly a view Sarah would have picked for a scenic postcard, but at least it was home. It still didn't explain how they'd managed to escape from her apartment, or that strange and beautiful world her mind had managed to conjure. Her mind held no clear answers, and her body just seemed to melt down onto the floor.

She felt a firm pressure upon her hips, and realised that Jareth seemed to be holding her steady atop him; with her reflexes shot to shit and both her arms dangling at her sides, that grip was the only thing preventing her from kissing the wall behind his back. Rather than enjoying the intimacy of having a woman in his lap, he was already working on tipping her out of it as he struggled back onto his feet. The two of them caught their balance together, though relying on the firm wall of Jareth's chest brought yet more heat to her face. With how easily he seemed to make her blush, Sarah was beginning to wonder if being around him for much longer would cause permanent damage to her blood vessels. When she risked a glance at him, she felt a surge of relief to see that eerie blue light that had captured his eyes had already begun to fade. Though they had run only a short distance, he still seemed to be breathing hard.

“You … all right?” he panted. The ball of his thumb circled her exposed hipbone, where her sweater had ridden up.

A sleepy nod was all she could manage right then, but it seemed to satisfy him. He smoothed her sweater back down into its proper place before his grip on her loosened. The loss of his touch seemed to help her back down to earth. The cool night air did wonders for her senses, though the smell of rotting garbage did not. She wrinkled up her nose as she looked around. Thankfully, the two
bags containing all her earthly possessions seemed to have made the journey with them. Her muddled mind had so many questions, but her body moved easily enough as she bent to scoop them up.

“You going to tell me what just happened, and how the hell we ended up streets away from my apartment?” she threw back over her shoulder.

When Jareth did not immediately answer, she cast an eye in his direction. Her heart jolted at what she saw. The man was slumped back against the wall as if his whole body would collapse without it. He had seemed brighter, healthier in that dream world, and yet now he seemed paler than ever – sickly almost. Though the temperature that day was nowhere near freezing, he seemed to be shivering, even in his long coat. Sarah quickly glanced away before he could catch her studying him. She took longer than necessary to make sure her belongings were all present and accounted for, fiddling with a strap here and there as Jareth rested. Under the circumstances, it was probably the kindest thing to do. By the time she was finally done fussing with the backpack's zipper, he was standing tall again with no assistance, and his usual insouciant little smile was back in place.

“Soon enough, but not here,” he said, as if there had been no pause. “We didn't move as quickly as I would have liked, thanks to you. We're out of any immediate danger now, but only by a block or two. We need to keep moving. Look, as you've probably gathered, when I said I had certain connections, I didn't mean people. I can get you where you need to be, away from your pursuers, but I'm afraid you're just going to have to trust me and tag along in the meantime. The sooner we find a bus that can take us to the other side of the city, the better. Can you point us in the right direction?”

Sarah considered her options. Her apartment was still only a short walk away, but she no longer felt safe there – particularly if she'd been spotted trying to burn it down. She had no other place to go, nothing and no one to pin her hopes on except the strange man standing before her. If he could somehow save her, then she had a longer life to look forward to. If not, at least humouring him for a few hours would get them out of that stinking alley. Right then, it seemed like as good a way as any to kill a little time before her inevitable death.

“Sure, what the hell? Let's go.”

She wasted no time in taking the lead, and made a point of shouldering both of the bags this time, casting a watchful eye over him as she did so. The man was still as pale as death, but if he was feeling well enough to run a hand over his wild hair, smoothing down his silken locks, she decided he probably wasn't going to keel over any time soon.

The bus was maybe a quarter of the way full when they climbed on, and Jareth took the heavy lurch of the vehicle in his stride as he led her to the empty back row. He seemed to have no qualms leaving her to pay both their fares. The moment Sarah had secured her bags and sat down beside him, she turned to him for answers.

“So, how did we get out of my apartment, and what was that place?”

A hint of a smile touched at Jareth's mouth. “Home,” he said, and then the smile was gone. “Or so it was. Now, I can only visit, and that's only with the aid of a little glass vial – the Zydrate that can give me a tiny taste of a power I once took for granted. Consider it a place where your earthly troubles and enemies can't get at you, though you can never stay for long.” He sighed to himself. “For those unused to that land, it can seem like a dream come true. From what I know of your life, you haven't been truly happy for some time, and that made it far easier for you to be drawn in. I should have known that, I should have …” Shaking his head, he glanced out of the streaky bus window. “That's all for later. For now, let's just concentrate on getting where we're going.”
Sarah rubbed a hand across her eyes. Her head still felt thick and too full from those few moments of wonder, and now that she had tasted what heaven was like, that stuffy old bus and its occupants stank worse than ever. That strange world had smelled of hope, of new life and new beginnings, but this … this reeked of desperation and sheer survival. Sarah wondered how many other poor souls on that bus with them had made a deal with the GeneCo devil too; how many of them were breathing and stinking up the already foetid air with dismay, disease and death, simply existing through each day as they waited for their time to run out. Sudden panic clawed at her throat, and she seized hold of Jareth’s upper arm just to have something to hold onto. “How did you take us there? Where is ‘there’?” she demanded. “And … how can we get back?”

His gloved fingers came up to cover her own. “Patience, love. Time is short, as I'm sure you're aware, but there's enough left for this – enough for rest. Just sit back for a while. The details will come in time.”

Sarah peered at him in his weary state, remembering that radiance he had emanated, all that energy and almost eerie beauty. She recalled the wild spark in his eyes and that warming breath, and how in that moment he had held her close to him, he had touched hands with her soul. “You're … not from around here, are you?” she said, after a time. Jareth's low laughter urged a smile.

“Not even close, but you could say I'm enjoying an extended stay in this city – although 'enjoying' isn't quite the word.” He patted her hand again. “Just rest, love. I … I need to rest. I'll explain all in due course.”

As he settled into silence, there was nothing to do but follow his gaze out of the fogged-up windows, watching as the world around them crept by. He seemed almost to have forgotten the hand that covered hers, but as Sarah slowly, cautiously let her head rest against his shoulder, he gave her fingers a squeeze. The two of them stared out through the smeared glass at the ghost of the city as time ticked on towards midnight.

When they pulled into the bus depot, Jareth was already on his feet, the long tails of his coat swinging as he rocked his way down the aisle. The moment the doors opened, he had one foot out of them. His boots thumped against the ground as he headed inside, with Sarah hot on his tail. The two of them made their way through the roiling crowd, squeezing their way through a host of other downcast travellers. They passed by the lost and the lonely, the exhausted workers, the teenage runaways and the huddled homeless, all with their wide, dead eyes; they passed the overpriced vending machines and the brightly-lit advertisements for a newer, better, GeneCo you, as Sarah's guts twisted themselves into despairing knots.

At last, Jareth drew to a halt when they reached a bank of personal lockers. They were covered in graffiti, their dark blue paint scarred and stained with countless initials, pitted with the dents of angry fists. Sarah noticed that one of the locker doors had been busted open. From the way Jareth's whole body stiffened and the dark look in his eyes, Sarah had a good idea who it might have belonged to.

“Hell's fucking teeth,” he hissed, and turned on his heel, striding with new purpose towards the exit doors. Sarah followed him with her eyes for several seconds before her feet finally managed to catch up.

“Uh, Jareth? Care to tell me what's going on here?”

“Fucking thieves,” he growled, without a hint of irony. “Someone came here earlier today with the intention of finding a special locker to break into. That someone just so happened to pick the right one out of all these other options, and they walked out of here with a new twenty-dollar jacket. Now, you might consider that to be a cheap coat, and no great loss to me – that is, unless you bring into consideration the ten little blue gifts that I had personally sewn into its lining.”
His eyes narrowed as they focussed dead ahead, set on his new path. “Someone thought it would be a good idea to double-cross me. Fortunately, I have a good idea of just who that someone is.”

Chapter End Notes

Title from: Zydrate Anatomy
“Please tell me you didn't leave a Z-head in charge of your supply.”

Jareth shot her a sneering stare as he marched on. Though his face was still pinched and pale, the betrayal he had uncovered seemed to have given him back his drive. He would have been streets ahead of her if Sarah hadn't scurried to keep up with him.

“Do I look like the sort of man who's inclined to give out free samples?” he spat. “No, my slimy little friend has an entirely different monkey on his back than Zydrate. So long as I keep it well-fed, he's loyal enough to suit my purposes, even if he is a miserable coward at times. He knows that no matter where he tries to run, no matter what filthy, rat-infested pit he goes to ground in, I will find him. I doubt he's brave or foolish enough to ever try stealing from me – I've made quite sure of that – but he'll know the person who is.”

“You think so?” Sarah panted.

Jareth scowled. “He'd better.”

The apartment building he led them to made Sarah's look almost inviting. The broken outer door hung crooked on its hinges like a loose tooth, the dim foyer a gaping maw beyond it. Inside, the peeling walls might once have held colour a decade ago, yet now they were a dingy grey. Only a couple of the overhead lights seemed to be working properly, the others flickering restlessly and giving the rest of the interior a nightmarish, almost surreal quality. As they made their way up the filthy stairs, the stench of piss, mildew and rotting wood strong enough to make her eyes water, Sarah made a vow to herself to touch as little as possible in that place. At least Jareth had his gloves for protection. She stood well back as he began to hammer on one of the rickety wooden apartment doors, the steady pounding of his fist echoing through the empty corridor.

A gruff yet wary voice spoke out from within. “Who's there?”

Jareth's lips peeled back in a snarl. “You know damned well who it is.”

“O-oh! All right, all right, keep your knickers on, I'm a comin'.”

After the soft click-scrabble-snick of what sounded to be several locks, the apartment door swung inward a few inches, and its occupant peered out. Sarah pegged the small man at somewhere in his mid sixties, though the worry that creased his leathery forehead made him seem older, and the black eye he was sporting gave the left side of his face a tired squint. A black pork pie hat sat askew on his head, and tangles of silvery hair snaked out from beneath its brim like weeds. A tiny gold hoop twinkled at his left ear, and there was maybe three day's worth of stubble along his jaw. He nursed the last stub of a cigarette in one shaking hand.
“Your Ma… ah, I mean … Jareth,” he stammered, and tapped his knuckles against the brim of his hat in a cautious salute. The cigarette went between his teeth, curls of heavy smoke doing nothing to soften the rough grate of his voice. “Wh-what a surprise. What can I do for you today?”

In two steadfast strides, Jareth had barged his way into the dingy apartment, and had the man's grimy, off-white collar seized in his fists. The man dangled in his grip as Jareth hauled him off the ground and pinned him with a thud to the nearest wall. The hat was knocked from his head, and as he squawked in surprise, the lit cigarette butt went tumbling from his lips. Sarah had the forethought to stomp it out, figuring another stain on the man's threadbare carpet would most likely go unnoticed, but a raging apartment fire wouldn't. By the time she was done, Jareth had his face mere inches from the other man's as the smaller of the two flailed and kicked his feet.

“You can start by telling me why exactly you thought I wouldn't notice ten vials of Zydrate going missing – and if you value your trachea, my grotty little friend, I'd suggest you speak quickly.”

“Not ten,” the man gasped, as he struggled against Jareth's grip. “Not the whole ten, you don't need to worry about that!”

Jareth shook the man like a rag doll before thrusting him back into the wall. “Do you really think it'll help your cause to tell me you took less than the full ten? Do you really think I'll tolerate any acts of theft, no matter how small?”

Coming to her senses, Sarah darted forward and seized hold of Jareth's elbow, but his arm remained rigid. “Stop it! This isn't solving anything!”

The little man's eyes rolled towards her. “Get 'im off me! He's mad! You don't know what he's capable of!”

“No, but she's about to find out – as are you,” Jareth growled.

Growling a little herself by then, Sarah seized hold of Jareth's wrist and dug her thumbs into the back of his hand, trying to wrench him away. “Stop! All you're doing is scaring him!”

“He's nothing more than a repulsive little thief – he deserves to be afraid right now.”

“But you just said you could trust him!”

Jareth's arm sagged just a fraction. He huffed out air through his nose and spared her an icy look. “And I thought I also made it quite clear that I have a reputation to uphold,” he hissed.

The man stopped his flailing. “Hang about. So this is all for show then? You're … you're not really this mad?” He sagged in Jareth's grip, a nervous smile stretching across his lips. “Well, that's something of a relief. Look, you've got to understand—”

Jareth let him drop to the floor, but immediately snatched hold of his collar again – this time at the back. “The only thing I understand, Hog-breath, is that you've bought yourself a one way ticket to the Bog of Eternal Stench when we return home.” His face was set in a scowl as he began to haul the smaller man across the room. “In the temporary absence of the real thing, however, I suppose this bog will have to suffice.”

“Your Majesty, please! Not that – not that! Please, you need to lis—”

“The time for talking is through.”

Eyes wide with horror, the man began to struggle, kicking and clawing at the dirty carpet to no avail.
He continued to plead for mercy as Jareth swept open the door to what appeared to be a small, yet surprisingly tidy bathroom. Judging by the way the man clung to the door frame, and the fact that the pristine white toilet appeared to be the cleanest thing in his otherwise grungy apartment, this wasn't his first rodeo. He whimpered and protested as Jareth used the toe of his boot to flip open the seat. Soon enough, he was on his knees on the tiles, Jareth's hand gripping the back of his collar as he began to force his head towards the bowl. Sarah hurried after them, already looking for some way to incapacitate one or both of them, until they had things figured out.

“Jareth, this is ridiculous,” she began, but the man on the bathroom floor shouted over her.

“It's safe!” he screeched. “It's safe, it's safe, it's safe! I busted up that locker meself!”

That seemed to give Jareth pause, and yet he did not release his grip. “Explain.”

“That's what I've been trying to do! You've got the only key, so I had no choice. It was the arseholes from 53B again. They kept coming back, askin' after you, askin' if I had anything I could sell them. I told 'em no time after time, but I could tell they didn't believe me. I guess you could say I got a little paranoid, sure I could feel one of them eyein' me every time I stepped out of my own front door, and following me wherever I went. Sure enough, when I got on the bus to go check on the goods, one of them got on after me, so I had to turn back. I didn't dare to go out, even for groceries, and I swear before all the gods, I heard whisperin' outside my door one night. It was only a matter of time before they busted the lock. I … I didn't know when you'd next come here, so I had to do something.”

“And what, pray tell, did you decide to do?”

“Please … let me up and I'll tell you.”

Jareth still looked suspicious as he finally let him go, scowling as the man scrambled back up onto his feet. He seemed to be looking for an escape from the bathroom, but Jareth folded his arms and blocked the doorway with his body. With no other choice, the smaller man gulped and went on.

“A couple of nights ago, I waited until it was dark, and then I went out the window. Fright of my life, it was, trying to shimmy my way over to the fire escape in the pitch black! Anyways, I managed to make it to the bus depot, get the jacket, and make it back here. Of course, when I got back, they weren't too happy about me being gone in the first place.” The man rubbed at the back of his neck, avoiding Jareth's eyes as he continued. “Now, they weren't stupid enough to think I'd snuck out just for a pint or somethin', so they starts pushing me around a bit, not so friendly like. I was wearin' the jacket by then, and I couldn't risk them gettin' a hold of it, so I'd already taken one of the vials out of the lining. I acted all cagey as I turned out all the rest of my pockets. When I got to the one I'd put the Zydrate in, I made excuses until one of 'em thumped me,” he explained, gesturing at the purplish bruising around his eye.

“So … I finally pulled out the vial, and I begged and I pleaded with them not to take it. That thing was going to help pay my rent money and buy food this month, I told 'em, but they didn't listen. They took it, just as I knew they would, and one of those little turds punched me again for wasting their time over one measly vial – but with all my pockets turned out, they had no idea I was hiding more. I outsmarted 'em. But … uh …they told me not to play with Z again, or next time they'll really hurt me.”

Jareth frowned. “I see. And the other stashes?”

“All fine. You've got to believe me. I know I let 'em take one vial, but it was that or letting them find out about all the rest. I made a choice. Now they think I'm not worth their time, they leave me alone 'cause I'm not worth the effort. I kept all the rest a secret, just like you told me. I'd never betray you
like that. I know whatever they do to me is nothing, compared to what you'd do to me!”

“And it was 53B, you said? Another set of repulsive creatures to add to my list, once our business here reaches its end.” Jareth cocked his head to one side as he considered. “It seems I underestimated you,” he admitted at last. “I suppose I should ask if you'll accept my apologies.”

Visibly relieved, the smaller man gave a sheepish grin. “I'll accept them, as long as they come with a few … uh … extras?”

“As you wish. I suppose you'll have earned them this week – once I can be assured my supply is truly safe, that is.”

Now on better terms, the two of them moved back into the apartment's messy living room. Immediately, the strange man ducked behind a ratty old juniper-green sofa, and emerged with a bulky blue jacket. After brushing a couple of dust bunnies off the collar, he began to tug the jacket back and forth, highlighting each small and subtle lump that had been sewn beneath its outer layer. At last, Jareth nodded his satisfaction, and the smaller man's relief was evident as he finally handed over the jacket.

With a hint of a smile, Jareth tucked the jacket under his arm and delved into his own pockets once more, uncovering a multitude of hidden treasures. Sarah watched in bemusement as, in addition to a small handful of old, mismatched jewellery, he brought out a small hip flask, a pack of cigarettes, and a selection of sugary candy bars. The man accepted them with a grin, laying out all of his spoils on the dusty coffee table.

“Scraps from my late-night exploits, as well as a few other human vices,” Jareth explained, as he caught her looking. “Mostly harmless, at least in moderation. Safer than what comes in those vials, at least.” As he handed over his strange haul to the smaller man, his smirk widened in realisation. “Oh, and not forgetting … this.”

From an inner pocket close to his heart, he slid out a slim magazine, whose glossy and rather explicit cover proclaimed: ‘Barnyard Backdoor Beauties – our curvy country girls show you five fun ways to choke that chicken’.

The little man flushed bright red and snatched at the magazine, stuffing it away into his back pocket. “I … uh … like it for the articles,” he mumbled.

“As if you know how to read,” Jareth scoffed.

Sarah began to rub at her temples. “Hey … if you two boys are finished kissing and making up, I'd really like to know what's going on here. It's been a really long day.”

“For all of us.” Jareth heaved a sigh and gestured to his partner. “Sarah, this is … Hatchet.”

The man's face immediately creased into a frown. “Hog-gle. How many times do I got to tell you before you remember? And besides, it's not Hoggle no more, not while we're here. To all the greasy little punks in this stinkin' neighbourhood, it's Hatchet.” His chest puffed out with pride, and he tipped a wink in Sarah's direction. “That's my street name, for my own protection, like – Hatchet.”

“Bloody old battle-axe, more like,” Jareth muttered.

Sarah couldn't help but smile. “Well, I guess it's nice to meet you, uh … Hatchet.”

He seemed to preen under her attention, drawing himself up to his full four feet. “Please, a lovely lady like yourself can just call me Hoggle.”
“Hoggle, then. So, are you going to tell me how you got mixed up with this guy?” she asked, jerking a thumb in Jareth's direction. “And maybe also why I heard you call him 'Your Majesty' back then?”

Hoggle spared Jareth a nervous look. “Well, uh … I guess it depends on how much His Majesty wants me to tell you – oh!” At the unintended honorific, he slapped a hand to his forehead. “S-sorry, Your Maj … ah … Jareth.”

Jareth waved a dismissive hand in his direction. “Just get on with it.”

With an eager nod, Hoggle turned his attention back to her. “Well, that's because His Majesty is … well, he's the king.”

“My full title, if you would.”

“Right, right. Ah, this is His Majesty Jareth the First, King of the Goblins, Laird of the Labyrinth, and High Ruler of the Underground.”

“Hmph. Close enough, I suppose.”

Sarah raised an eyebrow. “Well, that's definitely a mouthful.”

Jareth's eyes found hers, a wicked little gleam in their depths, but before he could respond, Hoggle cut in.

“Yes, well that was his title – uh, and still is, officially – before we both managed to get stuck here. It's been months since then, and there's still no telling if we'll ever be able to get back.”

“Of course we'll get back, you little fool. Now see here, ah … Ratchet, was it?”

“Ratchet! I'll give you Ratchet, you codpiece cramming, puffed-up bloody ponce!” The moment the words were out of his mouth, his eyes filled up with fear.

Jareth set his jaw. He lunged forward, one arm outstretched, his booted foot thudding down hard on the thin carpet beneath it. Hoggle gave a panicked little squawk, flinching back and bringing his arms up for protection. As he shivered and squirmed, Jareth leaned back into a less menacing pose, his eyes narrowed, like a cat's, in apparent satisfaction. He cocked his head and waited, a wry smile on his lips as the smaller man slowly uncoiled his body. A rusty, uncertain chuckle rumbled up from his bobbing throat.

“Uh … that is to say, Your Majesty, o' course …”

Jareth blinked at him. “Indeed. Well, whatever your name is this week, take a nice, long walk, why don't you? My friend and I need to have a talk.”

Hoggle flew towards the door like a shot, pausing only to scoop up his fallen hat. “Yes, Your Majesty. O' course, Your Majesty.” He offered Sarah a small, sorry grin. “I … uh … guess I'll be seeing you later.”

In his hurry to make himself scarce, he left his candy, booze and cigarettes behind.

Shaking her head, Sarah stared at the door Hoggle had disappeared through, a reluctant smile on her lips. “Do you really forget his name that often, or is that just another way of keeping him on his toes?”

Jareth gave a small huff of amusement. “Perhaps. You have to admit, it's rather satisfying to see him
squirm, isn't it? If the silly old fool thinks I'm too dim to recall a single name after all his years of service, then he's not half as clever as I give him credit for. And coward or no, I have to admit, that little bait and switch he pulled was rather cunning of him. Those thugs who assailed him won't bother to try again – though, of course, I am rather annoyed to have lost that vial to them in the first place.” He patted the jacket. “Don't worry, there's still enough time and enough Zydrate for me to fulfil my end of our bargain. We'll get you out of the city before the night's through.”

Sarah nodded at the jacket, which Jareth seemed to be keeping hugged close to his chest. “Even with the one that was stolen and the one you're using to get me out of here, that still leaves eight full vials. That's got to be enough for what you have planned.”

“I'm afraid I'm always in need of more. As you've seen for yourself, the effects of the Zydrate don't last long, and I'm always looking at ways of building up my supply.”

“And just how big is your supply already?”

Jareth paused to consider. “Just in this part of the city, there are at least forty vials – thirty-nine if you consider the latest loss.”

Her eyes widened. “Forty? As in four-zero?”

“Yes. It's too dangerous to store it all in one place. I once learned the hard way that, as you mortals say, it isn't wise to carry all of one's chickens in one basket.”

“Eggs,” Sarah found herself muttering.

“Come again?”

“It's 'eggs in one basket' – that's the saying we … uh … mere mortals have.”

Jareth shrugged. “Close enough. Well, eggs, chickens, or the thieving little cocks in flat 53B aside, I think we've established that it wouldn't be wise to keep all of my supply in one place. If I didn't need it all for myself, I'd say I have a veritable goldmine scattered around throughout this realm. This was simply the closest.”

Sarah scrubbed her hands over her eyes. Though they had been back in what she was beginning to consider the 'regular world' for some time by then, her head still ached, fuzzy and full of longing as it was for that strange other world. “Okay, so … you have a lot of Zydrate, but besides that … I really don't get what's happening here.”

“Don't worry. I believe we have the time to chat a little.” His eyes drifted around the room, over the scuffed table with its pair of rickety dining chairs, and a faded armchair with a torn back and ominous black stain on the seat, before finally settling on the beaten old sofa. “I suppose this will have to do.”

He seated himself with a grimace, tucking the jacket down safely at his side, and invited Sarah to join him. There was a strange, almost regal grace in the way he settled himself amongst the sagging cushions, before crossing one booted foot over his knee as he turned to face her.

“Do you believe in magic, love? It'll make it an awful lot easier to explain all of this if you do.”

Sarah considered for a moment. Given that her odd new companion had somehow managed to bend reality enough to get them both out of her apartment and onto the street without being caught – daydream field trip aside – it didn't seem like too far of a stretch to think there was some higher power involved. “I'm not entirely sure, but I'm listening,” she told him.
“Good, better that you have an open mind. You see, the place I come from – the place you briefly saw – is built on magic. That world is a place we call the Underground, hidden out of sight and mind of the humans who roam the world Above – people like your lovely self.” He raised an eyebrow at her confused frown, but went on when she declined to comment. “If you can accept that there is an entire world beyond this one, and citizens who inhabit it, then you must also accept that I am their ruler. Hoggle is right; I was a king, before this whole mess occurred, and I will one day be king again.”

“Well, I guess that explains the far-out clothes and the superiority complex.”

Jareth spared her a scowl. “Quite. Anyway, as you've seen for yourself, I can only return to my kingdom for short periods of time – hardly long enough to provide any real leadership, even if I could reach my castle. As of right now, this … place … is my home, until I can gather up enough power to see me over to the other side properly.”

“You mean the Zydrate? Wait, you said there's magic in this Underground place, right? So why not use that to help you? Or is there some weird king clause or something that doesn't let you?”

“I regret to say that my magic is currently … non-functional.”

From his grimace and the slight blush that painted his pale cheeks, admitting as much to her was almost the same as confessing he was impotent. Sarah nodded, careful to keep anything that might have been seen as sympathy out of her tone. “Okay, so magic's out. It sounds like you've already got another plan under way though, with the Zydrate?”

Jareth mustered a weak smile. “Yes, but it's like as not to kill me rather than get me where I'm supposed to be. The drug can give me just enough of a boost to cross back over to the Underground, but the amount I'll need to inject into my system when the time comes is monstrous. Though you were polite enough to overlook just how much energy that little trip earlier took out of me, you saw for yourself what the effects were, and that was only for a five-minute journey. Without my magic, it will take me well over a day, or even two, to make my way back to the castle, and that's without taking into account any time to rest or sleep. I'm sure you can work out for yourself just how much Zydrate I'll need to cross over for that period of time, and just what the after-effects will be.”

Sarah winced, remembering just how weak he had been. He was probably right about a trip like that killing him. “Well can't you make the journey in small bursts then? Spread it out over a few weeks, walking a little bit each day?” At the weary look Jareth gave, understanding flooded through her, and her heart went out to him. “You've already tried that, haven't you?” she asked softly. “You've been stuck here long enough to rule out every other option except that last, desperate one.”

“I have,” Jareth admitted, and stared down at his boots. “While every step over there moves you further in this realm, every time I return Underground, I return to the exact same place where I left it. Every time I go back, it's like starting over from the beginning – right on the very outskirts of my realm.”

After a moment's silence, she chimed in again. “Isn't there any way of getting your magic back? Is there any way Hoggle or … or I can help you?”

A small huff of laughter escaped him. “I appreciate the thought, Sarah, but I'm afraid there's nothing you can do. As for reacquiring my magic, I find myself stuck in something of a catch-22 situation. To get my magic back, I need to face a rather unpleasant man, and to face him with any hope of winning, I need my magic. So as you can see, sometimes it's easier to consider my only other option.”
“Well, fuck.”

“Fuck, indeed.”

Sarah stared at the murky grey wall before her as she turned the puzzle over in her head for a little while. It was probably useless – any hope of an idea she came up with was no doubt one Jareth had already tried and dismissed – but her mind refused to leave it alone. She realised, with a guilty little jolt down at the bottom of her belly, that instead of worrying about her own ass, she actually wanted to help heave his out of the trouble it had fallen into.

“How did you lose your magic, anyway?” she asked, risking a glance in his direction. “If it’s not too hard to talk about it, that is.”

Jareth’s slumped shoulders lifted in a sorry little shrug. “Jealousy … plotting … politics and betrayal.” His lips hitched up at the corners. “The usual, really, in any royal court. If you’re willing to sit a little longer before we head back out, I can tell you the whole story.”

She turned her body more towards his and returned that feeble smile. “Why not? It’s not like I have anywhere better to be.” It seemed to be enough to coax Jareth to begin.

“Before I was born, my father ruled his kingdom alone. For many years, a man named Sinclair served as his healer and most trusted advisor. As my father grew older and still refused to take a queen, or give the kingdom an official heir, it looked like Sinclair might one day inherit the throne for himself – that is, until my father finally found love. The woman who was to become my mother was nothing more than a serving girl, but my father told me that he loved her from the moment they first met. She wasn’t the proper noblewoman his position demanded, but she was his, and he was very much hers. For a short while, she was mine, too. I can still remember the cradle songs she would sing to me, and how it was always she who came to wake me each morning, and never my servants. She refused to pass me off to a nursemaid or governess, even when I was disobedient, always seeing to my praise and my punishments herself.”

The small, wistful smile that had taken his lips as he reminisced quickly faded. “When she took her own life, my father was inconsolable in his grief. He kept a lock of her hair, as well as the blade she had taken to her wrists. I had only my memories of her, the love and lessons she had given to me. I was only six years old when I lost her. I never realised until much later just how much effort it must have taken her to make it even that far – how much pain she had been in for all those years, and how long she had fought, for me and my father. I still wish I could heal her of those unfortunate years, though of course, I cannot.” Sighing, he continued. “I was heartbroken when I lost her, but fortunately, I had my best friend to help me through the worst of my grief: a boy my age named Aluin – Sinclair’s only son.”

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“Over the coming years, Aluin was my rock, and the two of us were near inseparable as we grew up together. I came into my full powers shortly after I turned eight – a rarity for one so young – but Aluin was right behind me, pushing himself to catch up, always hoping for the day when his skills would match mine. We took our lessons and our meals together, and he was always leading me into trouble, daring me into danger. When we were only eleven years old, he convinced me to spend a night in the Firey’s Forest, where neither of us slept a wink, cowering from evil creatures that may or may not have been there. The pair of us received the hiding of our lives the very next day, but we took it in good spirits, proud of our bravery and cunning. There wasn’t a thing in the world we couldn’t face as long as we were together. We were brothers in all but blood.”

The smile returned, but now it was bitter. “We were just eighteen when Sinclair passed on into the next realm, and Aluin inherited his father’s magic. Having already known the pain of losing a parent so young myself, I was at Aluin’s side day and night, a shoulder for his woes, and yet as the weeks
passed, he only grew more distant. For the first time in our lives, he was more powerful than me, even though I was to be king one day, and our friendship seemed to sour as he came to realise that for himself. We slowly grew apart, but when my own father's health began to worsen some months later, he was right there at my side once more. Little did I know, he was only waiting for his moment.”

Sarah felt her heart sink. She had a good idea where the story was headed, and reached out for Jareth's hand. He offered her a curt nod as his fingers curled around hers.

“Since Sinclair's death, my father had loved Aluin like he was his own son. Perhaps foolishly, Aluin thought that meant he had some chance at inheriting the king's powers, rather than I. Of course, my father refused.” Jareth's lips drew into a thin line. “He flew into a jealous rage by my father's sick bed, forcing me to send him from the room. I was angry, but it hurt my heart as well. I didn't want my father to pass on, believing that his adopted son hated him. When Aluin returned later that same night, I could see the guilt and pain in his eyes, and I allowed him a few moments of privacy with my father to make his apologies. Just a matter of minutes, but it was all he needed.”

His eyes grew colder, his voice a touch harder. “Instead of being at my father's side to see him over, I was out in the corridor instead, with the advisers and the servants. I only learned of his death when his power left his body and began to flow into mine. When I dashed into his chamber, it was already too late. There were tears on Aluin's cheeks, and his hands were empty and clean, but the moment I looked him in the face, I knew what he had done. He said he had done it to ease my father's suffering, but both of us knew better. It was revenge and it was regicide, the highest form of treason, and death awaited him as punishment. The pain I felt in that moment was immeasurable. He robbed me of my father's final moments, and for that I could never forgive him, and yet … to lose my father that night was enough, but to lose both of them …”

Jareth shook his head. “Banishment was the kindest, and perhaps most foolish thing I could have done. I gave him until the next morning to gather his things and leave my kingdom for good. The story I told was that my father had finally succumbed to his illness, and I was to take my rightful place as king. I couldn't bear for anyone to know that my dearest friend was his murderer.”

A deep sigh escaped him. “As the years went by, I did my best to move on and put that shattered brotherhood behind me, but Aluin had still not sated himself with his revenge. Just like his father before him, he had no trouble playing the long game. He waited many years to get to the place he wanted, still and silent as a spider as the decades passed, and I lulled myself into a false sense of security.”

Perhaps to calm his shaking fingers, Jareth slipped his hand free of hers and reached out for Hoggle's forgotten cigarettes. He slit open the cellophane wrapping, tore open the pack, and tapped one of the smokes out into his palm. Placing the filter end into his mouth, he tapped his thumb to the end of the paper, clearly expecting a spark. When nothing happened, he plucked the thing from between his teeth and flung it down onto the table. “No fucking magic,” he muttered. He cast a brief, thoughtful look towards the filthy kitchen and its stained stove top, before apparently dismissing the idea. Sighing, he went on.

“Banishment is, of course, final, and to this day I still don't know how that treacherous fuck managed to weasel his way back into my realm, unnoticed, so many years later. Though I have never managed to forgive him, I can honestly say he was the last thing on my mind that night as I took my evening meal. Looking back, the serving girl who dosed my wine was clearly Aluin's. He always did have a way with women, and I don't doubt he managed to find one who was cautious enough not to let herself be caught as she sneaked her way into my service, and smitten enough to die for him, if needed. One drink, and I was out. When at last I woke from my stupor, I was still seated at the
dinner table, but my hands and feet were bound to my chair, and my jaw was locked shut. I couldn't call out, and I couldn't muster the strength even to raise my head from off my chest, let alone use my powers. Aluin lifted my chin in his hand, though, needing me to look him in the eye as he spilled his hatred.

“He told me how his father had loathed my mother and I from the very start – how a common whore and her bastard son had no right to the throne. When Sinclair finally managed to push my dear mother over the edge, poisoning her mind with doubt and threats from the shadows, he sent his son after me. Sinclair corrupted him from birth, you see, grooming the boy so that he would one day fulfil his destiny, becoming the man who would take my place as the next king. All of our childhood exploits, every challenge we faced and risk we took as boys had been an attempt to rid them of me once and for all. Fortunately for me, I was far too stubborn to die. He cursed me for daring to live, and told me how much pleasure he had found in seeing my father die by his hand. His own father's death was finally enough to push him into action, and though he didn't say as much, I knew then that my father's illness so soon after Sinclair's death had been no coincidence.

“To learn the truth after so long hurt me greatly. I had to watch as the person I once believed I knew died before me and came back twisted beyond recognition. Aluin knew there was no way to have what he wanted, even if he killed me. The kingdom his father promised him could never be his unless I agreed to pass on my magic to him, and he had long since burned all bridges between us. It contented him to know that, if he could not rule in my place, then the kingdom would fall into chaos without a king.”

Without looking her in the eye, Jareth began to roll back his left sleeve. “All magical beings have some talisman they use to hone their powers – something small that can be kept close to their person at all times, usually a piece of jewellery. Mine was a ring,” he went on, as he began to work off his glove. “It was given to me by my father when I first came into my powers, and it grew with me as I became more powerful, soaking up the magic that ran wild through my veins, shaping and sharpening it into something I could use at will. For my own protection, it was charmed so as it could only be removed by my own hand, but such matters didn't concern my old friend Aluin. He had his own way of taking it from me, and my muffled screams only made that task all the sweeter for him.”

When Jareth finally peeled the leather away, Sarah saw that his hand was missing its smallest finger. There was only a ragged scar in its place. He met her sharp gasp with a sickly, tight-lipped smile.

“He took your finger?”

“Oh, he took more than that from me, love. Without my ring – and worse, without a part of myself – my powers cannot be replenished. He baited me, stole from me – mutilated me, for fuck's sake – and he knew that I would have no choice but to go after him for it. When I finally wrestled myself free, I let pride rule me, racing to keep up with him as he led me on a merry chase through my realm, almost choking himself with his laughter as the powers I had spent my life cultivating finally left me. I cast spell after spell to try to bring him down, watching each one emerge even weaker than the last. I could feel my strength leaving me, but I limped on after him, through hardships unnumbered and dangers untold, wasting more and more of my waning magic to overcome whatever obstacles he threw into my path. He had spent years planning out just how this would go, and the bastard enjoyed every last minute of my misery – but of course, the worst was still to come.”

“He fled here, Aboveground, forcing me into using the very last of my powers to follow. He knew that, once I had left the Underground, without my ring and missing that one small yet vital part of myself, I wouldn't have the strength to return. Here, away from my land and the home and source of my magic, I might as well be human.”
Jareth slid his glove back into place, taking great care to ensure that the smallest finger of the garment – clearly stuffed to appear fuller, Sarah now realised – stood at the right angle. He chuckled when he caught her staring. “Pride can be a terrible thing, love. Perhaps if I hadn't been too proud to call on my guards instead of going after Aluin myself, the consequences wouldn't have been quite so dire. My old friend counted on the fact that I would be too humiliated to ask for help – despite our shattered friendship, he still knew me far too well, and knew I would end up rotting here alone. What he didn't count on, however, was my reaction to Zydrate.”

He reclined in his seat, eyes raised to the ceiling as his head rocked back. Now that the worst of his anger had been let loose, he seemed awfully tired. “My first days in this realm were a screaming blur of agony. Weakened as I was, and without the power to heal myself, I could feel every ache of my body tenfold. My feet were blistered and broken from my frenzied trek, my skin stinging and torn in a hundred places from the nettles and buckthorn I had been dragged through. Worst of all, though, was the pain in my left hand. It had barely healed, the ragged flesh beneath the missing knuckle still on fire, and even the slightest accidental contact was enough to leave me whimpering. At that time, I would have taken anything to kill the pain, but my pockets were empty, and I hadn't the means to buy even the cheapest bottle of booze. This city is a cruel place, as I'm sure you're aware, but it did give me something: a way of digging up my own cure, if I was careful enough.”

Sarah nodded her understanding. “And when you first took it-”

“It lifted me far above my abilities, giving me the strength to connect to that lost part of myself. I could return home again, but only in short bursts. It didn't take me long to realise that making my way back to my castle and reclaiming my rightful place as king was the only way I could keep hold of that power. I risked as much as I dared to steal more of this power, this Zydrate, experimenting with higher dosages and longer journeys Underground, and suffering through the consequences each time. The one time I made it far enough to encounter one of my citizens, I came back in an awful state, wracked with convulsions, shivering and sweating at the same time, and near-delirious with fever. Fortunately for myself – and perhaps unfortunately for him – I managed to drag that citizen back here with me. He got me through that awful night without letting me swallow my tongue or shudder myself to death, but now he can't return home either.”

Sarah couldn't help a wry smile. “And now you repay him by kicking him out of his own apartment for the night.”

“I'll have you know I pay for his apartment with my own illicit earnings, and keep the miserable little wretch sitting reasonably pretty for his troubles,” Jareth sniffed, gesturing at the array of candy bars with a distasteful sneer. His expression softened some as he chuckled to himself. “Though I suppose a trip to the off licence now and then is a small price to pay for him possibly saving my life.”

“I'll say.”

The two of them fell into a comfortable silence for some time, Sarah's mind full of strange thoughts as she went back over everything Jareth had told her. It was a hell of a lot to take in, especially after the stress of what they'd already been through that night. Her body felt like it was made of lead, overtaxed, and her head felt like it would spin off her shoulders as she tried to imagine the man sitting next to her as the ruler of some strange new kingdom, wielding powers both imperial and magical that she could only ever dream of. Her own problems seemed to pale in comparison when she considered all that he had lost. She began to wonder what would happen to the strange man and his companion after their business that night was done; she wondered if either of them would live long enough to see a brighter future, she out of debt and danger, and he ruling over his kingdom once more.
Her head felt impossibly heavy, burdened by her worries and guilt, but she urged herself to put such thoughts aside. Jareth wasn't her problem, any more than she was his. She had already saved him from harm once that night, and though he had returned the favour by getting her out of her apartment unscathed, he had still not fulfilled his end of their deal. She had helped him as agreed, but now he still owed her a free ticket out of the city. Whatever came after for him was none of her concern.

“Hey, Jareth …”

She turned to him, her brow furrowed and her jaw set, ready to demand what she was owed. Seeing Jareth fast asleep, blond locks splashed across the sofa's faded headrest, was enough to take the wind from her sails. His gloved hands were folded flat across his stomach, his chest rising and falling at a steady pace as the odd, soft snore pushed past his lips. Clearly, she wasn't the only one feeling overwhelmed by the evening's events – not to mention whatever toll that burst of magic earlier had taken on his body.

Sighing, Sarah reached into her bag and managed to dig out her phone, careful not to make too much noise. The glowing screen told her it was just after ten o'clock, and she nodded to herself as she tucked it away again. They still had time.

Resigned to babysitting the curious, strangely captivating man for a little longer, she smiled over at his sleeping form. “You've got less than thirty minutes to sleep this off,” she murmured to him. “Then we get moving again, okay?”

When Jareth only uttered a wheezing grunt in response, she laughed and settled herself back on the sofa to wait. Thirty minutes wasn't too long to wait, and it was good to at least be comfy as the sound of Jareth's gentle snores washed over her. It had been such a long night for them both. It would be nice to relax for just a little while, she thought as she laid her head upon his shoulder, letting the solid warmth of his body seep into her skin, and the steady cadence of his breathing lull her down into sleep. Midnight came and went, but only in her dreams.

Chapter End Notes

Title from: Crucifixus
Can you forgive me for this?

Heavy rain beat down on her face, neck, and bare breasts, cold enough to steal her breath. She could feel the places where the drops had beaded on her cheeks and begun to roll icy rivulets along her temples to wet her hair, but beyond that her body felt strangely detached, heavy and numb. The sidewalk on which she lay sprawled was slick and wet, and she realised with a feeble groan that it wasn't all rainwater soaking through her clothes. The top she wore had been torn open, but it clung to her ribs, heavy with blood as more ran black in the moonlight, stretching out dark wings onto the paving slabs beneath her. There was no pain, only a strange coldness spreading through her limbs. Her fingers twitched, but she could hardly feel them.

This is dying, she managed to tell herself. This is what I've been worried about all this time. The pain she had feared did not come, and yet that creeping, numbing cold terrified her even more as it worked its way through her entire body. She was too weak to call out for help, even as her captor detached himself from the shadows and stalked his way across the still, silent alley towards her. Sarah's eyes rolled in her head, looking for an escape, but her broken body would not comply. This was going out, not with a bang, but unable to muster even something so pathetic as a whimper. The sound of the Repo Man's boots rang in her ears, tapping out their own grim dirge for the dying, louder even than her slowing heartbeat.

He lowered himself down atop her, long dark coat pooling around him like ink, his lean, leather-clad thighs spread to straddle her hips. He didn't seem to weigh much, and yet he made up for it by pushing one gloved hand down against her sternum, making her work all the harder just to breathe. She went on gasping beneath him as he freed his scalpel, holding the keen instrument up for her inspection. Her eyes widened as they traced the length of the blade, and he cocked his head to one side, perhaps enjoying her reaction to it. Behind the full face helmet he wore, with only the vaguest hint of his eyes behind a thin strip of glass, it was impossible to tell for sure. It felt so wrong, so cowardly that the bastard could mete out something as intimate as death without even having the decency to look her fully in the face.

Moaning, Sarah used the very last of her strength to reach up to her masked assassin, and hooked clumsy fingers beneath the chin bar of his helmet. The man did not help her, nor did he resist as she tore the helmet away, before letting it drop to the ground. He gave a twisted little smile as his long blond hair tumbled free, weighed down at once by the weather. Damp tendrils tickled her cheeks as Jareth leered down over her, exposed but unashamed, the tip of his scalpel already touching down between her breasts to finally finish what he had begun.

“Please,” she begged.

“Hush, love. This won't hurt a bit, I promise,” he murmured as the blade pressed down.

Finally, she felt warmth, spreading from the incision he made to trickle down her belly. Blood pooled in her navel, thick and hot, telling her the cut had been a deep one, and yet it didn't hurt; nothing hurt any more. In that, at least, Jareth had told her the truth. She stared up into his cold, dead eyes, surrendering to him as he sliced her open, believing in him even as he raised the dripping scalpel up and, in slow swipes of his tongue, he licked the blade clean. When, at last, he looked into her eyes, his lips were stained as dark as his smile.

“I promise.”
She woke gasping, lurching forward in her seat with enough force to earn a disapproving grunt from the stranger dozing beside her. Terror buzzed in her mind as she tried to untangle the dark threads of her dream from reality. Judging from the stiffness in her neck and the hot, dry feeling in her mouth, she had slept for way too long. Cold, sick fear wormed its way up her gullet, too forceful to swallow back down as she fumbled for her cell phone, feeling yet more precious seconds slipping away. It was twenty-seven minutes past midnight, and she was officially out of time.

“Jareth,” she choked out. “Jareth, get up.” Even as her legs slowly swayed into action, even as her mind raced to catch up with her dragging limbs, her eyes were on the move, scanning the unfamiliar apartment for danger. “Jareth,” she hissed again, sharper this time. “It's after twelve. We need to go-” The words dried up on her tongue as she clocked the body slumped in the armchair opposite them. For one heart-stopping moment, the stranger's black hat, pulled down low to cover his eyes, became the dark mask of a Repo Man. Hoggle, she reminded herself as the man's deep snores rasped through the room. Only Hoggle. She slipped across the room as Jareth at last began to stir, and cracked the door open, risking a glance out into the hallway. Though it was as silent as the grave out there, it did little to settle her nerves. Whatever tracking device GeneCo used to keep an eye on potential runaways, it was no doubt lit up just for her, screaming out her name to any dutiful Repo Man willing to pick up the bounty. All they had to do was hunt her down.

Shivering, she turned back towards the sofa, ready to light a fire under Jareth's ass to get him moving, only to find him already standing behind her. Pure adrenalin coursed through her body, triggering that age-old battle between fight and flight. As she stumbled backwards a step and his hands came up to steady her, she forced herself to remember that this man and the one from her dream – the one with her blood staining his lips – were not one and the same. Still, she felt grateful when those gloved hands released her.

“It seems we rested too long.” His voice was low and rough, his cheeks still flushed with sleep-warmth, but there was shame in his mismatched eyes. “My mistake. We should get moving as soon as possible.” He began to scoop up their belongings, his precious jacket with its stash of Zydrate still clutched to his breast. “Thankfully, we should still be okay – at least for now. Most people on this side of the city wouldn't qualify for even the most basic repayment plan; the chances of a patrol or routine stop and search will be relatively low here. Whatever happens though, we'll get through it.” He offered out the strap of her bag in one hand, and the small smile he wore was the same one from her nightmare. All that was missing was the scalpel. “Trust me, love,” he said, with a thin trace of a smile. “I'll keep you safe.”

Sarah nodded her agreement as she accepted the bag from him, but it was a huge relief when he finally turned those eyes away from her. She had a horrible feeling that if she looked into them for too long, she might actually come to believe him. She found herself shifting from one foot to the other, shooting glances between the door and the man – the stranger – she had chosen to gamble her life upon. He had helped her, gotten her farther than she could have hoped to go alone, but it didn't mean he was trustworthy. The man plundered dead bodies, for Christ's sake; she didn't want to think too long on what he might be capable of doing to the living.

She watched him as he worked his knife into the blue jacket's lining, his hands moving with great care as he transferred the precious vials of Zydrate into his own pockets. The only thing he truly cared about was the drug he had gone to great lengths to steal and to hoard – the only thing that might give him some chance of getting home again. No matter how well he had managed to charm her, or how his sad story of betrayal had tugged at her heartstrings, she would do well to remember that. She jumped a little as he finally turned back to her, knife still in hand. He raised his eyebrows at her as he slid the blade back into his coat.
“Ready?”

“Ready,” Sarah managed to croak.

Hoggle's deep snores came to an abrupt end when Jareth crossed the room and tapped his boot against the smaller man's shin. “Rise and shine, Hogwart. I've a job for you.”

As the old bus lurched and shuddered its way back across town, Sarah was careful to keep her eyes on the dark world outside her window, rather than her seat mate. Her poor heart was working overtime, her nerves all but fried as she dreamed up death, standing on every street corner. Every shadow became her stalker; every GeneCo billboard they passed screamed out a warning. Whenever the bus stopped at a red light, or even slowed in the thin traffic, the muscles in her thighs and calves seized up, and refused to relax until they were on the move again. When Jareth laid a hand on her shoulder, she jumped so hard that her ass almost left her seat.

“Loosen up, would you?” he said, close by her ear. “If you keep twitching and hopping around like that, we're more likely to be singled out.”

Panting a little from the unneeded shot of adrenaline, Sarah forced herself to relax a little, almost jumping again when her back came into contact with the seat. “Okay, sure. It's not like I'm wanted 'Dead or … well, Really Fucking Dead' right now, or like the guy I'm travelling with is carrying enough illegal Z to put us both on the moon ten times over,” she hissed. “I'd appreciate it if you'd cut me some slack here.”

“Hmm. You'd do well to cut yourself some; all this tension can't be healthy.” He tilted his head to look at her. “This isn't your fault, you know.”

“No – it's yours for declaring it nap time in the first place.”

Jareth sighed. “Quite. I was, however, referring to your overall predicament. Though you've no choice but to slink through the streets like a common criminal right now, it's the system that's corrupt, not you. From where I'm sitting, your only crime is the audacity of wanting to live a little longer. You don't deserve any of this.”

“Yeah, tell me something I don't already know.”

The sudden hot prickle behind her eyes caught her off guard, and she squeezed her lids shut. She knew it, all right, but it had been so long since anyone had cared about her enough – or at all – to say something so simple. She felt a little ashamed that such a small show of kindness from a stranger could hit her so hard – that she had been cut off from her feelings for so long as to let a man like this actually move her.

Jareth did not acknowledge the silent sobs which shook her frame, but he went on holding onto her shoulder, squeezing softly, until she had managed to get herself under control. Only when she released a great, shuddering sigh and finally risked a glance in his direction did he draw back, one hand delving into the depths of his overcoat. He emerged victorious, offering out a crumpled yet still perfectly serviceable roll of hard candies. “Lifesaver?”

Sarah took one look at the familiar, colourful packaging, made the mistake of meeting his eyes, and promptly burst into laughter. It squeezed more tears out to blur her vision, and so she sensed, rather than saw Jareth's amusement. “I'm sorry,” she managed, when her giggles had tapered down. “You just looked so goddamn sincere.”
“Yes, I'm sorry. Sincerity is a dreadful habit of mine.”

She snorted. “You are so full of shit.”

Jareth graced her with a smug smile. “Perhaps, but you are no longer full of tension.” He popped one of the candies into his mouth and tucked the rest back into his pocket. “I'd say you owe me a thank you.”

“I'd say you're not supposed to talk with your mouth full.”

It was his turn to chuckle. “Oh, please. You've been wearing that not-so-subtle look of disapproval from the moment we met, and that's what you choose to lecture me on? You should pick your battles better, love.”

Sarah scoffed but allowed him to have the last word. It was hard enough to keep track of her ever-shifting emotions that day – especially those which revolved around him – without being weighed down by more talk. It wasn't exactly a companionable silence they fell into, but it had to be close, and it gave her time to wonder. She had been acquainted with the man less than a day, and yet he already knew more about the way her mind worked than all the supervisors and colleagues she saw on a daily basis. He knew when to push her and when to give comfort, when to draw her out of her own thoughts and when to leave her to them. God knows why, of all the crazy things, she actually felt drawn to him, when everything about his attitude towards life and his questionable way of living it screamed at her to stay away.

She supposed, after so many years of being alone – years in which she had never really paused long enough to let herself feel lonely – it was good to know someone whose life was just as dark and bleak, and as fucked up as hers. Somehow, in spite of everything, the two of them had managed to hold onto their sense of humour.

Sarah gave her companion a sidelong stare, taking in the messy hay pile of hair, the high, hollowed cheeks as he sucked at his candy, and the semi-permanent smirk that curved his lips. She looked at the laid-back posture, the tattered clothes, and what was maybe the last remaining trace of regal hauteur in his curious eyes, and she choked back a sigh. She wanted to know this man. It had taken coming this close to death for her to admit she wanted more out of her life – something beyond the daily grind, and some hope beyond that of just survival. She wanted to laugh again, and to have a friend or a lover to do it with. Perhaps this strange man would turn out to be neither, but she at least wanted the chance to find out. So much had been stolen from her, and she longed to finally take something back. She wanted a week – hell, a year, if time could really be bartered for – to learn more about the one truly interesting person she'd had the misfortune of meeting.

She dearly wanted to finally finish off that hot chocolate, or maybe even a decent bottle of wine in good company, talking deep into the night with the king who had once been, and who might one day rule again.

It was just a dream, though, and she knew better than to wish for it to become real. She knew that soon enough, that near-comfortable silence would stretch and twist and turn ugly, and she would be on her own again.

As they drew closer to their destination, she found herself at something of a loss. Though this had been the plan from the start – to make their way towards freedom, in spite of the danger – she realised that, deep down, she had never really expected to get this far. It had been nothing but talk, overshadowed by thoughts of failure and death right from the beginning – a plan too crazy and just plain goddamn stupid to have ever actually worked. Optimism was almost a foreign concept to her, and now that she found herself within reaching distance of her goal, her mind just didn't seem to
know what to do with itself. He had actually gotten her here. Instead of leaving her behind, maybe excusing himself to go to the bathroom and then ducking out on her, Jareth had actually stayed the course. True to his word, he was with her to the end, and that frightened her more than she could possibly hope to express.

Guilt swelled up within her, and she spat the words out before they could choke her. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

Jareth swivelled in his seat to give her an odd look. “Come again?”

Sarah let her eyes move up and down the almost empty bus, staring anywhere but into his. “You're out in public with someone who's on the run from GeneCo – plus whatever extra trouble playing with matches got us into – and you're holding a shit ton of Z. If they catch me, the chances are pretty high that you'll be coming down with me.”

“Fortunate for us both, then, that I don't plan on being caught.”

“Maybe not, but it's still a huge risk for you – more than what I took to free you back in the graveyard. It's … it's not exactly fair of me to ask you to do this.”

“Sarah, we made a deal – one I don't plan on going back on, if that's what's worrying you.”

She sighed and pushed both hands back through her hair, slumping forward almost far enough to kiss the back of the seat in front of her. “I am trying to give you an out, here. Even if this whole thing does work, it'll only get me a head start towards the next city, and I really don't think a Repo Man is gonna let a little traffic stop him from doing his job, you know? I appreciate you offering to help, I really do – there's no one in my life right now who'd put their neck out half as much for me – but it's too dangerous to go on like this. You have enough to deal with already.”

Jareth scoffed. “You'd really have me turn back when we're so close? You really want to just give up?”

“No, I don't want to 'just' give up. I want to stop you from doing something really stupid just to help me.”

He gripped the collar of her jacket and pulled her back into her seat. “You mean something stupid like prolonging your life?”

“Yeah, but for how long?” She shook free of his grasp and finally met his eyes. “Don't play dumb, Jareth. We both know how this ends. You waste your time and your Zydrate on getting me out of the city, and then in a couple of days – a week, if I'm lucky – a Repo Man tracks me down and I'm dead anyway.”

“Then I suggest you make the most out of those precious few days, and when the bastard comes for you, you give him hell – and the next one, too. You can't let them win.”

She shook her head. “It's not letting them win – it's accepting the inevitable. When I die-”

“Gods, Sarah-”

“-when I die, I want it to be-”

As quick and painless as possible, her mind finished, but she knew he would never accept the easier, simpler way out of the whole mess. In one moment he was looking at her, steel in those icy-blue eyes, and in the next he had his hand in her hair, his gaze set on her mouth.
“Sarah …”

She could feel her pulse starting to pick up as she gave him a silent nod, and then all at once, he was kissing her. It began as little more than a brush of his lips, but when he began to draw back she surged forwards, pressing her mouth fully to his. She kissed him, and for the first time in so long, she felt something other than fear, or pain, or despair. The soft sound of pleasure she made spurred him on, and then both of his hands were on her, one cupping her cheek and the other stroking along her nape, drawing her to him. It was a brief kiss, sure and sweet, and yet it managed to leave her lips tingling, and a warm weight in the pit of her stomach. Even when he pulled back, Jareth stayed close enough for her to feel his every word slipping across her skin.

“You're going to fight this,” he told her, those curious eyes locked with hers. “Whatever it takes. You're going to fight to stay in this wretched world, teeth and claws if you have to. No excuses – I won't listen to them.”

Somehow, she managed a dazed little smile. “Even if they're completely valid?”

Jareth grinned and kissed her again. “Even so. Now come on, I believe this is our stop.”

The predawn air seemed a little less chilly with a warm body at her side, and an arm wrapped around her shoulders. After just a couple of kisses, the two of them had hardly agreed to go steady, or anything equally ridiculous, but Sarah found she appreciated the gesture all the same. As helplessly girlish as it seemed, it was nice to have at least some delusion of protection out there. Now that they had moved into the open, her earlier worries tried to fight their way back to the forefront of her thoughts, but Jareth's presence kept them at bay, at least for the time being.

Having someone to help her escape was one thing; knowing someone truly believed she would succeed almost made her foolish enough to believe in herself. With enough breathing room from her immediate problems, there might be some way of taking herself off the GeneCo radar – some way of killing whatever tracker they used to monitor their organs, without killing herself. She'd been lucky enough to stumble into Jareth, after all; there was still hope she could run into the right kind of wrong people a second time. It was small, maybe even microscopic, but there was a chance she might somehow get to live a little longer.

She wondered if the same could be said for Jareth, when he put his own crazy plan into action. Her heart sank when she remembered that she would most likely never get the chance to find out. Even if she lived, the chances of running into him again were virtually zero – and that was if he managed to survive another hit of Zydrate and magic so soon after the last one.

“Hey, are you going to be okay?”

Beside her, Jareth huffed and shook his head. “You've got a target on your back and you're asking me that? I told you, I'm too stubborn to die, just like back when I was a boy. I'll be ruling again soon enough. Just concentrate on worrying about yourself.”

“That's not how I meant it – not exactly. I mean, obviously I don't want anything bad to happen to you once we go our separate ways, but are you even going to be okay getting that far? Are you even safe to inject Z again this soon? Won't it mess you up even more than last time?”

“Very likely, but that's none of your concern. You should focus on-”

“Worrying about myself. Yeah, I get that, but when they come looking for me and they find you slumped over with a Zydrate gun in your hand instead-”
“They’ll tut and sigh, and ultimately send me back to my father – which reminds me …”

“Your father?”

Jareth let go of her to dig deep into an inner pocket. With a slanted smile, he produced what appeared to be a silver medical alert bracelet. “It’s a must-have accessory these days,” he explained, as he laid the thing over his wrist and began to fiddle with the clasp. “All the spoiled little rich boys and girls never take theirs off, so when their latest surgery is botched and they need a little extra comfort, mummy or daddy dearest will be able to find them and clear up whatever mess they’re in. From what I’ve witnessed, the parents are usually willing to pay quite handsomely to keep their little darlings out of trouble – and out of the local news. Ugh, this bloody thing!”

Sarah stepped up to help him get it fastened on. She noticed that, in lieu of actual medical details, the bracelet was simply inscribed with an address – presumably fake – and a phone number – hopefully real. “So you essentially play an ageing trust fund baby and hope like hell that Hoggle actually comes to bail you out?”

“Less of the ‘ageing’, thank you very much. Besides, he's only had to do it once before, and I always ensure that he has adequate funds, just in case.”

She shot him a frown. “I thought you said you didn't have any money.”

“I didn’t – at least not on me.”

He passed by her with a smirk, leaving to stare after him, amazed at his audacity, before she followed along just behind him. “If I do die, remind me to haunt you until you cough up the bus fare you owe me.”

“Duly noted, love.”

The dark streets were theirs, the two of them picking up the pace wherever the shadows seemed to stretch too long, or a busted street light left them in a shadowy limbo. There were no more words between them, nerves on edge the closer they got to the outskirts of the city, both of them listening out for footsteps which were not their own. When the faint sound of another voice reached her ears, Sarah seized hold of Jareth’s arm at once and dragged him into the darkened doorway of a closed store. The pair of them froze there for a moment, the seconds ticking by as they debated whether to run or to try to stay hidden. Boisterous laughter soon settled the matter for them.

As it grew louder, Jareth shoved her up against the door, hooking a hand around her thigh and urging her to curl it around his hip. He planted his other hand against the door frame and dipped his head to brush noses with her; though he looked like just an overeager lover, his eyes remained fixed on the glass above her head, watching the reflection of the street behind them. They waited that way, bodies entwined, until two sniggering drunks had stumbled their way past, and their voices had faded into the distance once more.

As Jareth’s attention slowly moved back to her, Sarah realised she was breathing hard, her heart fluttering like a caged bird within her chest. Evidently, being pushed up against a grimy doorway had caused her body to forget she was no longer a hormone-addled, sex-starved teenager. Being pinned by his warm, lean form, her hips trapped by his was doing a number of things to both her brain and her body – and not a one of them was conductive to skipping town. Just then, she was perfectly content to remain exactly where she was. She saw something dark flash within his eyes, and before she could even speak, Jareth nudged his forehead against hers and groaned.

“Don’t look at me like that. Gods, don’t look at me like that,” he murmured, and covered her mouth
with his.

It wasn't as tentative as their first kiss had been, and both of them suffered for it; without that almost touching, desperate need to reassure her, it was slow, and open, and wet, and it left her moaning against him. His lips were so soft, and far too practised in pleasure as they abandoned her mouth to trail hot little kisses down along her neck. No matter the danger, Sarah couldn't bring herself to tell him to stop. A little hum of excitement left her as the tip of his tongue teased the tender hollow of her throat. “Fuck,” she whispered, and he mumbled something that might have been agreement into her skin.

His head ducked just a little lower, the hand still supporting her thigh starting to stroke her through her jeans before coming to a reluctant halt. He was caught in indecision once more, and she almost wanted him just to give in, but he drew back.

“I can't let myself do this to you, love. I want to, but if I'm buried inside you, I'm not protecting you, and it's not safe for you here or anywhere else right now. If it were any other place or time-”

“I know.” Cupping his cheeks, she tilted his face down just enough for her to press one last kiss to his pale forehead. “I know. Let's … let's just get moving, okay?”

A little shaken, the two of them stepped back onto the street to finally finish their journey. The rejection stung a little, but Sarah knew it had been the right decision. She smiled a little when she felt Jareth's hand at the small of her back, his body moving in close to hers once more as they walked.

“I love how we're making this even more complicated than it needs to be,” she muttered.

“I wouldn't dwell too much on it. Mankind has been making things complicated since the Garden of Eden, if any of your Bible's to be believed – and fornicating like rabbits since back then, too.”

Sarah snorted. “Lucky us. As for the Bible, I'm guessing there are weirder things than talking snakes and burning bushes back where you come from, huh?”

Jareth smirked. “You could say that.”

“I wish I could see what it's really like there, once you're back as king, I mean. Getting lost in some kind of fantasy land has got to be better than dodging Repo Men and wondering how to stay alive.”

“It comes with its own set of trials, believe me, but I do find it preferable to here.” He seemed to hesitate a beat too long before adding: “Well, there's no telling what the future might hold, and-”

“No. You don't need to say that. Probably better not to get either of our hopes up. Hey, uh … we should probably think about crossing over soon. If we go much further, they'll be able to see us from the guard tower,” she said, and was immediately grateful for the much-needed reminder of reality. They had almost reached the city's uninhabited edge, but they were far from being out of the woods. Suddenly anxious, more so than she had felt back in her apartment building, she began to fuss with her small bag, reminding herself once again that this wasn't meant to be the end, but a new start for her. She hoped Jareth didn't notice the way her hands were shaking. “Well, I think I've got everything I need.” Her intention had been to inject some of that nervous energy into her voice, and yet the words fell flat.

“It would appear so.” With a cursory glance around, he used the hand at her back to steer her away from the artificial glow of the street lights, and into the relative concealment of a nearby alley. “But I've been thinking … and I don't think it's going to be enough.”

Sarah shrugged and clutched at her elbows. He had seen the way she had been forced to live. He
knew how little she had to her name. It was pointless being ashamed of it. “Maybe not, but it's all that I've got.” Being out of sight of the main street had to be a good thing, but the shadows were starting to make her feel even more nervous.

His expression was grave, but his eyes were kind. “Be that as it may, you're not going to get far on what little you have squirrelled away. Now, I can't help too much with that, but still … I think these will help you more than they'll help old Hoghead, in the long run.”


“Close enough.” His gloved fingers slipped and danced through his many pockets, making her smile a little at the now-familiar sight. Soon enough, he found what he was looking for, dragging out a tangle of gold necklaces, and a beaten silver bangle. He thrust them at her with an apologetic shrug. “More leftovers from my … ah … exploits. You might be able to pawn them – give yourself a little more money to work with while you figure out a way to keep going.”

She could feel the most ridiculous smile trying to creep its way across her face. “Jareth … this is too much. I don't know what to say.” It was absurd to let herself get all gooshy over a couple of stolen trinkets – trinkets he had taken from actual corpses, no less – and yet she couldn't find it in herself to be sickened, to reject or to laugh at his gifts. She accepted the fistful of jewellery, and managed to tuck it away into her own jacket. “It's … I'm probably going to hell for saying this, considering where it all came from, but it's actually pretty sweet of you.”

Jareth wasn't done, however, a look of concentration creasing his brow as he dug back into his breast pocket. “And there's also … this.” He presented her with a plain gold ring with a little more ceremony than his last offerings, and with a crooked grin on his lips. Planting one booted foot out before him, he bowed over it, hand outstretched, the ring held between his fingers. “Though if you're planning on keeping it as a token of my undying affection, I recommend at least sterilising it first. Let's just say the rings never tend to come off as easily as the necklaces.”

Sarah gave voice to a dark chuckle. “And they say romance is dead.” Her smile faded when, instead of taking the ring, her clumsy fingertips knocked it out of his grasp instead. “Oh shit, Jareth, I'm sorry-”

“Don't be, I've got it.”

The thin gold band went bouncing off over the uneven paving, and true to his word, Jareth went scuttling along after it, hunched over and looking for all the world like an exceptionally well-dressed monkey as he gave chase. After a couple of unsuccessful attempts at capture, he finally managed to trap the thing under his boot, stopping it from rolling any further. Sarah caught something that sounded like 'little shit' as he bent to scoop it up. He turned and raised the ring up in his fist, and Sarah laughed aloud at the look of boyish glee on his face. She reacted only a second too late as she watched that warm expression of his turn to one of horror. She couldn't turn in time to face death as it came stealing in silence behind her.

“Sarah-!”

The hand that clamped down on her shoulder was like iron, brutal and unforgiving as it seized her. Sarah found herself yanked backwards, her jaw slamming shut as she collided with her attacker's solid frame hard enough to make her teeth rattle. Instinct made her lunge forwards, but a gloved hand sank itself into her hair to pull her back again. She cried out as pain lanced through her scalp, reaching up to try to relieve the pressure, but by then a thick arm had hooked itself around her middle, only tightening its grip as she tried to wriggle free. God, he was crushing her. The pain in her head subsided; the man holding her had released her hair, only to draw his weapon as Jareth
came running to her aid. There was a flash of silver, and then a deadly scalpel was poised between her throat and her would-be saviour.

“Stay where you are. Don't come any closer.” The Repo Man's words were dry and rough, thick with gravel, and no less menacing for the helmet that muffled them. When Jareth proved a trifle too slow in obeying the man, the blade in his hand moved a heart-stopping inch closer to Sarah's bobbing throat, the tip now grazing her skin. That cold kiss of steel stilled her struggles at once. One wrong move, and it would slip through her skin like it were made of paper. She might have whimpered in fear, but her captor paid her no heed.

Jareth took a tiny step backwards, his eyes darting between the scalpel and the madman wielding it. “Look, we can talk about this.” The cogs in his brain were already turning; with her own mind seemingly frozen in panic, Sarah hoped he didn't say anything stupid enough to get her killed even quicker. He was the concerned citizen from the graveyard and the charmer from the café rolled into one, an expression of measured woe slipping over his features like silk. “This one woman can't be worth that much to you, but she is to me. She lit up my life the moment she walked into it, all those months ago, and there's a good chance she's already carrying my child—”

The Repo Man grunted. “Spare me. Do you think I haven't heard that old sob story before? Let me stop you right there before you waste any more of my time, and tell you that all flight risks are closely monitored in the months approaching their date of expiration. No ties were found, familial or otherwise, no one to foot her bill, and no one to mourn her after she's gone. If you'd so much as given her a cab ride home one night, GeneCo would have known about you. What this woman is worth to you, my friend, is nothing.”

“But maybe she could be worth something to you after all.” Jareth traded tactics easily and gave him a knowing smile. “Whatever they're paying you—”

“-is none of your concern,” the man growled. “I know street trash when I see it. If you think you can convince me a junkie can make me rich, you may as well save your breath. Besides, all the money in the world couldn't save me if I betrayed GeneCo's trust. Now look, she's already spoken for, and nothing you say will convince me otherwise. Whatever you're guilty of, I don't want you. I'm not interested in you. This isn't your problem, and you aren't mine tonight. Leave, now, and I'll let you live. If you stay, you're interfering with official business, and you'll face the consequences. Do you understand me?”

Jareth's lips peeled back in a snarl, the pleasant mask finally cast aside. “I understand you, all right.”

“Good. Now, do yourself a favour and just walk away. Forget what you've seen tonight. Go on, now. You don't want to watch this.”

Helpless, yet not quite hopeless, Sarah met Jareth's eyes. She widened her own, letting her gaze dart down in a brief, pointed stare at his coat. Use the gun, she mouthed. Use the Zydrate. We can still get out of this. It was impossible to imagine how it would work, with Jareth so far away and that gleaming scalpel so very near, but in the greying, panicked locale of her brain, it simply had to. There was the Zydrate and the pull of magic, or there was death. There was no third option. They would try and they would succeed, or she would die right there on the street. The sharp blade shifted against her throat again, making her glance down in fear, hoping like hell the Repo Man wasn't sick enough to carry out his work with an audience – hoping they still had time to make their move. When she met Jareth's gaze again, she didn't like what she saw. In that moment, she realised that there was no 'we' or 'they' – not any more.

His mismatched eyes were full of pity, but Jareth made no further move to come to her aid. In fact, he already seemed to be edging away, and Sarah thought she saw the exact second his expression
moved from empathy, to cool acceptance – the moment he realised that, in the face of real danger, she was expendable after all, and it would be wise to cut her loose. His eyes darted away from her, briefly back, and then away again, settling somewhere far to his right, where the alley stretched on into the night. His hands, which had been twitching close to his coat pockets – preferably in the area the Zydrate gun or even his knife was located – now rose up, palms showing in the age-old gesture of surrender. He shuffled a step backwards, and then two, and then he was looking at the Repo Man, rather than her.

“All right,” he said, and though the words were hardly loud enough to carry the weight of regret, they were still enough to crush her heart. “All right.”

Her throat, which had been seized up along with the rest of her body, now let loose a senseless squawk of protest. This wasn't how it was supposed to go. She began to struggle anew, hardly caring if the blade nicked her. “Jareth, fuck, no! You said … you promised you wouldn't abandon me, remember? Not until we were through. You fucking promised!”

His eyes shifted back to hers, and he could only offer a weak, helpless smile. “I'm sorry, Sarah, love. I'm so sorry,” he said, and then he was gone, breaking away from the confrontation, and stealing deeper into the darkness of the alley without a backward glance.

A heartbeat passed, and then two, in which her mouth hung silent and open. It was the betrayal that she had been expecting, waiting for all along, and yet somehow she still couldn't quite believe he had abandoned her in the end. Her eyes at first refused to move from the spot he had been standing in only seconds ago, not quite able to accept that he had disappeared, refusing to give up hope that he would change his mind and come back for her. She struggled against her captor, but her heart was already falling, failing her the same way the old one had. Despair washed cold over her whole body, but she forced herself to fight it, clinging on to the last tattered shreds of hope she had. She wanted to live. Even if she had nothing and no one left to live for, Christ, she wanted to try. No one was coming back to save her, and so she had to save herself.

She twisted in the Repo Man's tight grasp as well as she could manage, swinging up a fist and aiming it low on that dark helmet, hoping in some vague way to catch him in the throat. The angle was tight and awkward, and though she heard him grunt, the soft brush of leather against her knuckles told her she hadn't managed to hit him anywhere near hard enough. She shifted her hips and flung herself forward again to try and throw him off balance, but the fucker still held on. Her sneaker was already scrabbling along the damp ground, seeking out the tender bridge of his foot, when pain exploded at the back of her skull, spreading its sick heat behind her eyes, and the world went black.

Chapter End Notes

Title from: Night Surgeon
Before the cut

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the wait! I realise some of you Labyrinth fans are giving this story a chance despite never having watched Repo! before – and I do love you for it – but please, do yourself a favour and look up the 'Thankless Job' scene/song from the film before reading this. It's a fun little piece of slapstick horror (if that's a thing), and I think this chapter and the next play even better if you've seen the way our lovely Repo Man sometimes likes to toy with his victims ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The rain sounded like it was close by, the gentle *pitter-patter* trickling into her ears, and she shivered as she waited to feel the first drops. It was already way too cold out to get wet.

*I am outside … right? Ugh, why does everything hurt?*

Her eyelids felt heavy, glued together almost, but Sarah managed to squint them open. She hissed as white light speared its way into her eye sockets and lanced deep into her skull, where it did not receive a warm welcome. She forced it back out with a groan, her eyelids slamming shut again.

*Fuck! Why is it so bright out? Wasn't it just night time a few minutes ago?*

The pounding drum that was her brain just wouldn't give her an answer. Every thought was forced to share space and precious, delicate strands of concentration with a raging storm of pain, screeching winds and booming thunder making it impossible for even the simplest of thoughts to take proper shape. She tried to block it out, tried to raise her hands to cover her ears and squeeze out that pounding noise and confusion, but both her arms refused to cooperate.

*Hey … why can't I move? Why the fuck can't I move? I can't have been hit that hard.*

That last worrying idea shocked the rest into silence. Someone *had* hit her. She couldn't yet remember who or what had struck her, but the threat of danger was enough to jolt her back to life. She could feel herself coming around, aware enough of her body to realise she was resting on something hard and cold, and that her legs weren't cooperating either. She couldn't move. *She couldn't fucking move.* Her chest began to tighten, but she made herself go on breathing before her panic could smother her.

*Get it together, Sarah. Feel that twitch in your fingers? That pressure on your wrists? You aren't paralysed, you're just stuck, somehow. You're going to try opening your eyes again now, okay? It's going to hurt like a bitch again, but you need to find out what's happening here. You need to find out if you're safe.*

Her eyes didn't like it, but at least they obeyed her command. That bit of perseverance paid off, telling her that the bright light slamming down into her face was too harsh and unforgiving to be anything but artificial. Grimacing, she did her best to peer past the light with her eyes slitted open, wincing as even that small exposure provoked a deep and unholy ache within her head. A few careful blinks helped her adjust some, and she was able to make out shapes – a low ceiling – beyond the glare. The sound she had mistaken for gentle rain still drummed in her ears, too strong and steady
to be anything but a working sink. *I'm not outside, then.*

After flexing her fingers and toes, reassuring herself that they still worked, she consulted her body as a whole, and discovered that she was not quite standing, yet not quite lying down either. The hard surface at her back was set at a severe angle, leaving her head and shoulders high and her toes dangling down towards the ground, her body propped up and prone for whatever was to come. She rolled her sore head forwards as much as she dared, noting the heavy black cuffs that bound her wrists and ankles, making any movement beyond a little desperate squirming all but impossible. Sure enough, pulling at her restraints only caused pain, their stiff edges biting into her skin the moment she did. With growing horror, she saw that her thin sweater had been split open down the middle, baring a faded white bra and a strip of too-pale skin that stretched all the way down to the waistband of her jeans. The thin sliver of faded pink scar tissue that ran down between her breasts brought the memories rushing back.

She remembered the pain after her operation, the changing of layers of crisp white bandages and the livid red line that had lain beneath them. She remembered the staggering weight her new heart had placed upon her young shoulders, the many long months she had spent fighting to keep it, and the cold panic that had gripped her chest as, finally, her time with her fresh new organ had run out. She remembered the warm touch of hope as she and her would-be saviour tried to make their escape from the city, and how, in the space of mere seconds, it had been snatched away again as he left her to her fate.

*I'm going to die,* she thought, guts already cramping up in terror. Then: *He's going to kill me.*

Unable to help herself, she rocked forwards against her bonds, wincing as the leather restraints dug deep into her wrists. *Fuck.* Her eyes darted left and right, more shapes slowly coming into focus as her eyes adjusted beneath the harsh bulbs above. That bright examination light above her head seemed to be the only concession towards the cold, clinical surrounds she had been expecting. It was cold, all right – freezing, really – the room's dingy stone walls doing little to keep in the heat, the worn surgical slab against her back raising goosebumps all over her skin. She shivered, and spotted what could have been her jacket, tossed into a corner in a careless heap, but the deep shadows that clung to the room's edges made it impossible to tell for sure. Beyond the damning glare of her spotlight, everything was painted in vague shades of grey, from the strange implements and ancient surgical apparatus which lined the walls, to the ones that were hung from the ceiling in untidy rows. The midnight gleam of metal was everywhere in the darkness, scalpels and saw blades and god only knew what else dangling down for her goggle-eyed appraisal, all those jagged edges strung up like the mobile in some sadist's playpen. From the looks of it, said sadist liked to keep his toys sharp.

Her eyes widened as grim realisation set in. There would be no hope of catching hold of a real doctor in this drab basement room – no chance at reason, or some desperate, last minute bargain. This wasn't GeneCo's shining and spotless headquarters; it was a cavern of nightmares, where no one would hear her scream.

She almost *did* scream when, at last, she spotted him.

In the shadows and without his helmet, he could have been any other doctor, head down as he concentrated on the small sink before him, humming something soft and melodious under his breath as he scrubbed up ready for her surgery. It was only when Sarah let her eyes shift sideways, away from the sink and back onto the wide array of grisly tools around the room, did she remind herself that the task he was readying himself for, the one that had him singing a merry little tune, was her murder.

A low, despairing whimper crept from her throat, and she hated it, *loathed* herself for it, for the
moment she unleashed that traitorous sound, the man's shoulders stiffened and began to turn towards her. In his heavy black leathers, he was by far the darkest thing in that frightful room, and now she had his full attention. The running faucet squeaked off, the water dripping away into silence as he snatched up a towel and dried off his hands. He took his time in slipping into a pair of thick gloves before his footsteps began to move across the stone floor towards her, bringing him into her small circle of light.

Her would-be killer was … human. Sarah didn't know what kind of monster she had been expecting beneath the GeneCo disguise – perhaps a mismatched, patchwork job of rotting skin taken from his victims, pulled across his face in a grotesque mask of death. As far as Sarah could tell, the skin stretched taut across his cheekbones and jaw was smooth and clean, and most definitely his own. His hair was a steely grey, kept short and neat, and slicked back from his forehead to give him a sleek, business-like appeal. The dreaded GeneCo stalker didn't have claws, or fangs that might have made him stand out on the street, or eyes that glowed red as they tracked his latest victim. He was just an ordinary man – one who had chosen to maim and murder as a living. Somehow, that was more terrifying than any twisted monster she could have ever dreamed up.

His eyes were focussed on hers, and as he came closer still, Sarah saw they didn't quite match up, just like Jareth's. They were a soft fern-green, and though their pupils were the same size, there was a thin swatch of brown marring the left iris, making it appear far darker. It seemed wrong, somehow, to know something so casually intimate about the man – to even see him as just a man, considering what was to come.

Those eyes creased at the corners as the man's mouth began to curl, his thin lips slowly peeling back to reveal twin rows of straight, white teeth in a smile that was far too wide to be natural. Sarah felt her heart pitch up into her throat. *Jesus*. Something in that smile chilled her all the way down to her soul. The monster she had been dreading was there, all right; he was lurking just beneath the surface, playing peekaboo until the real fun started. She wondered if he would laugh as he cut her open. She wondered just how many other poor souls had borne witness to that sly, demon's smile, and if, in their dying moments, it was the last thing they had ever seen.

“Williams-comma-Sarah.” That bright and unsettling smile dimmed some as the man got down to business, reading from a neat sheath of notes attached to a small black clipboard. “Age: twenty-seven; height: five foot six. Weight: approximately one hundred and five pounds, down from your last check-up. Blood type: O-positive. And now …” His lips twitched as he scanned a little further down his notes, before tapping a disapproving finger against the page. “Yes, exactly ninety days overdue.” He paused in his reading to flash her another oily little smile. “Plus a couple of extra hours because of that detour you took, but hey, who's counting? It's good of you to finally join me. You don't mind hanging around a little longer while I finish off the relevant paperwork, do you?” From the way his smile widened, she could tell he hadn't been expecting a reply. “Fantastic.”

His pen scratched across the page while he continued to mutter to himself, and while Sarah tried to calm her racing heart without much success. Though her body was in panic mode, her restraints rendered her incapable of either fight or flight, leaving her with only one bleak option: to hang there in silent terror. A cold shudder rippled its way through her core as finally, he set all his notes and the clipboard down. It was time for the practical part of his twisted little exam to begin.

She bit back a scream as one gloved hand came to grip the left side of her face, and his thumb moved dangerously close to her eye socket. She was stiff with fear, but he only propped the lid open and urged her head backwards. There was a soft *click*, and then the beam of a small penlight was directed into her eyeball. The smell of peppermint surrounded her as he leaned in, almost close enough to kiss as he peered into both of her eyes in turn, humming and angling her head to suit himself as she tried to keep the flesh from crawling off her bones. The light finally clicked off, leaving her blinking away
dark halos as the man shoved up her sleeves and prodded a finger into each of her biceps, and then the tender bend of both her arms.

“Well, no wonder your little drug dealer friend seemed so disappointed to lose you. It doesn't look like you've actually been using,” he observed. “Looks like I got there just in time. You'd be surprised how many last minute rebels I have to deal with, polluting their whole bodies with whatever shit they can find, just to try to damage the parts GeneCo have given them. That can set me back a good couple of days, just waiting around for it to flush out, as if I haven't got anything better to do. Some people are pretty selfish, huh?” Once again, her lack of answer didn't seem to phase him. “Well, you've saved us both a little time and effort here – not by running in the first place, though.” His lips hitched up at the corners. “At least you can console yourself with this: you won't be making that mistake again – or any other, for that matter.”

The words awakened a sour, hot pulse in her guts. There she was, on the brink of death, and her executioner-to-be was jolly enough to crack jokes about it. “Lucky me,” she murmured, without thinking.

That eerie smile cracked into another wide, toothy grin. “Ah, she speaks! That's the spirit, Sarah. You are lucky not to have gotten dragged down into the dark world of drugs. Just. Say. No.” He punctuated his last words with three light, playful taps of his finger against the tip of her nose, which she flinched away from in disgust. He went on, seemingly oblivious to the sickened scowl she gave him. “Saying that, I think you might regret going into this completely straight, without so much as an aspirin or even a stiff drink to take the edge off for you. This is going to hurt.”

Like you really need to tell me. Sarah sucked in another breath to try to settle her nerves. “Okay, so … if this is really happening, don't I at least get a chance to say my goodbyes?”

“Of course.” His eyes had shifted from her by then, and were moving along his hanging rows of tools, seeking out just the right weapon. “You had ninety days notice – ninety days of non-payment in which to make your peace with the world and all that's in it.” He paused in his musing to shoot her a Sly, sidelong glance. “And, of course, let's not forget those couple of hours on the run with your friend. Shame he had to dash off like that, wasn't it? I wonder where he rushed off to.”

Sarah clenched her fists and chose to ignore the question. She had far bigger worries than Jareth's whereabouts right then. “You know I didn't choose not to pay, right?” she asked. Any real conviction behind her words was dampened by the hitch in her breathing, and by the small, needy sound she coughed out after. It was painfully close to whining. “I tried to keep up – I tried like hell. I skipped meals, I went without heat, even in the winter, but my salary only stretched so far. I could maybe understand punishing me like this if I just forgot to make the payments, or I just didn't feel like paying, but … I did all I could.” The cuffs that held her bit into her wrists as she leaned forward into them. “This isn't right. This isn't fair. I don't deserve this.”

The man shrugged. “You made the agreement and you didn't stick to it. There aren't any participation ribbons or runner-up prizes in the organ game, I'm afraid. You either succeed or you fail – and you, my dear Sarah, have most definitely failed. It's not all bad news, though. Your heart will get put to use again, and with any luck, the next owner will be better equipped to take care of it.”

Another bright, white flash of his teeth set her own on edge. “Just think of it as a form of recycling.”

The tightly-drawn thread of panic within her finally snapped. “I don't want to be fucking recycled! Jesus Christ, I just want to live!” With how badly she was trembling, she didn't know where that surge of strength managed to come from. “You don't need to do this. Please … please, just let me go! Let me go!”

“After you've proven so tricky to catch the first time? I don't think so. You've shown yourself to be a
little too slippery for my liking, Sarah Williams. You won't be wriggling your way off this hook any time soon."

The cocky assurance only spurred her to test her bonds again. She began to squirm as much as her binds allowed, but only succeeded in chafing her wrists against the unforgiving leather of her cuffs. Her captor simply watched her struggle; she was only proving his point. Sarah's aching wrists thanked her as, finally, she slumped back against the cold slab.

*Jesus. Okay, think, Sarah. Just think. You are not going to die here. Not in this … this sicko's little murder den. You can't run, you can't move, but you can talk. You've got to use that to help yourself in any way you can. Keep him busy. Keep him talking.*

“So, where am I?” she asked, with another glance around the room. “This sure as hell isn't any GeneCo building I've seen before.”

He let his eyes slide back towards his line of tools, reaching up to finger the nearest shining silver blade before answering. “It's the end of the line. That's all you need to know.”

He wasn't exactly wrong. Sarah could feel the hopelessness of her situation pressing down on her chest, making her body long to bow, her lips to go on begging for mercy, but she fought against those desperate urges the only way she could. She would fight her fear tooth and nail before giving in. If the man wanted her terror before he took her life, she would do her best to give him only indifference. “Wh-where is that exactly, east side of town or west side? I'm not too good with directions.”

Her captor grunted, a deep scowl setting in. “Got to love a smartass. When you've pissed yourself in fear and your throat's raw and bleeding from your screams, we'll see how smart you are then.”

Sarah felt her pelvic floor muscles contract, as if in agreement. Still, she managed to steal a crumb of hope from his words; he would have to keep her alive long enough for her to get to the screaming stage. She refused to let herself think past that point, tuning out the part of her mind that cried and whined, and wondered just how much agony it would take to force out the desired sounds. She gave no reply as she considered her next move, still and silent as she observed the way the man's eyes kept darting back to hers as he made a show of selecting his instruments. All the while, he watched her watching him, hoping for a reaction; she could see the quirk of his eyebrows, the tilt of his mouth as he lingered over a particularly nasty-looking tool. He *did* want to see her suffer, even before the cutting began, and knowing it for certain finally forced anger to rise up, tall and proud above her fear.

“I'm not trying to be a smartass,” she told him, already feeling herself losing her hold on her tongue. “I'm actually feeling pretty dumb right now, to be totally honest with you, because I just can't understand what could possibly motivate you to do this – to kill people. To pick them up off the street and drag them back to … to whatever this place is, just to *murder* them.”

His eyes flicked towards her again, this time holding her in their dark depths. Though everything in her trembling body told her to look away, Sarah held him in her sights. She refused to be the one to blink first. Being caught was actually starting to feel pretty refreshing. Sure, she was terrified of what pain awaited her, but after months upon months of worry, of sleepless nights filled with sorrow and clawing desperation, it felt good to finally be able to stop running. Self-preservation was a care that lost, *past* Sarah had carried with her. As dangerous as it was, with disgust and sickening rage crawling their way up through her insides, this new Sarah felt almost ready to shrug free of that burden for good. She was finally at the Repo Man's mercy, trapped and probably not long for this world in the bargain, but by god, she was *furious.*
“Why do you do it?” she demanded. “What gives you the motive, the right to end someone’s life?”

“It’s my job,” he sneered at her, crossing his arms over his broad chest as he continued to browse his tools. “And might I remind you, that job is to uphold the contract that you agreed to – not to waste my time bickering with you just because you’ve suddenly decided you don’t like the terms.”

She shook her head in disbelief. The sucker really was cold enough to believe that. “Are you kidding me? I signed that contract because I didn’t have a choice. I needed a new heart; I either agreed to your terms or I died! It’s not like I had a lot of options open to me.”

“Oh, save your sob stories. You’re all the same. We’ll never see eye to eye when it comes to making debtors account for their actions, so why bother? Call me crazy, but I thought you might have had more important things on your mind, like maybe one last prayer to whatever god you hold dear, rather than trying to figure out why I do what I do.”

She had no problems calling the man before her crazy – just not to his face. Not just then, anyway. “How can you do this to people? Don’t you have a conscience? A family? Anything?”

He gave another dismissive grunt. “My family is my business. I do all of this for her.”

Sarah’s mind worked quickly. Her. “So … who? A wife? A daughter?” The man’s eyes seemed to narrow at the latter. “A daughter, then,” she affirmed, and licked at her dry lips. “You’re not that old, so she has to be … what, twenty, twenty-five at the most? I’m hardly older than her or her friends. Would you do this to one of them?”

The man turned his head and gave her a dark look. “You don’t talk about her. What happens here isn’t any of her business, this is just … well, my business.”

“Right, 'business’. So how long have you been in the murder business, huh? ’Cause I’m guessing I’m not your first. I bet they don’t call it that on your paychecks, do they? Murder? And I bet you sure as hell don’t call it that when you two sit down to dinner and have a little daddy and daughter chat about how your day went. I hope it pays you well enough to look after her, and put something decent on the table. I hope it pays you enough that if your little girl ever gets sick, she doesn’t have to take out a loan she can’t afford, default on it, and then be forced to look you in the eyes when you stick one of your precious knives in her!”

For the second time that night, the man’s shoulders stiffened. His whole body seemed to freeze in place, but then he was turning, moving with surprising speed and grace to snatch down the first sharp blade his fingers encountered. The moment he came to face her, Sarah knew she had gone way too far. His formerly cold eyes now blazed with fury, a fierce snarl on his lips which bared both rows of his teeth. He jabbed the scalpel he held in her direction, pointing it right between her eyes. “You shut your mouth. My job means that I can protect her, so that she never ends up a lowlife, no good brat like you. Now, you take that back right now – that part about her being sick. She will never end up in your shoes.”

“But she could easily-”

The slash of his scalpel cut her off, all rational words and thought reduced to a strangled little squeal of terror as the tip of the blade came within an inch of her nose. The man’s barked words seemed deafening in that tiny room. “You take it back! You take it back before I gut you and then sew you back up, just to gut you again, making sure you’re still alive to enjoy every second of it!”

There was murder in his eyes and flecks of spittle on his lips, his heaving breaths hissing out between his teeth as he waited, none too patiently, for her reply. Sarah gulped, able to hear the dry clicking of
her throat as she did. Suddenly, all of that fear she had felt was back, pounding in her chest and churning in her belly, buzzing and crawling around her insides with no place else to go. She wanted to scream, to swoon; she wanted to let her eyes roll back and faint dead away from this whole horror show, but she knew one cut of that scalpel would bring her screaming back in a hurry. Her bladder clenched, and this time she was certain it had let go, though she was shivering too hard to feel it.

“Okay … I'm sorry, okay? I'm really, really sorry. I don't want that for her at all – I don't want her to get sick. You think I'd wish that on anyone else? Christ, no. I lost someone, and I'm still hurt from that and I'm really, really scared right now, but I didn't mean it. You're not going to lose her, okay? She's not going to get sick. Please … please believe me … please don't …”

The hand holding the scalpel bunched into an even tighter fist, strained and trembling, before it finally dropped back down to his side. The man let out a deep sigh, but it sounded like he was choking. His gaze fell to the floor, but his eyes were glazed and unseeing. “She already is. She's already sick, and it's my fault. It's all my fault.”

*Sick daughter,* the primitive part of her brain attuned only to survival piped up. *Use it. Work with it. Empathise, Sarah. Empathise like your fucking life depends on it.*

Chapter End Notes

Title from: Zydrate Anatomy
“Hey … hey, I'm sorry. I'm really sorry, okay? I didn't know. I didn't know she was sick. I'm so sorry.”

“Hmph. Of course you didn't know. How could you? It's none of your business. Forget that I mentioned it.”

“But-”

“Or don't. It won't matter for much longer either way.” The man raised his head again, his eyes narrowed at her. “You've caused me enough trouble already. It's time we got this show on the road.”

Sarah saw that blade of his starting to rise again, and quickly forced her mouth into action. “Wait … why are you blaming yourself?

The man huffed at her and glanced away. “Like I said, just forget it.”

“It's not your fault, you know.” Her teeth grazed her lower lip as she searched for the right words. “You work for GeneCo, right? You give them loyalty and … and your service, and they still can't help her out? That's not on you whatsoever. That's on them.”

“It's not like that. They can't help with anything.” His lips pursed tighter. “She has her medicine and it's enough to keep her safe, and that's all that counts.”

“I bet they could help her more if they wanted to. They can perform miracles if they want to. You ever think they maybe don't want to heal her properly? Maybe they're giving her just enough to keep her alive and keep you in their debt.”

His eyes rolled back to meet hers. “Just be quiet. You don't know what you're talking about. You don't know anything.”

“I may not know your exact situation, but blaming yourself – hating yourself for failing someone close to you? Yeah, I know what that feels like. I know just how much it hurts.” She was convinced she saw a flash of pain in the man's eyes before they clouded over again. She flinched as he came closer, the tip of his scalpel rising up with deliberate slowness as he stared into her eyes.

“The only hurt you need to worry about is the one that's still coming to you,” he growled, but the bite, the fire that had laced his earlier threats just wasn't there. He seemed to realise it too, rearing back from her with a sneer and retreating to pout over his set of sharp toys once more. He returned the scalpel to its former place, muttering something about a dull edge. He began to browse his many other options for a second time, but Sarah knew the truth. The man was stalling. She had touched a nerve in bringing up his daughter, and managed to uncover a little guilt in the bargain. She could only guess just how often a man who had chosen murder as a profession got to unburden himself of his sins, but it was clear he wanted that release now. After all, she would be dead by the end of his confession, so who could she possibly tell? He was holding back, waiting and willing her to go on talking to push him past a line he didn't quite dare to cross alone.

_I wonder how much I must be saving him on therapy_, she thought, and choked down the urge to laugh before it got her throat slit prematurely.
“Well, yeah,” she finally agreed, attempting a shrug before her wrists snagged her bonds and her shoulders locked. “I'm scared. I know there's nothing pleasant for me in the future, but I don't have that many good memories in my life to look back on either. I know what it's like to watch as someone you love suffers.”

The man scoffed. “Stop.”

“No, I mean it. I know how scary it is, not being able to help, but the thing is, you can't blame yourself. You don't want her to be sick, do you?”

“Of course not,” he hissed.

“Then it's not your fault. How can her illness be your fault if it's the last possible thing you'd ever want for her? She knows you're doing the best for her that you can.”

There was a brief moment of silence in which she thought she had actually managed to find common ground and get through to him. A small weight fell from her thudding heart when his wandering hand fell away from his collection of tools, and it was empty. It didn't seem to matter much; armed or not, her chest tightened right back up as the man approached, holding her in his cold stare.

“Let's get one thing straight,” he said, jaw squared and stiff. “You don't know me. You don't know a thing about my life, or my family, or what I've done. Do you think you're the first scared little mouse who's tried to get to know me, thinking that if they pretend to be my friend, I'll spare their miserable, worthless life? I hate to break it to you, Sarah dear, but you're shit out of luck when it comes to me. I don't make friends with corpses. I don't make friends, period.”

Her eyes snapped shut, and she had to fight to keep her whole body still, just so he wouldn't see her shiver. She let out a long, slow breath through her nose. “I'm not dead just yet,” she said, as much to herself as to him, “and I don't need to be your friend to know how that fear might change you – how it could make you do things you wouldn't normally want to do.”

He laughed at that, but given his sour expression, it felt a little forced. “What makes you think I don't enjoy what I do?”

Sarah looked deep into his eyes, and what she saw there – the stubbornness and doubt and boundless pain – made it easier than she thought to assure him. “I don't think you enjoy it, because you're not a monster,” she told him, holding his gaze even when he scoffed and began to turn away. She spoke quickly, desperate to keep him invested. “Yes, you do monstrous things, but I think that somewhere, deep down, you regret them. It's easier for you to separate yourself from it all – to toy with people until they're shrieking and half crazy, too hysterical to even seem like people any more. You want them to scream because if they fear you … if they hate you … it makes it easier to kill them, doesn't it? It makes it so much easier to just pretend to be the demon everyone sees you as.”

It was a shock to see just how hard her words hit home. His expression twisted into one of such misery, such unabashed, soul-cutting agony, that it was hard even to look at. Her heart actually hurt for the poor, fucked-up man … until he let out a deep, world-weary sigh and clutched at the left side of his chest, and she realised he was mocking her.

“Ouch, right in the heartstrings,” he said, with a sick little grin. “You're right, Sarah. I'm not such a bad guy if you live long enough to get to know me. I'm just greatly, painfully misunderstood.” He snorted out a laugh. “Really, that kind of attitude is what's wrong with the world today. Everyone has to have some whole tragic backstory. You can't just leave a guy alone to be … well, evil.”

His mocking smile remained in place, but his eyes dipped away from hers. In spite of his bravado,
she saw she had at least managed to poke through his tough outer skin to prod at the deeply damaged man beneath. It was a huge gamble, both on her life and his dwindling patience, but it was either keep on prodding, or going along quietly with whatever horrors he had in store for her.

“Evil? No. No, I don't think you are. That's just your way of coping, telling yourself you're too twisted and messed up inside to care about all the awful things you've done.” He didn't answer; he only glowered, and so she stumbled on. “Hey … hey, you want to talk about real evil? Let's try looking at your boss then, huh? Let's talk about a company whose profits are made off misery. Don't you see what kind of sick bastards you're working for? They make all the money while you get your hands dirty, and they don't even help you with your daugh-” She swallowed hard. “They don't even help you where you need it most.”

The man grunted and turned away, and she chewed at the inside of her lip for a moment as she eyed his back, contemplating just how far it was safe to push him. “I'm sure you and your … uh … your colleagues don't actually like killing people, it's just something you have to do, but I won't be your first case this week, and I won't be the last. How many do they order you to kill a year? How many do the others have to kill? Even if you each only hunt down one person a week, that's still a lot of blood staining your conscience – and that's not counting all the people who died already because GeneCo turned them away, or the ones who didn't even try because they knew they could never afford the repayment plan.”

Her throat throbbed; she hadn't realised how dangerously close she had been getting to shouting at him. She needed water, and badly. Dying in agony was one thing, but being cut up alive while she was so goddamn thirsty just seemed needlessly cruel. The world really wasn't fair. Tears she could scarcely afford began to trickle down her cheeks.

“My mother died just to keep me alive,” she said, her voice hoarse and low. “Both of us were suffering with heart failure, and we didn't have long left to live. She told me we'd somehow struggle by to make the payments for two surgeries for us, and I was sick and stupidly hopeful enough to believe her. Well, you know what? She lied. She kept on lying to me because she loved me, right up until they put me under for surgery, just like she wanted. I let them give me this fucking heart to let me live, only to find out that Mom was giving up just to save me. I can still remember the look in her eyes when she finally admitted that she hadn't gone through with her own operation – that there was no way we could ever have afforded two new hearts. When I close my eyes, I can still see that sad little smile she gave me. She resigned herself to death because of me, and because of GeneCo and their fucking greed. Right up to Mom's last breath, all she wanted was for me to live. Every thought, every penny that she had went to me, just to keep me breathing. She died for me.”

Her face twisted into a mask of hate as she stared her soon-to-be-killer down. She was signing her own death warrant a little sooner than intended, she knew, but she couldn't hold it all back any longer. “Do you ever think of stories like that when you're on your rounds, Mr. Repo Man? Or do you tell yourself every person who drops dead of organ failure in the street, and every one you carve up deserves it, just to help you sleep at night?”

The man wouldn't even look at her as she spoke, and those sheepish, averted eyes filled her with rage. She rocked forwards against her restraints, wanting nothing more than to sink her fingers into her captor's throat and squeeze. “You look at me when I'm talking to you, you sick piece of shit! You look me in the eye and you tell me that my mother was a … what was it? Right, a lowlife, no good brat, just like me, who deserved to die. None of us deserve this, you hear me? None of us. None of us deserve to fucking die like this; I don't deserve to die like this, sliced up like a … like a fucking lab rat, but you don't even care do you? Not so long as your own family is okay. You're worse than a monster, you know. If you can stand by and let them do this – fuck, you help them do this – then you're not a man, either. You're nothing but a coward who tries to act tough even with his
tongue stuck halfway up GeneCo's bloated ass. You're pathetic. You make me fucking sick.”

A fresh scalpel was back in the man's hand before she knew what was happening, and before she could plead for mercy, before she could even draw in breath to scream, he directed it at her throat. He seemed to change his mind mid-lunge; rather than the blade slitting open her throat, the solid bar of his forearm slammed right into her windpipe instead. His eyes narrowed into slits as he bore down, putting all of his bodyweight behind that choke hold as he began to slowly squeeze the life from her. Sarah felt her eyes bulging in their sockets, her throat working in vain to draw in air. The brutal pressure made her gag and feel like she would puke soon, but the faint black smoke already curling into her vision told her that she might not remain conscious that long.

She began to struggle against her restraints again, knowing there was no escape, knowing it wouldn't end until he had pulled the last of the air from her body. The dark haze before her eyes grew thicker, heavier, until it felt like the whole world had begun to recede behind it, the sound of her own gurgling attempts at breath soon obscured by the dull pounding of her heart. It was warmer than she remembered in that room, and all at once she realised just how tired she was, even as death looked her in the face. She could feel her fingers slackening as life and purpose slipped out from their grasp. She had to fight, but as the soothing caress of sleep smoothed over her body, she couldn't quite recall why. Her eyes began to flicker shut, but before they did they fixed onto the man before her. If she squinted, she could still see the way his jaw quivered in silent rage, his stony expression twisting, tightening, until it finally crumbled.

He was panting by the time he tore himself away from her, and Sarah joined him, gulping in air in trembling bursts and sending it crashing back into her lungs. Air. She could breathe again. It felt as though she had been punched in the chest, pain pounding through her body as it heaved and jerked back to full alertness. She gagged again, and the involuntary reflex set her abused throat on fire. Hot tears poured down her cheeks as she dragged in breath after ragged breath, shape and colour surging back into her surroundings as her bleary eyes remembered how to focus. If breathing was painful, then trying to force out actual words was agony.

“Don't,” she gasped. “Please … don't. I'm sor—”

“Shut up. Shut up! You've said enough.” He scrubbed at his face with his free hand, the other still clenched around his weapon. As his breathing calmed, his eyes fell closed, his brows coming to knit together. His hand passed over his face again, dragging all the way down to his chin. “All right,” he finally said, the strain evident in his voice. After a brief pause, he repeated the words a little more softly. Sarah's heart skipped a beat when he turned and set the scalpel down. “We're going to do this the right way,” he told her, and he must have seen the total lack of comprehension in her eyes, as he sighed before he went on to explain. “I'm … ah, Christ, I'm not going to hurt you, at least not if I can help it. I think you've had enough.”

Grimacing, he reached out and touched her throat, gentle even as she shied back from him. Even the softest graze of his gloved fingertips burned her skin; Sarah had no doubts that he had bruised her badly. She still hadn't gotten her breath back fully, her chest tight and still heaving, her mind too full of panic to piece together much hope from his careful touch and his words. It's a little late for not hurting me, she thought, watching him with wide, wary eyes. Whatever abrupt decision he had come to, he still hadn't made any move to free her. A moment later, she realised why.

Her captor seemed ill at ease as he tried to address her as something that at least resembled a human being. “Let's get things straight. I can't help you. I'm not going to free you, or do anything that goes against GeneCo's orders, so you can put that out of your head right now. The only thing I can offer is to take away the pain. I'm not really in the habit of doing this, but there are certain drugs – ones that'll put you out until this is all over,” he confessed, as though he were ashamed even to have such a thing
in his possession. “You might lose out on a few seconds of life to sleep, but the dose will take you so far under that you won't even know when it's time to go. It'll feel just like you're slipping down into a dream. That's the most I can give you. You can take it or leave it – it's all the same to me – but I promise it'll be better, gentler that way.”

His words only reminded her of certain promises she had already been made – the supposed ally who, in the end, had abandoned her after all. *Fuck Jareth. He's gone now. He can't help you.*

No one could help her, she realised as the cold kiss of despair once again consumed her, skin and bone. Up until the end, there was only the two of them: the murderer and his victim. She just had to swallow her pride and accept what little mercy he could give her. “Okay. I'd appreciate it if you could do that.” It was the end of her life she had just agreed to, and though the words almost choked her, she forced herself to add: “Thank you.”

The Repo Man grunted. “Don't mention it.” He started to turn away from her, but paused halfway. “Seriously. Don't.”

Sarah nodded in silence, her tongue already catching and sticking against the roof of her mouth. God, she was so fucking thirsty. Another dry swallow and her throat's disapproving click made her think. It was a long shot, but she couldn't ignore the faint tang of hope that seemed to chafe her raw tongue. She gave him enough time to reach the general vicinity of the sink before she risked speaking up again. “Hey … before you do it?”

A low grumble reached her ears. “What now?”

“I know, I know, I'm sorry.” She hung her head in the hope it made her seem humble, while keeping her eyes trained on him. “It's just … well, my throat hurts. A lot. Not because of what you did, but 'cause I'm thirsty. Really, really thirsty.”

Her captor sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Then I suggest you stop talking.”

Minus the leather gloves, he reminded her a lot of her grouchy third grade teacher in that moment, impatience and near-murderous mood swings and all. Even in her fear, she might have laughed if her ravaged throat could have afforded her the luxury. She wondered how well he'd take it if she told him of the resemblance. She wondered just what being deprived of air for all that time had done to her brain. Sensing the man's interest in her waning, she nodded hard enough to make her head hurt. “I will, I will,” she croaked. “Only …”

He raised his eyebrows. “Only …?”

“Well, I could really use a drink. Please. As a last request. It'll only take a minute.”

“You can't be serious.”

“I have to be serious.” Christ, now she wanted to cry. Her grasp on her emotions felt as tenuous as the hold she currently had on her life, and she knew she had to get through to him before her poor body simply shut down and accepted its fate. “I don't have any time left to joke around. No games. No tricks. I'm not asking to go out with champagne or hard liquor, or anything like that. I just want something cold – one last glass of water. I just don't … God, I don't want to die feeling this thirsty and pathetic. Please …”

His features creased into a frown, and those cold eyes searched hers for what felt like a long time. This time, his sigh was loud and it was put-upon, but to Sarah's hopeful ears it sounded resigned as well. “If I agree to do it – if – do you promise to stop fighting this?”
“Yes. Yes, I swear,” she promised at once.

“Just one drink of water. No refills. No last meals to go along with that drink. I'm not ordering in take-out, and we're sure as hell not going to sit down and talk this out over coffee and braid each other's hair afterwards. I give you the water and then I give you the shot, no ifs, no buts, and no asking me to scribble out a will or pen your last memoirs. Got it?”

She nodded again. Her heart seemed to beat anew at his words. It was really happening. “Got it. You have my word. One drink – that's all that I want.” Then, after a second or two of thought: “And thank you for doing this.”

All her attempt at politeness earned her was a roll of his eyes. “Yeah, yeah. Let's just make this quick.”

He looked around the dismal room for a moment before honing in on a collection of what looked to be dusty – and mercifully empty – old specimen jars. After selecting one, he shot a pointed glance in her direction, as though daring her to complain about his chosen receptacle. Beggars couldn't afford to be choosers, that look said, and though inwardly she shuddered to think what the jar might once have contained, she only nodded her encouragement. Her throat worked in impatience as she watched him saunter over to the sink to fill it. He seemed to find some humour in giving it a quick rinse out first, as though the very idea of her getting sick from whatever bacteria it contained right before her murder tickled him.

Sarah didn't care. As he approached her with that glass of blissfully cool, clear liquid in hand, she wasn't about to be picky. Her tongue seemed to swell with anticipation and greed, even as her stomach gurgled its protest. *Easy, girl. The last thing you want is to take one sip and end up puking on his shoes and making him mad again.* She found it a struggle just to keep her eyes on him and not just the water he held. When he was close enough, he thrust the makeshift tumbler at her without ceremony, and when the rim nudged her lips, she had a whole new fight on her hands just to keep her tongue inside her mouth. Every hot, dry inch of her body screamed at her as she turned her face away, combating the urge to shiver as the edge of the glass wet her cheek.

Immediately, he let out an impatient huff. She had forced him to feel, sickness and guilt and god knows what else, and it was painfully clear that he just wanted this whole ugly business over with as soon as possible. “Now what? This is what you whined for, right? Drink up.”

She let her wide eyes rest on his, begging for pity. “Please … I know it's a lot to ask, but can I at least hold it and guide it myself so I don't end up choking on it? You know … one last tiny bit of independence? I'd only need one hand free for a few seconds, and it's not like I'm going anywhere.”

His answering growl made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end, and she knew she had plucked at the very last thread of his patience. He slammed down the specimen jar so he could tear open the buckle at her right wrist, but he gave her no time to relish her new freedom. In a heartbeat, he had the jar back in his hand, and he shoved it in her direction so fiercely that it collided with her sternum, some of its precious contents slopping out to wet her chest. “Fine. Whatever. Just drink the fucking thing quickly and stop putting off the inevitable.”

Sarah gulped. This was it. Christ, this was it. If she dropped the slick glass, it was all over. She forced her stiff wrist to move and her shaking fingers to close around the jar, letting out a low whimper as she brought it to her lips. The water was icy-cold, heaven to her dry tongue, and it was torture not to just slurp and slurp until it was gone. She allowed herself two generous swallowing to coat her parched throat, then pulled in a deep breath. *Now or never, Sarah. Fuck this up, and it'll be your last chance to fuck anything up ever again.*
Staring over the rim of her glass, she allowed a little more water to slide between her lips and pool on her tongue. Almost at once, her eyes flew wide and she began to cough, the glass rattling against her teeth, droplets spraying all around it. Her upper body jerked forwards as she continued to splutter, and the hand holding her drink sagged down to her side. Just as she hoped, the Repo Man rushed in to catch it before it could slip from her fingers.

“For Christ's sake-!”

He grabbed her wrist to steady it, but just as his fingers began to tighten, Sarah made her move. She yanked upwards against his grip, taking the half-empty specimen jar with her and then swinging it back down against the metal surgical slab with as much force as she could muster. With her pulse pounding in her ears, she had no idea which of them cried out the loudest as the glass shattered on impact, dousing them both with cold water and twinkling shards. Her captor raised a hand to shield his face, giving her precious seconds to glance down at the fistful of jagged glass she still held. It, too, seemed ready to shatter in on itself, but she managed to keep the remaining third of the beaker trapped between her wet palm and slippery fingers. There was no time to find a better grip; she had only one chance to swing the sharp end at her jailer while he was still in range.

“Oh, you stupid girl-”

The last word morphed into a bellow as those jagged edges sliced up along his cheek. Sarah cried out with him once again as the glass slid in her hand, and agony sank its unforgiving fangs into her flesh. Still, she held on tight, teeth bared against the pain as she went in for a second swing. This time her captor was ready for her, knocking her hand away with one gloved fist and sending broken glass goring deeper into her wounded fingers. The tip of her thumb and base of her middle finger felt like they had been engulfed in fire and ice all at once, her whole hand screaming out for mercy and immediate attention, but the man standing before her had just become infinitely more dangerous. She didn't dare to tear her eyes away from him. His wound had sent him stumbling away from her, one hand pressed to his face and blood already beginning to seep between his fingers. When he eased his hand away to assess the grisly mess he had made of his glove, Sarah saw the deep red gash she had inflicted bisected his left cheek and stretched up almost all the way to his temple. A couple more inches and she might have taken out his eye.

A wave of nausea welled up in her throat, too powerful to swallow down completely. She gagged on the bile that came up with it, blinking back the tears that sprung to her eyes as she spluttered and choked hard enough to summon ghostly black butterflies into her vision. The searing pain in her hand had amped up to a desperate, ceaseless shriek of pure agony, and she willed herself not to look down, knowing that the sight of her own bloody and broken flesh might just be enough to send her over the edge into unconsciousness. With her captor already recovering from his shock, she knew that even the smallest blackout might be one she never woke up from. She had to focus. She had to escape while she still had the chance.

Taking a massive risk, she let her eyes stray to the thick black strap around her left wrist. Even if she managed to operate her mangled right hand well enough, it would take a near eternity to saw through it with the glass—time she simply didn't have. Her only hope lay in getting the buckle open, and with her fingers sliced into raw meat, it would be even tougher than she had first anticipated. Her pounding heart had already begun to sink when she raised her eyes again to check on the current state of her foe.

A steady stream of blood still poured down the side of his face, and when a trickle touched the corner of his mouth, he swept it away with his tongue. Sarah's stomach lurched at the sight, threatening to send her back to that sick, sleepy place she had already dwelt too long in, but adrenaline seized hold as he readied himself to lunge at her. She raised her hand, feeling the hot spill
of liquid over her wrist as she did, and let what remained of the shattered glass fly. Her heart and soul went into that throw, her lips peeled back from her teeth with the effort, pain shooting all the way up to her shoulder as she wrenched her arm forwards. She had aimed for his head, but felt a bitter stab of satisfaction all the same when the glass shattered against the man’s shoulder as he came barrelling in. The impact sent him staggering back, one arm thrown across his eyes and curses on his lips.

“You vicious little bitch,” he snarled, unveiling teeth filmed in red.

*Look who’s talking.* She knew she had bought herself only a few moments while her captor shook chunks of glass out of his hair, but it was just enough time to test out the clasp on her left cuff. New urgency made her fingers quick, but they were shaking and wet, slick with her blood. The buckle at her left wrist stayed fastened.

*Mom … God … someone, if you’re out there listening. Help me. If I have to die, then just let my heart give out before this crazy fuck kills me. Please don't make me suffer.*

A high, keening whimper forced its way from her throat as she fought to keep panic from stealing what was left of her air. Her lungs hardly seemed to inflate before her next wheezing breath rushed out of her. She swiped her bloody hand along her right flank, and screamed out loud when the rough denim of her jeans pulled at her wounds. The cuts continued to gush – she had time enough to worry just how deep the one on her middle finger went, but not to laugh at the futility of such concerns, given her circumstances – but getting rid of that initial tacky film of blood at least gave her some purchase. She managed to snag the buckle's smooth edge, but by then the Repo Man had already recovered, and he was gaining distance far quicker than she could hope to put it between them.

An icy shard of fear pierced her heart when she realised she was witnessing the same sight that countless other poor bastards must have seen right before their deaths.

The man’s eyes were wide and dreadful, enough of the glaring whites on show to make her believe he’d finally shed that last thin skin of humanity he cloaked himself in. The scent of his own blood seemed to have reawakened the beast inside him, and Sarah knew with stark certainty that her chances of experiencing anything other than a brutal, agonizing death at his hands were now exactly zero. He would savour every last incision he made into her flesh, revelling in the blood and the tearing and the sickening reveal of viscera and bone, and she would die screaming.

One moment she was staring, wild-eyed, into that bloodied mask of hate, and the next she was staring into darkness as the lights overhead flickered and died.

A single, gasping breath escaped her. *Fuck. Fuck fuck.*

Not seeing the man was even worse, knowing just how close he was and hearing the scuffling sound of his footsteps moving around in the blackness. There was a loud crash, a litany of grunted curses, and what sounded like a groan of pain. Whatever the hell the man had managed to stumble into, Sarah decided to use the diversion to her advantage. She continued to pull at the buckle, savaging her lip raw between her teeth to keep from crying out when the leather and metal scraped at her torn flesh. Finally, she almost sobbed her relief when she felt the end of the cuff slide free of the snug keeper loop.

The leather was stiff and heavy, but it obeyed her trembling fingers as they began to tug harder, spilling more hot liquid as they went. Sarah felt the moment the metal prong pulled free, and tried to keep her breathing slow and even as she finally slipped her wrist loose. That only left the restraints at her ankles, the full weight of the pitch-black room sitting on her shoulders and dizziness threatening to take hold as she bent forwards to tackle them. She could still hear those strange sounds, echoing all around her, the deep grunts and the frantic scrabbling of feet. She could still hear him breathing –
the rasping growl of a predator in the night. When he spoke to her from out of the darkness, she almost shivered her way out of her skin.

“You think … this will help you?” A dark chuckle laced with gravel and broken glass cut through the air. “You're wrong. You're … both … already dead.”

At first, there was silence, and then she heard him take in one more choking breath. She felt him hesitate in the dark, and then his shambling footsteps came closer.

Chapter End Notes

Title from: Night Surgeon

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