Summary

Sarah Williams is a girl caught between two worlds, but which is the dream, and which is reality? When the mind is faced with disparate choices, it can only waver between them for so long. A dedicated physician and the ruler of the Goblin Realm both seek to guide Sarah through the morass of her thoughts and perceptions. Both assure her the choice is hers to make. Both say they want what is best for her.

But she isn’t convinced.

Notes

This is my first foray into the Labyrinth fandom, so be gentle. It's a story I've had in mind for a few years and have finally been inspired to write. I've chosen not to give warnings/tag triggers because I don't want to give away any of the story in advance, but suffice to say, I plan to deal with some dark-ish themes beyond those in the source material (though nothing that will take it beyond a "T" rating, I think). I envision this as a novella-length work.

I'm writing this in the present tense, which is unusual for me, so forgive me if you find any tense errors.

Obviously, Labyrinth is not my property and I profit from it in no way.
Sarah thinks about the utter lack of surprise in the paths she takes now. Her slippers move over shiny travertine which reflects the overhead fluorescent glow back into her eye. She squints.

Straight, wide, and bright, the hallways intersect at regular intervals, at right angles, and there are signs *everywhere*.

Dayroom.

Dining Hall.

Visitor Check In.

It would be impossible to get lost here.

Everything is white, and clean, as if something has leeched all the color from the walls, the floors, the ceiling, the people. As if it has all been soaked too long in bleach.

She scratches idly at her cheek.

"No, Sarah." The kindly man at her side takes her hand and guides it away from her face.

Sarah’s eyes trail down to her fingertips then, and she sees the fresh blood beneath her ragged nails. It is scant, and makes curved stains, trapped between nail and skin; three tiny, red smiles (*pointer, middle, ring*) when she bends her fingers to inspect them, and three tiny, red frowns when she stretches her hand out before her to regard it further.

*Comedy. And Tragedy.*

Once, she'd thought she might major in theater when she got to college. Like her mother. That doesn't seem likely now, though.

She pushes the errant thought away and looks again at her fingernails. The crimson beneath them seems out of place here, the one dark thing in this luminous, whitewashed world. She smiles before remembering she shouldn't. Her eyes drop to take in the tips of her white socks, peeking out from the open toes of her slide-on shoes, and she continues along the wide hallway with her genial companion, the man who had stopped her from picking the scab on her face; a man called *Sam.*

*(He has a sign, too; a small rectangle embossed with his name, pinned just over his heart, its long edge perfectly parallel to the floor. It is the one ornament on his crisp, white uniform.)*

"Sorry," Sarah whispers hoarsely, curling her bloodstained fingertips into her palm. "I forgot."

There are times when Sarah wonders what it would be like to be *normal.*

Her life before she had wished Toby away had surely been destined for the most middling sort of normalcy, but now, it is anything *but.* That she owes her current state (her long-desired escape from
normalcy) to the most selfish, unthinking, cruel act imaginable is an irony that both amuses and
shames her.

All the trappings of royalty: a palace in which to dwell; a kingdom at her feet; a bevy of loyal
servants to carry out her wishes and whims; the richest of gowns to wear; the choicest of foods to
eat; chests of gold and silver and gems; ropes and ropes of pearls, more than her two hands can
hold; entertainments and masques and feasts; the unquestionable devotion of the one who had
bestowed it all upon her so readily.

The one who had made her a queen.

Sarah slumps, a frown marring her face. The weight of all she has, and all she will have, presses
down upon her like a boulder from the Northern Mountains. She covers her face with her hands and
breathes deeply, in and out, in and out.

That she owes her current state to the most selfish, unthinking, cruel act imaginable is no irony at
all. It feels more like...

Justice.

"Precious." Jareth's voice is like the finest silk, a sleek scarf which drapes over her shoulders, then
wraps around her throat warmly, and just a little too tight. "Your petitioners await."

"Yes, my king." Sarah replies automatically. The ruler of the Goblin Realm smiles, but Sarah can see
by the agitated way he twirls three shining crystal orbs between the fingers of his gloved hand that he
is not happy. The unsatisfactory depth of her sincerity chafes him, creating a wound which will not
heal, and when he is in his cups, Jareth rails that she lacerates him.

"I bleed!" he insists in these moments with breathtaking clarity, despite the impressive degree of his
inebriation. "Do you not see it?"

The Goblin King's nearly hysterical tantruming is balanced by the earnestness with which he laments
and Sarah sometimes wonders if perhaps he does bleed, in places and ways her human eyes cannot
appreciate.

Once, she even thinks she sees a tear form and nearly spill over his shining lashes, but she can't be
sure it isn't just glitter catching the candlelight.

She leans nearer to the mirror of her dressing table and inspects her eyes intently. Are they cruel?

"You are beautiful, my dear," the king assures her, and with a slight wave of his hand, her mirror
goes black as if the glass backing is painted with coal dust rather than silver.

In the Goblin King's palace, every mirror is a magic mirror.

She rises from her cushioned stool and turns to face him. "I'm ready."

"Of course you are," Jareth replies, flicking his fingers so that the fragile balls he has been idly
spinning jump into the air high above their heads. She watches as one by one, they pop like soap
bubbles, showering both of them in tiny, sparkling flecks of glass. She would need to be careful
when scrubbing her skin in the bath tonight. "Shall we?" The Goblin King offers Sarah his arm. As
she takes it, the dressing table at which she has just been sitting shimmers, wavers, and then
disappears into nothingness, as if it had never been.

Nothingness.
There are times when Sarah wonders what it would be like to be normal.
Sam extends an arm, his palm angled just so, indicating that she should walk through the door at which they have just arrived. It’s a gentlemanly sort of gesture, and it makes Sarah wonder at the orderly’s life outside of this colorless place. She bows her head at him in a courtly manner, as if she is bestowing royal favor. The movement is slight and graceful, and she peeks through the dark strands of hair which fall over her eyes. She wants to see how he responds.

Sam does not press a kiss against the back of her hand or drop to one knee and pledge fealty. He merely smiles, all politeness, and clasps his two hands behind his back, waiting for her to enter the room. She knows he will not leave until she does.

*How disappointing.*

There is another sign here, on the wall next to the door. It is held in place by a chrome plate holder, allowing the sign to be easily changed as the occupant of the room changes. Today, as it has for the past several months, the sign reads *J. Prevarant, M.D.*

Sarah lifts her head and squares her shoulders, thinking for a moment; choosing her mask. *She had been to a masquerade once, and had arrived without her mask, the only guest to do so. It was a mistake; one she has no intention of ever repeating.*

She walks through the door, her footfalls muffled by the commercial-grade carpeting which covers the floor of the office. A man sits across the room from her, behind a desk. He is writing something in a chart. Even from this distance, Sarah can see that the slanted handwriting is elegant and precise. *Not like a doctor at all.* She swallows.

“Dr. Prevarant,” she says, announcing her presence.

“Sarah,” the man returns, not looking up from his charting. He is keen to finish his thought, she supposes. “You’re right on time.”

“One o’clock,” she says, “on the dot.” *She thinks of military time then. 13:00.*

With a few more swoops of his pen, he completes his note, then closes the chart and moves it aside before he stands to greet her. Dr. Prevarant wears a long white coat, with a pocket over the left breast, the sole purpose of which seems to be to serve as a place to clip his I.D. badge. The badge bears his name and his picture, unsmiling, above the words *Brooksong Behavioral Health Center.* There is a magnetic strip on the back which she cannot see, but she knows is there. With it, the doctor can open the locked doors of Brooksong. All of them.

*The power to come and go as you please,* she muses. *What must that be like?*

Dr. Prevarant is a tall man, and lean, with blonde hair pulled neatly back into a ponytail. It’s a strange choice for a doctor, she has always thought, but perhaps not for a psychiatrist. In Sarah’s experience, psychiatrists seem to be less bound by the conventions of professional appearance than many of their peers in other specialties. The physician whose name plate had previously been displayed outside this office had a tattoo which crawled up his neck and ended somewhere behind his ear.

*Impossible stairways and arches, with skewed and seemingly changeable intersections. She imagined the inked image continued over his shoulder and writhed down his back, and she had stared at the exposed portion as he talked, feeling lightheaded as she tried to make the perspective*
“Please,” the doctor says, interrupting her recollection of his predecessor, “have a seat.”

Sarah smiles demurely and advances further into the office, sitting in one of two chairs angled slightly toward each other in front of Dr. Prevarant’s desk.

“I see you’ve been scratching at your face again,” the doctor remarks, taking his own seat. His eyes flick to the small wound over her cheekbone, at the spot where it meets her ear.

“Have I?” This is the mask she has chosen for today. Passive-aggressive; uncooperative; disinterested. She shrugs and a small smirk shapes her lips.

“Sarah, we’ve talked about this,” Dr. Prevarant reminds her calmly. “Even shallow wounds can become infected, and cause scarring.”

Scarring.

She laughs outright then.

He leans back in his chair, his steepled fingers pressing against his lips, and watches her. Sarah bites back her laughter and apes his movements, leaning back into her own chair and pressing her fingers to her lips in perfect mimicry. She meets his studious gaze and wonders, not for the first time, what color his eyes truly are. They appear alternately blue, then green, then hazel, depending on where she is sitting and how his head is turned as she makes the observation. Today, the afternoon sun streams through the blinds which are slanted open in the doctor’s window. In this light, Sarah thinks his eyes are the shade of the crystalline waters of some Caribbean paradise, like the one pictured on the calendar that hangs in the nurses station.

July, she recalls. Antigua.

After a moment of perfect stillness, in which he stares at her and she stares back at him, Dr. Prevarant drops his hands to his desk, palms resting flat against the fake-mahogany surface, and tells her he is adjusting her medication.

“Why?”

Her own hands also drop, but her palms now lay against the soft, white cotton of her scrub pants, her fingers curving over her knees.

“Because you aren’t stable yet.”

Stable.

The word is fraught. For her, it is fraught.

When was the last time she felt stable? Before Toby was born? Or maybe just before her had mother left?

No, a voice whispers inside her head. You know when, precious.

Sarah gulps and does not allow herself to remember that empty crib.

“The last time you changed my meds, I felt sick for three days.” What she says is true, but she doesn’t say it to change Dr. Prevarant’s mind. Rather, she is giving herself another point of focus. “The smell of breakfast made me puke. And I was so dizzy, I could barely stand straight.”
“I know. I’m sorry about that. Many of these medicines can have unpleasant side effects as you adjust to them. That’s why it’s so important for you to report how you’re feeling to your nurse when she asks.”

“Or when he asks.”

“What?”

“Nurses can be men, too.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that Sarah, but currently, none of the nurses on this ward happen to be men.”

Dr. Prevarant doesn’t have the decency to be flustered by her accusations of sexism. Instead, he exudes his maddening composure, as usual.

“As I was saying,” the physician continues, “it’s important for you to report any symptoms to your nurse. When she asks.”

Sarah isn’t sure if he’s teasing her with that last, or if there is perhaps a tiny crack appearing in that unperturbed veneer of his. The girl narrows her eyes.

“How?” Sarah practically spits. “So you can dope me up even more?”

Arguing feels good, even if she’s the only one who considers it an argument.

“Giving you a few days of Zofran to help your nausea is hardly doping you up,” the doctor admonishes. “I’m here to help, Sarah, but it only works if you cooperate.”

_I ask for so little._

She can’t tell if the words are imagination, or memory, or if the doctor has spoken them aloud. Her mask slips then, all but the part of it that is woven from defiance, and she bares her teeth.

“It’s not cooperation if you coerce me,” she hisses.

_Just fear me, love me, do as I say…_

“I’m not trying to coerce you, Sarah. I’d like for us to be partners here. Partners working together towards better health.” He looks at her with a creased brow, and his eyes-like-the-waters-of-Antigua seem so sincere as he emphasizes, “For you.”

“I don’t really have a choice, though, do I, doctor?” She sees his degree, double matted and professionally framed. It hangs on the wall behind him, just above his head, lending authority to his words. But Sarah has seen more convincing props in her time, and she has learned that her eyes do not always tell her the truth of things. Frowning, she repeats the title, saying it slowly to see if that will make it seem more genuine; more legitimate.

“Doctor.”

Her sneering tone says all the physician needs to know just then, about how his patient feels about him; about her state of mind; about his chances of making any sort of impact on her at this moment. He sighs, and Sarah luxuriates in the sound of it.

_Maybe his own mask will slip, if he’s so weary,_ she thinks. There are times Sarah is sure he wears a mask. In fact, there are days she’s certain it’s one he’s chosen carefully, and solely for her benefit. Other times, she forgets, usually after he’s changed her meds. But today, she knows. _She’s sure._
She wonders if he suspects she’s figured it out. The girl bites her lip and leans forward, just a bit, studying the doctor’s face. Waiting for a tell.

The hope is futile. Dr. Prevarant’s expression betrays nothing as he buzzes for Sam, and a moment later, Sarah is escorted from the office to the dayroom, where she stares through a window whose thick glass is reinforced with a metal mesh embedded in it. The pattern looks like chicken wire.

*Chicks in a pen,* she thinks, looking around at the other patients. *How they would clamber and cheep to learn the fox is locked in the hen house with them.*
The Thirteen Steps

He likes her in white. Sometimes her gowns are shot through with silver thread, sometimes with gold. When he is feeling particularly cruel, she finds her gowns are slashed with red satin, down the front, over the sleeves, a choker of resplendent rubies clutching her throat, her opulent shackle.

A pitiless reminder of her sins.

And his.

“Warden,” she greets him sardonically as he fastens the jewels with his own hands, not trusting the task to her goblin servants. She can’t help but to try to provoke him at such times. He usually glowers and she thinks he might like to strike her, but he never does. Jareth’s self-control is extraordinary, really, and his discipline immense. It makes her feel small, and stupid, but it’s a quality she admires, when she’s not too busy hating him to notice.

“Have care of your words, precious. They have the power to fell kings.”

If only, she thinks. If only.

Today, her gown is made of a snow-white velvet, and the material is of the highest quality. Of course it is. The velvet is thick and plush, adorned heavily with opals along the low neckline and cuffs. Her trailing skirts are weighty, made more so by the intricate embroidery which forms a perfect replica of her labyrinth, all done in silken white thread, exquisite work that can only be seen by those standing closest to her. Too far away, and the white on white pattern fades and cannot be detected by human or goblin eyes.

She is unsure how the gown appears to fae eyes. Or, owl eyes, for that matter. She does not ask.

The Goblin King leads Sarah through the throne room amid the gathered crowd, to the far side of the chamber, up thirteen steps of dark, polished marble. Jareth’s footing is sure, and she is made to be glad of that as the smooth sole of her dainty slipper glides over the edge of the last step at an odd angle, causing her to lose her balance. The king’s grip on her wrist tightens then, and with no detectable effort, he keeps her from tumbling backwards, sparing her injury and perhaps even death.

“Thank you,” she murmurs a bit breathlessly, her heart pounding beneath her breast.

“I live to serve you,” he replies and she is sure the bitterness in his tone isn’t just her imagination, though if she were to ask him, he would certainly tell her that it was.

The platform upon which they now stand is made of the same slick marble as the stairs, and it holds their matching thrones. The chairs are black and silver, glittering and hard, carved with grotesque faces, goblins and trolls and the like.

“My queen,” Jareth says with a deep bow, releasing Sarah’s arm so that she might take her seat before her petitioners. As always, his gesture seems a mix of worship and mockery. She curtsies in return (carefully, chastened by her near-miss on the steps) and sits, the thick velvet of her skirts providing a welcome barrier between her flesh and the cold of the throne. She swears Jareth has spelled it somehow, to make it this uncomfortable. The chamber is warm enough, especially with all the creatures gathered inside. There is no logical reason for the seat to be so glacial.

Before Sarah can address the court, a flurry of activity erupts around her feet. Seven tiny goblins scurry about her throne noiselessly (such silence is not natural to goblins. Sarah wonders if perhaps
this is yet another spell of the king’s. She does not like to think of the alternative: that Jareth has removed the goblins’ tongues. One pushes an indescribably ornate and tasseled pillow beneath her silvery slippers (so that her feet will not dangle ridiculously off the throne, for the seat was made to accommodate Jareth’s height, not her own) while the others arrange her puddling skirts about the floor in a fashion which she assumes will appear *regal* to the creatures standing below.

Jareth has dropped into his own seat rather carelessly, one long leg draped almost profanely over the carved silver arm to his right while the other trails over the front edge of the throne. The pointed toe of his left riding boot taps against the floor, a rhythmic reminder of his impatience.

“Your majesty.”

The words are spoken with a deep reverence by Sir Didymus, First Knight of the Labyrinth, Lord Commander of the Royal Guard, Chief Officer of the Queen’s Privy Council, and her majesty’s personal protector. The talking fox-terrier makes a sweeping bow, his plumed cap pressed respectfully against his heart.

“Sir Didymus,” the queen replies with a delicate nod, her fondness for her loyal knight impossible to disguise. Jareth glares at the noble creature who in turn genuflects stiffly, paying the king his due respect.

“My king,” the knight says, and though he is deferential of his liege, there is no affection in his tone. Sir Didymus and the Goblin King do not like each other.

Jareth barely acknowledges the fox-terrier and begins to pull crystal orbs from the air and twirl them about in his hand, a sure sign of his disinterest in the impending proceedings. Sarah is unsure why he bothers to attend at all, but she suspects the king is too skeptical of her fidelity to leave her on her own for long, even when she is doing nothing more than tending to such tedious matters of state as these. Or, perhaps he just has nothing else to claim his time. She clears her throat.

“What petitions have we today, Sir Didymus?” she asks, and the faithful knight unrolls the parchment scroll a goblin has just handed him.

“First item,” the knight announces regally as the crowd quiets, “is a disturbing report from the Labyrinth worms, who describe an incursion by the Gate fairies.”

The creatures in the chamber part and a familiar nematode inches along the cleared pathway, coming to rest just before the bottom step to the royal thrones.

“’Allo, your majesty!” the worm calls cheerfully, and the queen remembers this particular subject from her earliest hours in the Labyrinth.

“Hello,” Sarah says with a smile. “What can you tell me about this fairy incursion, good sir?”

“Well, last week, they flew in, a whole mob of ‘em, and carried off three of my kin, didn’t they?” the worm replies. “And yesterday, it was my boy Jordy.”

“Oh, no!” the queen cries, alarmed. “They’ve abducted your son? Whatever for?”

“Well, it’s to eat ‘im, innit it?” the worm answers, not sounding nearly as distressed as Sarah herself.

“Gate fairies eat Labyrinth worms?” She sounds incredulous as she speaks the words. The queen is frankly aghast at the thought. Jareth snorts.

“Oh, yes, your majesty,” Sir Didymus replies gravely. “It’s ugly business.”

Though she understands that fairies aren’t the sweet and charming creatures from the coloring books and bedtime stories of her youth (a truth she’d learned shortly after her arrival in this land), Sarah has largely considered the Gate fairies to be relatively harmless (providing one does not stand too close to their needle-like teeth).

Put plainly, the queen has believed this particular fairy species to be made up of nasty, ill-tempered, biting nuisances rather than an invading force of cannibalistic abductors.

“Their numbers have swelled to the point that they’ve outgrown their traditional hunting grounds,” the knight explains gently, “and emboldened by their new strength, the fairies seek easy prey inside the Labyrinth walls now.”

“It’s true, your majesty,” the worm pipes up. “And there’s no easier prey than a worm, is there? Well, we don’t have arms to fire crossbows at them, do we? We can’t even throw rocks!”

Sarah is crestfallen. The worms are the gentlest of the Labyrinth’s creatures. She’d sooner wish harm on herself than this worm and his kin.

“Yes,” Sir Didymus replies, holding a hand up. He acknowledges the worm’s account while at the same time blocking further input from him. He is quite certain his queen understands the gravity of the situation and does not need to be further distressed. The fox-terrier smiles sadly at Sarah.

The queen’s non-aggression policies have been something of a contentious topic in the privy council, but her faithful servant is loath to point out Sarah’s folly so publicly. Sir Didymus considers his role as her majesty’s protector to mean more than just the safeguarding of her person, but also of her reputation. He will not undermine her subjects’ faith in their sovereign.

The queen sighs, feeling defeated, and then looks down at the petitioner.

“I shall send the Chief of the Royal Gardeners to deal with this directly,” the monarch promises, dreading the earful she’ll get when she tells Hoggle what she needs of him. He has been the primary opponent to her original plan, arguing that exterminating the fairies is the wisest course. She wonders how many ways the ill-tempered dwarf will find to say I told you so. Oh, well. It’s not to be helped. She sighs. “Next, Sir Didymus?”

“A territorial dispute, your majesty,” the knight answers, “between the rock trolls and the night trolls.”

“I thought rock trolls were night trolls,” Sarah remarks, befuddled, and ignores Jareth’s barking ‘Ha!’ in response.

“It’s a fine distinction, my queen, but they are, in fact, two separate tribes,” Sir Didymus informs her quietly, then adds, “though closely related, with a significant degree of intermarriage, which may account for your majesty’s confusion.” The fox-terrier glares at the king pointedly.

“Bah!” Jareth exclaims, then under his breath, he adds, “Ignorance isn’t confusion.” He spins a crystal orb upon the tip of his index finger. The queen’s back stiffens, but she does not acknowledge the Goblin King’s words.

“Hmm,” Sarah says, her eyes narrowing. Experience has taught her that such a dispute can become quite a headache if not handled promptly, and she has no desire to rebuild the center of her labyrinth for a third time since being granted its rule. “We’d best send Ludo to arbitrate straight away.”
“A wise course, my queen,” her advisor remarks, waving away the two warring trolls who have approached the throne to argue the merits of their claims. In a whisper meant only for Sarah’s ears, Sir Didymus adds, “And you’ve likely spared us two hours of nonsensical and cantankerous rambling between those two. Trolls aren’t known for their brevity, their civility, their logic, or indeed, for their hygiene.”

Sarah giggles but whispers back, “All except Ludo, of course.”

“Of course, your majesty,” Sir Didymus agrees with a bow of his head. “Our Ludo is the most civil and sweet-smelling of all the trolls in the realm, a credit to his kind, even if he is the only one.”

Jareth clears his throat pointedly and the queen bites her lip, swallowing her amusement. She has several more petitions to address, issues in her labyrinth that need her attention, and the king is already dangerously bored, judging by the speed with which he is spinning and swirling the three crystal spheres in his hand. She wishes to help the denizens of her small province, not vex their high king to the point he begins to amuse himself by turning them into quaint statuary or removing their heads and placing them on other bodies for comedic value. The Fireys might not mind, but she isn’t so sure the Labyrinth’s other occupants would thank her for it.

Sir Didymus is sensitive to his queen’s concerns, and with his help, Sarah is able to satisfy the remaining petitioners in short order, some issues being resolved by royal decree on the spot, while others are continued so that the throne may consider further evidence or conduct additional inquiry.

“You have done well, your majesty,” the old knight tells his queen, kissing her hand fondly. Sarah does not say it out loud, but her grateful smile tells Sir Didymus that his approval means the world to her.

When the last of the assembled creatures clears the throne room, Jareth dismisses the goblin servants and the queen’s protector. Sir Didymus opens his mouth to object, but Sarah stops him with a look, having no desire to pique Jareth’s ire just then. There are thirteen marble steps she must descend, after all. The steadfast knight bows, his furry brow creasing in concern, but he leaves as he has been bid, his reluctance visibly hampering his steps. It isn’t until the faithful fox-terrier has closed the door of the throne room behind him that Jareth speaks again.

“Sarah,” he says.

Even after nearly three years of hearing her name on his tongue, the sound of it still causes the girl’s heart to squeeze painfully in her chest.
Sarah’s dreams are the one place the truth always finds her. This is the reason for her poor sleep, despite the melatonin, the clonidine, the valium, the trazodone, the off-label Ambien.

*Treatment resistant insomnia,* Dr. Prevarant scrawls in her chart. Over the years, Sarah has become an expert at reading upside down. She does not correct the doctor’s mistaken assumption; his erroneous diagnosis. *It’s not insomnia if I choose to be awake.*

“How did you sleep?” the nurse always asks.

“Fine,” she always lies, because *she has no wish for it to be anything other than it is. She has to be able to wake up. She cannot let them take that away from her.*

Sometimes she will drift off in the dayroom, or during lunch, sitting up in her chair. Sam, or some other white-clad orderly, will gently shake her awake and tell her she is not supposed to sleep except in her room. When it happens, she smiles and says, “I know” and they tell her not to do it again. Those stolen snatches of sleep are enough without being too much. She rests, but not so much that she falls too deeply into that shadow realm.

*She walks through the door, but never reaches the crib.*

On visiting day, someone brings a baby into the dayroom. The infant is at the age where children first gain their legs and toddle a few steps before tipping over and resorting to their comfortable crawl once again. Sarah notices the baby straight away, a boy by the looks of his blue romper with colorful train car appliques on the legs. She sees him, his fine blonde curls tickling his ears, and she watches as his mother sets him down carefully. He stands with his chubby hands gripping the edge of a chair, but he laughs up at his mother, and at his older brother, who he has been brought to visit here.

With that laugh, the baby releases his hold on the chair’s edge, taking a few tentative steps towards Sarah. His adventure is short-lived, however, and he falls down, landing on his hands and knees, more startled than hurt. He stares up at Sarah and scrunches his face into a look of disbelief, just before he begins to wail. Even when his mother gathers him up and shushes him with her comforting words spoken in the softest and sweetest of voices, he wails, great tears wetting his inflamed cheeks.

Sarah sees this, this scene so typical of babies the world over, and it pierces the very center of her. She stares at the baby cradled in loving arms, crying even as his mother pats his back in that soothing way that all mothers seem to possess, and Sarah’s mouth falls open.

And she screams.

She screams and screams and screams, until everyone in the room stops and stares and rises from their seats, backing away from her in fear. Until Sam rushes in and takes her away from the visitors and the baby. Until he wrestles her down the bright, clean hallway toward her bright, clean room. Until he presses the call button and tells the answering nurse that he needs assistance. Until Dr. Prevarant is paged and an injection is ordered. Until two other orderlies help Sam hold her down on her bed and the nurse jabs her in the hip and depresses the plunger on a syringe.

Until she sleeps.

*Her screams die in her own ears and her eyelids are weighted like lead. Then, there is realization.*

*Oh, God, this is sleep. I’m asleep. They’ve made me sleep.*
Wake up wake up wake up!

She screams at herself to wake up but she can’t. They’ve given her something, something strong. She can’t fight her way through it. It’s too heavy. It’s seeping through her veins, through her brain. She can feel it, sticky and sluggish and far too powerful. She’s coated in a layer of tar and she’s stuck in place.

Damn it!

She’s in a familiar hallway, floral wallpaper adorning the walls above the chair rail. Karen always did love florals. Peonies, their outer petals a blushing pink with throats of a deeper shade, nearly scarlet, their curling stems and leaves intertwining in a way they never do in nature. Sarah looks away from the unnatural peonies and stares down at her feet. If she can only turn and move to the left, she’ll walk down that hallway and through her bedroom door. There, she can collapse in her own bed and draw her quilt over her, hugging Lancelot until this poison wears off and she is once again safely conscious.

If she can only turn…

But it’s as if she’s paralyzed.

She can feel the door at her back, can tell that it’s open, and the quiet from the room beyond is like a living thing, with weight and movement and intent. It wants her. It beckons. It slithers around her, writhing up her back and making the hairs on her neck prickle painfully, like tiny shards of glass nicking her skin.

Like the tiny shards from a shattered crystal orb.

“I’m not going in there,” she calls out. She is conscious of a fluttering in her chest; her heart. “This is just a dream. There’s no reason why I have to go in there!” She says it out loud, hoping that will convince whoever it is (or whatever it is) that wants her to turn and enter the room; whoever it is that wants her to walk toward the crib.

She says it out loud, hoping to convince herself.

“This is just a dream."

She closes her eyes tight, and when she opens them again, she’s in the doorway. It makes her head feel light. She’s sure she didn’t turn to the door. How, then?

Lightning makes the windows blaze for a second and outlines the crib in brief, flickering brightness. She takes a step just as a clap of thunder follows the lightning.

“No, no, no,” she begs and takes another step. Her tremulous pleading is the only sound in the room, save the rain pelting against the glass. Her feet move without her permission and she squeezes her eyes shut, not wanting to see the crib, or what’s in it. Or what’s not in it.

Dr. Prevarant changes her meds again.

He tells her at their next session. It takes Sarah a moment to understand him. She feels as if she’s still half in a dream. When she manages to move her sluggish tongue enough to ask why, he doesn’t answer her outright. Instead, he quietly asks her to do something she doesn’t want to do.

“Sarah, tell me about the baby.”
Forget about the baby.

Sarah flinches. “What baby?” Her eyelids are heavy and her head feels as if it’s been stuffed with cotton.

The babe with the power, she hears, and this time, the voice isn’t coming from inside her head. Rather, it seems to originate from somewhere behind her.

“Shut up,” she slurs angrily, looking over her shoulder. There’s no one there.

“Sarah, who are you talking to?” the doctor asks. His tone is nonconfrontational; conversational, even, like a friend who is genuinely interested. Sarah laughs. She knows better. “Do you see someone else in the room with us?” Dr. Prevarant presses.

She rubs her forehead and squeezes her eyes shut. “What did you give me?”

He ignores her question and asks one of his own. “Are you having visual hallucinations again?”

“What did you give me?” she shrieks, pounding her fists on the edge of the doctor’s desk. Her hands feel as though they are made of modeling clay.

“Sarah, please calm down.”

Sam arrives in what seems like half a second, sticking his head through the door (the door is open, partially. Always open. Dr. Prevarant would never put a patient and a closed door between himself and safety). The orderly asks if the doctor needs help.

“No, Sam, thank you,” Dr. Prevarant replies, and his voice takes on a note of authority when he continues, all pretense of conversation and friendship gone in an instant. J. Prevarant, M.D. is a master at changing masks, far better at it than Sarah is herself. “I don’t need any help, do I Sarah? Because you are going to calm down and talk to me in a civilized way, isn’t that right?”

The rebellious teen inside of Sarah wants to sweep her arm across Dr. Prevarant’s desk and knock everything there to the floor: his open laptop with its noisy fan, the charts neatly stacked in a box marked “out”, the small clock with a plaque on its base engraved with what she assumes is his med school graduation year, and the ornate silver cup which holds the doctor’s pens.

How’s that for civilized, Dr. Feelgood?

But she doesn’t knock her psychiatrist’s things to the floor, partly because she has used what little energy she has in her small display of temper, and partly because during her time in bright, colorless spaces such as these, she has learned not to buy herself unnecessary trouble. Instead, she nods weakly and when Dr. Prevarant frowns a little and leans forward to look at her expectantly, she mumbles, “That’s right.”

She nearly chokes on the words but manages them to the doctor’s satisfaction.

“Good,” he says, nodding curtly. “So, we have no problem here, Sam. Thank you anyway.”

“Yes sir,” the orderly replies before walking away. The door remains open.

After Sam leaves, Dr. Prevarant leans back in his chair and stares at Sarah across his desk. She keeps her expression neutral, but she is waiting for a tell-tale smirk or some sort of mischievous glint in his changeable eyes; something to tell her he’s reveling in his control.
Because he should be. It’s in keeping with his character, and no one can hide their true nature forever.

But the doctor gives no hint that he is anything other than a competent psychiatrist, meeting with his patient. He is still staring at her, saying nothing. It begins to make her uncomfortable.

“What?” she finally asks.

“I’m waiting.”

So am I. “Waiting for what?”

“For you to tell me about the baby.”

Sarah’s shoulders sink and she looks away from Dr. Prevarant, settling her eyes on his desk instead. “Can we… Can we not talk about the baby right now?” She resists the urge to scratch at the sore on her cheek. It has nearly healed.

“Sarah, eventually we will have to talk about the baby. You know that, don’t you?”

“I…” She closes her eyes, allowing the images of a hundred babies to fill her mind. The Gerber baby. The baby on that fabric softener commercial. A set of twin babies she saw once at the mall. The baby her third grade teacher had delivered just before Thanksgiving when Sarah was eight, resulting in her class being taught by a substitute for three months. Babies in Romanian orphanages, their tear-stained faces featured on exposés by Dateline and 60 Minutes. Babies she’d watched for neighbors when they’d had reservations at fancy restaurants, to the tune of five bucks an hour. Babies in that Family Circle magazine (her stepmother was a subscriber).

Her baby brother.

Sarah stops there, her eyes popping open.

“I know, Dr. Prevarant,” she finally says, “but not today. I… I can’t even think straight today. Whatever you gave me…”

“Alright, then,” he acquiesces. “We can talk more about it when the effects of your injection wear off.”

Sarah nods gratefully. That’s today’s mask: the meek and grateful girl.

“But Sarah,” the doctor warns before the girl can congratulate herself too much on her successful manipulation, “your birthday is not far off.”

Sarah blinks once, twice, then slowly draws her brows together. “So?”

“So, you’ll be eighteen.”

She smiles somewhat drunkenly and shrugs. “I know. It’s what comes after seventeen.”

“You’ll be an adult then, in the eyes of the state.”

“Okay.”

“Sarah, Brooksong is a pediatric facility. We’re going to have to transfer you.”

Dr. Prevarant’s words hit her like a powerful wave of frigid water as understanding dawns and a
sense of apprehension takes root. Of course this is a pediatric facility, she has always known that. And of course, she will become an adult and will no longer be suitable for continued residence at Brooksong. It’s no secret, for God’s sake. But somehow, in her mind, this hasn’t meant she will need to worry about leaving one institution for another. She’s always thought it meant she’d be free. She’s been looking forward to her birthday, for the first time in a long time. This birthday will actually mean something.

She will be eighteen, and an adult, and…

Free.

Free of hospitals, and the control of others. Free to shape her own life as she chooses. Free to find a psychiatrist who isn’t tall and lean and blonde with blue-green-hazel eyes. Free to move far away from her father and Karen and their floral wallpaper and…

“I had hoped to have you stabilized before you turned eighteen,” the doctor says, drawing her attention, “so that you could potentially be managed as an outpatient…”

“Yes,” Sarah agrees in a rush, suddenly more alert. “That’s what I want, too, Dr. Prevarant.”

“…but your… condition seems to be deteriorating lately. It’s refractory to all the typical treatments…”

“Re… Refractory?” She tries the word out. It sounds like something from a physics textbook, she decides. He must have made it up.

“…and unless I can find a better alternative, I won’t be able to even recommend discharge, I’m afraid. We’ll have to look into transfer to St. Mary’s.”

St. Mary’s.

Dr. Prevarant might as well say he’s sending her to Attica or Riker’s Island. Hell, he could tell her he’s sending her to the Overlook Hotel to be cared for by a man named Jack who likes carrying an ax around, and it wouldn’t be any more frightening than what he’s saying now.

“But Dr. Prevarant,” Sarah tries. She wants to tell him she’s not that bad, really, and that she doesn’t need to be locked away. She wants to tell him she knows the difference between fantasy and fact. She wants to tell him she only needs just a very little bit of sleep, it’s fine, and she won’t try to hurt herself, if you don’t count scratching off scabs every now and then. She wants to tell him that it would be stupid to send her to St. Mary’s (other kids on the ward talk about St. Mary’s the way they used to talk about the bogeyman or monsters under their bed when they were too young to understand what is really scary in this world).

She wants to tell him, but she doesn’t, because their time is up, and Sam is back to escort her to music therapy and she is looking at Dr. Prevarant’s silver pen holder cup thing again, and this time, she notices that the fancy carvings on it aren’t random or abstract designs but gargoyles or… goblins?

When she was young, she was scared of the bogeyman, and then monsters under her bed, and then goblins who skittered on the periphery of her vision and made sheets move from underneath when no one else was there to see. In the dark, her imaginings had stolen her breath. She can laugh at such cowardice now.

Because now, Sarah knows what is really scary in this world isn’t some imaginary monster who lives in closets or under beds, but the real monster who lives inside of her.
The Noble Savage

The hour has grown late and Sarah is tired. She bids her supper companions goodnight, pretending she does not notice the way the Goblin King’s gaze lingers on her as she gathers her skirts and sweeps across the floor (today, it is polished parquet created from the rarest of the woods which are native to the realm). Her taffeta gown rustles as she moves and the sound of it makes her feel as though she is retreating among overlapping whispers, the hushed judgements of those who watch her leave. She knows this is merely a creation of her own overzealous imagination, yet she feels heat bloom on her neck and in her cheeks, certain she is drawing even more attention to herself. Her pace quickens just a touch, along with her heartbeat.

Sarah glides through the gilded doors which fling themselves open as she approaches. She rules her instinct to scurry away and carries herself with as much grace and dignity as she can muster. It is difficult, knowing as she does that Jareth watches her. His own carriage is so very elegant that simply to walk in his presence makes her feel like a plodding fool.

Stupid, Sarah tells herself. It’s just walking. You’ve been doing it since you were a year old.

And she supposes creatures such as Jareth have an unfair advantage; something genetic, perhaps, which renders them exquisitely agile and fills them with an unpracticed ease. Such presence is bound to make ordinary mortals appear completely unremarkable and perhaps even awkward.

But all the logic and justifications in the world do not make her feel confident in this moment. When she is halfway down the wide corridor, the gilded doors close behind her. She shakes her head and snorts a little, chagrined at her ridiculous self-consciousness. It seems to be getting worse lately, when it ought to be getting better. She has grown used to the fine court gowns, the dressing for suppers, the jeweled slippers, the royal protocols, and the elevated language with which much of their conversation is conducted in the palace. Why, then, does she fear tripping over her own two feet, or tripping over her tongue, or making any one of a thousand blunders which will make her seem simple and silly in the king’s eyes?

Why should she care for his opinion at all?

She’s not sure why, but that doesn’t change the fact that she does.

It is a question which demands contemplation, but one she is averse to considering just now. She’s not sure she will like the conclusion she draws if she looks too closely at it.

She makes her way to her bedchamber as these questions and thoughts play out in her head. Sarah pushes through her door, finding several attendants waiting for her. A nightdress of cool linen is laid out on her bed and she allows the goblin servants to help her undress, removing her jewels and gown and petticoat and corset. She slips on the nightdress, relishing the near weightlessness of it after the sheer immensity of her dinner attire. She dons a silk brocade robe but not before frowning at the embroidered pink peonies which pattern it.

(She cannot say why, exactly, but she finds them distasteful. Her brows knit in concentration. It seems to her that the reason for her dislike hovers just beyond her reach, in the mist of the forgotten memories of childhood. Finally, she shrugs, closing the robe and belting the waist before walking to her dressing table.)

Sarah dismisses the goblins, shooing them out of her chamber despite their objections, and she’s
brushing her own hair for once, sitting at her dressing table and staring into the mirror. It’s not that she’s vain, she’s really not, but somehow, the simple act of gazing into a dressing table mirror grounds her. It reminds her of simpler times; times she believed without knowing.

(Enlightenment comes with a price, she has learned, and simple faith is often times more gratifying. And less terrifying. Choosing what to believe, with all the whimsy and innocence of childhood to inform the choice, is a gentler kind of thing than being confronted with the fullness of what actually is. And what she now knows, cruel irony that it is, is her recognition of this truth means she can never experience those simpler times again, no matter how she may long for them. They are forever banished to memory and fond recollection, and she is cursed to lament their loss.)

There’s movement in the mirror’s reflection, coming from behind her, near the door. The chamber is dim, lit only by the candle which burns near her elbow, but she knows it’s him.

**Who else would it be?**

Sarah speaks without turning, a note of censure in her voice. “Why are you lurking in the shadows, Goblin King?”

“I am not responsible for the shadows, Sarah. It is you who has chosen to light only a single candle,” Jareth protests. “And I do not lurk.” His tone marks him as mildly offended.

“You don’t knock, either.”

“Can I help that my natural grace makes me difficult for your human eyes to detect?”

*Strange that he should say it, when her own thoughts had strayed down this particular path earlier. Not about the human eyes, of course, but about his innate gracefulness.*

Sarah refuses to award his arrogance with anything other than an eye roll. “I’m detecting you just fine.”

The king moves closer to her and she watches him approach in her mirror. He’s still wearing his dinner finery, dressed all in black, from his splendid silk cravat to his tailored waistcoat to his fitted breeches to his tall patent leather boots. There is a glittering pin of jet brilliants at his throat, holding his cravat in place. The gems are set in the shape of an owl. Strangely, tonight the brooch is the only thing about him which glitters, aside from his eyes.

Sarah resumes brushing her hair and Jareth watches her for a minute, his look inscrutable. It begins to make her uncomfortable.

“Is there something you need?” she finally asks.

“There’s only one thing I need, precious. You know that.” His hands come to rest on her shoulders and she pauses in her task, but only for the briefest of moments. Then, she begins brushing again.

“You know you don’t have to do that yourself.” He speaks as if he is reminding an errant child of the household rules and his finger movements are so fast and subtle, Sarah’s eyes barely pick them up. In a blink, he’s holding her brush and her own hand is empty, fingers curling around the air where the brush’s handle used to be. Jareth begins to pull the bristles gently through her hair, starting at the temple. “It’s why we have servants, my dear.”

“Sometimes I like to do it myself.”

“Yes, I’ve noticed.”
Of course he has. There’s almost nothing that occurs within the whole of the Goblin Realm that escapes the king’s notice. How much more aware is he of the things which go on under his own roof? Still, she feels unsettled. Perhaps part of that is because she’s unsure of what has drawn him to her chamber.

More questions which want contemplation.

Instead, she hides behind a placid sort of ridicule.

“Did you come to help me brush my hair out for bed, my king?”

Jareth finds a jeweled pin that Sarah has missed. It’s still holding back a small section of her dark tresses and he removes it deftly, setting it on the cool marble top of the dressing table next to her hand. His own hand, bare for once, rests there for a moment, a hair’s-breadth separating his thumb from her little finger. He leans down to murmur in her ear.

“Why must you scorn me so?” He watches her face in the mirror and his own expression is serious. His eyes betray the hint of an ache, Sarah thinks. She wonders if this is another moment he will later claim has lacerated him. That unsettles her, too.

“I…” She hesitates and guilt washes over her, though she doesn’t understand why. He is the one who has crept into her chamber, uninvited, violating her privacy and her personal space. Why should she feel guilty? Sarah sets her jaw and when Jareth sees the change in her expression, one corner of his mouth lifts up and he smiles at her in the mirror. She huffs. “Why are you here, Goblin King?”

“I enjoy your company.” He pronounces this as if it is the most obvious answer in all the world.

“Yes. You’ve just enjoyed it for three hours at supper.”

Jareth rearranges his expression into an exaggerated pout and straightens, running his long fingers through her hair to check for more missed pins before he begins brushing again. “Yes, but I had to share you with so many others.”

“I’d hardly call Sir Didymus and Ludo so many others. And Ludo only arrived back from the summit in the late afternoon. He leaves again first thing in the morning. When else could we have discussed the situation with the trolls? He needed my approval for the proposals.”

“He couldn’t have written?”

“Would you handle the single most important situation in your kingdom by passing notes?” she chides. “Besides, his handwriting is atrocious. And you know how much tension there is at the center of the Labyrinth right now. If I don’t…”

“Yes, yes, I know.” He sounds as if he is rolling his eyes as he speaks, but Sarah can’t be certain because the dimness of the chamber and the angle at which he now stands make it difficult for her to find his eyes in the mirror. She stops trying, dropping her gaze down to the surface of the table and staring at the shining hairpin Jareth had placed there.

It is a beautiful little thing, among thousands of other beautiful little things she is trying so hard to be worthy of, to earn, lest she become just one of the beautiful little things herself; one amongst the thousands, with no other purpose but to glitter and please.

“You want me to be a good queen, don’t you?” She speaks softly, her voice sounding as uncertain as she feels. The king stops, placing the brush on the dressing table, and he drops to one knee at her side.
“What I want… Oh, Sarah,” he says, and she turns, moving on her cushioned stool so she is facing him. “My Sarah.” He breathes audibly through his nose, in and out. She meets his gaze, startled by the sincerity she finds there. “You are a good queen. What I want is for you to be my queen.”

*He does not say it often with words, not since that first time when his proposal (she had not understood it at the time, but that’s what it was) had been rejected.*

‘For my will is as strong as yours.’

Sarah swallows. “I know.”

His one hand is resting on his knee. The other, he has placed on the edge of her dressing table, but he moves it then, holding it out to her, palm upturned. She looks down at it for a moment and her heart begins its painful squeezing again, just as it does when he says her name in that way. Her gaze flicks up to the king’s eyes and in them, she sees no malice or demands or entitlement.

*How utterly unexpected.*

She draws in one small breath and reaches out with her own hand, sliding her palm against his. Jareth cocks his head and a small smile shapes his lips. His fingers close around her hand and they stay like that for the space of one hundred heartbeats (though admittedly, hers have just taken on a pace which is faster than normal).

“Is this why you’re here?” She doesn’t know why she’s whispering, except that the goosebumps which have arisen along her arms, her neck, her back, seem to have stolen her breath and whispers are all she can manage.

The Goblin King sighs. “I wish it were so.”

Sarah is alarmed by the regret she detects in his voice. Her skin prickles more sharply and she straightens. “What is it, Jareth?”

Reluctantly, he releases her hand and rises. He stares down at her for a few seconds and then clasps his hands behind his back and begins pacing. It’s a maddening habit, Sarah thinks, this tendency of his to pace and consider and scheme when he could simply speak. She knows Jareth will not answer her question until he has decided how to phrase whatever it is he’s thinking in the way which is most advantageous to himself. It’s another quality of his she admires, when she’s not overwhelmed with irritation at how it stymies her.

“Well, there’s the matter of your birthday,” the king finally says.

*This is the last thing she expects to hear in this moment.*

“My birthday?” Her brow furrows and she stands, walking toward him.

“Your eighteenth birthday.” He sounds so grave as he says it that she immediately understands there is some significance to her eighteenth birthday she does not yet grasp.

“Did you come here to party-plan?” she laughs, trying to diffuse the tension. Even to her own ears, her words fall flat.

“Hardly, precious.”

Sarah hesitates, not sure she wants to know what it is that disturbs the king, but she decides this is cowardice.
And cowardice has no place in the life of the girl who has faced the terrors of the Labyrinth; a girl who faces them still.

She reaches out and places a hand on his arm, stopping his restless pacing. “Jareth, please. Just tell me.”

The Goblin King looks down at her hand and he seems... torn. It is a fleeting thing, however, and he clears his throat, saying, “Forgive me. I should not have come to you so late. We can discuss this tomorrow. Will you join me to break your fast in the morning?”

For a king used to unchallenged rule, that he is asking her rather than commanding her is striking.

Confused, Sarah simply nods and Jareth bids her a good night. With that, he is gone, and she’s left standing alone in the middle of her dim bedchamber, wondering if come morning, she’ll once again regret her decision to seek enlightenment.
The Stairs of Dr. Penrose

Arts and Crafts.

It reminds Sarah of kindergarten, where children are ushered from one activity to another in small, rotating groups. Forty-five-minute blocks, as she recalls, long enough to accomplish something, short enough to keep the proverbial ants out of tiny pants. The art table. The writing center. The play area. The reading nook. The math station. Only here, the blocks are longer, and it's music therapy, group session, arts and crafts, free time, and individual counseling.

Today, Sarah stands at an easel, painting with acrylics (the room is not ventilated enough for oils, they are told, but she believes it's less an issue of ventilation and more that the administrators of Brooksong fear giving patients access to the solvents required to thin paints and clean brushes). No matter. The non-toxic acrylics are fine and it feels good to paint, no matter the supplies she is or isn't allowed.

This isn't art school, she reminds herself, and then looks around briefly at the others in the room. As if.

She's always loved painting, from the first time she dips her fingers in washable Crayola tempera and drags them across butcher's paper in preschool, creating a smear of color as joyful and exuberant as Sarah herself at that age. And, if she's honest with herself, she has to admit that she's always been better at it than acting.

She has a tendency to overact.

Sarah supposes her desire to act (her thoughts of a future as a theater major, her plan to move to the city and try to make a living at it), has less to do with any true passion or talent for it and more to do with wanting a connection with her mother. The insight amuses her.

Well, look at that, she thinks, I guess all these years of therapy haven't been a total waste.

Sarah shares her mother's looks, from the intense green eyes to the thick, dark hair, to the willowy, feminine build. And some would say she shares her mother's temperament as well, but that has never been enough to bind her mother to her; to hold her mother's interest for more than the space of a quick dinner out when her mother passes through town or a hurried phone call (Oh darling, I'm glad I caught you. Mommy is so sorry she can't make it for your birthday this year, but your gift is on its way. Look, it's a great deal of money. Buy yourself something fanciful and absolutely useless. A girl should always be surrounded by pretty things she doesn't need! Remember, you're my little princess. Oh, I've got to run, Mommy's late, but I'm sending all my love!) The girl has grown up believing that if she becomes an actress, her mother will be forced to stop and look at her.

Sarah has an old daydream she keeps in her head, silly as it now seems to her in this bright place, but she replays it from time to time. She is a young starlet, the next big thing, and the theater world is abuzz, lauding her looks, her talent, her mystique. They are simply enthralled with her. She lands the starring role in a big production and her mother comes on opening night. For once, she comes. And when Sarah is through with standing ovations and curtain calls and piles of roses collecting around her, her mother is there, backstage, or, perhaps in the dressing room (Sarah's name is on the door). Her mother grasps her hand and says, "I looked up at that stage, and it was like looking at myself." And at last, Sarah knows her mother sees her.

She has talked about this dream of hers before, with her doctor. Not Dr. Prevarant, but the one who
came before him. The one with the dizzying stairs tattoo. Dr. Penrose. She recalls he'd told her that clinging to her daydream is detrimental. He'd called it an 'immature coping mechanism'.

'Fantasizing is fruitless,' he had said, 'and it keeps you from facing your issues with your mother. You're simply placating yourself with wishful thinking. It's not productive.'

Sarah nodded, but she only half-heard him, distracted as she was by the way the stairs on his neck seemed to twist and shift as he talked and moved his head.

*If only Dr. Penrose could see me now,* she thinks, dabbing her paintbrush into a carefully mixed shade on her palette. Squinting, she flicks her wrist so the bristles strike the canvas in just the right way, leaving a stroke of green so deep it is almost black, rendering a shadow where once, there had been only light. *You can't get more productive than this.*

Because painting is quite literally the act of creating something out of nothing.

*Sarah finds the idea indescribably appealing.*

More than one nurse has stopped to admire her work, commenting that she could have a future as an artist, if she chooses. Sarah smirks. Having a future as an artist is akin to being struck by lightning, she thinks, but the fantastical landscapes she prefers to compose are stunning. At least, the new Director of Art Therapy thinks so.

"There's a dream-like quality to your work," the young woman tells Sarah, "yet an undeniable realism. That's not an easy dichotomy to balance. And I should know. I have a masters in fine arts."

*And look at you now,* Sarah does not remark, though it would perfectly make her point about the difficulty of earning a living with one's art. *Your MFA brought you all the way to Brooksong so you can curate a collection of works by mentally disturbed children.*

The girl supposes it's ungenerous of her to think this way, but she is hard pressed to care, which isn't really like her. She thinks it must be the medication change. Everything looks and feels different today; clearer, brighter. It's as if everything is somehow *sharper* today, including her mood.

*The dream-like quality of her world has given way to an undeniable realism.*

As the director jabbers, commenting on Sarah's *technique* and *vision*, the girl continues painting. She could point out that she's had plenty of opportunity to develop her skills during her time trapped in places with compulsory *arts and crafts*. She could point out that much of the great art of the world finds its origins in the artist's pain, which she carries in abundance. She could simply smile at the compliments and pretend to be interested in the opinions of others. Instead, she continues working, saying nothing.

(This is the mask she wears with the staff here: aloof teenager, too cool to care. She doesn't have to say 'whatever' because her expression says it for her.)

The director moves on to inspect the work of the other patients and Sarah finishes mixing the correct shade for the flags she wants to paint on the turrets of a castle she's completed in the background. A *sanguineous sort of red.* The castle sits on a high ridge overlooking a lush landscape and is backed by a distant mountain range. The tall peaks are clad in snow despite the warmth of the season evidenced by the green of the surrounding forest.

"Is that Germany?" Sam asks as he passes.

"No." *She resents him for making her speak.*
"Huh. It just reminds me of some pictures I've seen of castles in Germany."

She doesn't tell him that in the world she's painting, there is no place so practical and grounded as Germany. She doesn't tell him that no German castle is run almost solely on goblin labor and magic. She doesn't tell him that the passageways and chambers and great halls of German structures cannot change instantaneously on the whim of their masters.

She doesn't tell him anything.

She doesn't, but if she were going to, she'd tell him there's a hidden valley below that distant castle, and in that valley, there's a wild maze he cannot see, larger than any he's ever seen; larger than any he could even imagine. She'd tell him there's a face in the window of the castle's highest turret, gazing down upon that labyrinth, watching as a girl winds her way through it, discovering its mysteries. A face with eyes that watch and wait; with eyes that covet.

She'd tell him that the title of this piece is *Requiem for a Dream*.

Sam walks on and Sarah glances at the boy whose easel stands next to hers. *Luke*. He's monstrous. Not in nature, just in size. Luke has the same type of cheap plastic artist's palette that Sarah herself is using, but he ignores the evenly spaced sunken wells meant to keep the colors separate. Instead, his palette is smeared and tacky with one giant blob of paint whose color Sarah can best describe as *medium grayish-brown*. He uses it to paint two figures on his canvas. The grayish-brown stick people appear to be holding hands. Her mood improves slightly at the sight. She can't say why.

Luke catches Sarah glancing at his painting and says, "You and me." He smiles, a big goofy grin, and waits for her comments.

Sarah steps back to consider the piece, chewing on the end of her paintbrush. One figure is tall, she sees, occupying the entire length of one half of the canvas. She points to it. "You?"

The large boy nods, pleased by her recognition.

"So, then I guess that one is me," she continues, pointing her brush toward the much shorter stick figure next to the first. This one has long, grayish-brown hair.


"Sarah and Luke," the girl agrees. "Friends." Sarah is surprised to find she means it, even though she's not feeling altogether friendly today. Luke is nice, *a gentle giant*, if a bit limited in his conversation. New nurses and orderlies tend to approach him with caution, owing to his size, but they soon learn they have nothing to fear from the boy. He's quiet, and a little skittish, but seems to pose no physical threat to anyone. Mostly, he just likes to paint next to Sarah during the arts and crafts block, and work on puzzles with her during free time. He always lets her pick the puzzle (she's partial to the abstract ones, where she can imagine the picture is anything she wants it to be. They're more difficult, she supposes, but worth it. She doesn't like being told what to think. She never has).

Sarah isn't entirely sure what has brought Luke to this place. It's hard to imagine him as a danger to anyone, even himself, no matter how he may appear on the outside, but then, she supposes his placidity could be a product of Dr. Prevarant's expert medical management (her lip curls at the thought). Even so, Luke doesn't seem able to describe his condition to her, nor does he seem particularly interested in knowing about hers (not that she's tried to tell him, or that she even would, but she can sense it's not something which is important to him). Still, if someone asks her to describe her relationship with the lumbering boy, *friends* is what she'll say.
The class director announces that the art therapy block is over and it's time to move to group. Sarah frowns, but walks over to the sink to rinse her brushes. She has learned that in this place, there are things worth protesting and things which aren't. She has also learned that no matter how much she claims to hate group therapy (and oh, she does hate it), she will still have to go.

Besides, she has to convince Dr. Prevarant that she's doing well. Well enough to avoid transfer to St. Mary's, anyway. And she has exactly five weeks to do it. Five weeks until her birthday.

And then she'll be eighteen.
Goblin chatter wakes Sarah in the morning and she stretches in her bed before sitting up, enjoying the warmth and the softness which cocoon her. *Whatever else she can say about him, there is no denying the Goblin King has furnished his palace with the most comfortable beds in all creation.* As has become her custom, the girl glances toward the corner of her bedchamber to see what she’ll be wearing. She squints at what she finds, then laughs, befuddled.

"Really?" *This is how she'll be clad to breakfast with the king?*

She swings her legs over the side of her bed and finds slippers just beneath her feet, placed there only seconds before (by a goblin, of course). She steps into them and walks over to the dress form in the corner to inspect the gown more closely.

*If gown is even the right word.*

The dress is beautiful, as is everything provided for her to wear beneath the Goblin King’s roof, but it's so very different from anything that's ever materialized in her chamber before. Sarah tilts her head, reaching out to feel the fabric. *Muslin.* A very fine, white muslin frock, simple by palace standards (though 'simple' seems to understate the matter egregiously. Sarah has corsets with more detail and ornamentation than this dress). The material is very soft, and thin, nearly sheer. She supposes this is why the goblins have pulled a smooth satin slip over the corset they've laced her into. The hem of the slip nearly reaches her ankles.

"And today, the part of Lizzy Bennet will be played by Sarah Williams," the queen jokes, watching the goblins remove the muslin garment (costume?) from the form so they may dress her. One of the goblins titters uncertainly but the rest ignore her remark. "What? No Austen fans in the crowd?" *She would have to see about adding some English classics to the palace library.*

The dress could've been lifted straight from the pages of *Pride and Prejudice.* It certainly has a Regency sort of sensibility about it: the empire waist, the short sleeves with only the gentlest puff about them, the wide, square neckline, the sweet embroidery down the front of the skirt. Though certainly finer than the clothes Sarah has worn routinely in her life before coming to live here, she knows the king boasts handkerchiefs far more grandiose than this garment. This is part of what has so surprised Sarah—the king's tastes tend more toward *grand entertainments at Versailles* than *picnic on the grounds of Longbourn;* more Rococo than Regency. Until now, she has believed *simple* and *understated* are not virtues Jareth can even comprehend, much less appreciate. He has no point of reference for *restraint.* But this dress is beautiful precisely for its perfect simplicity.

Goblin hands pull the dress onto Sarah, making quick work of the tiny pearl buttons which run the entire length of the back (there must be a hundred of them, she thinks, but she is wrong. There are one hundred and thirteen). She never ceases to be amazed at how *dexterous* goblins can be. She knows she would have trouble managing the buttons on her own, as tiny as they are, and spanning from her neck to her heels as they do, yet the goblins do not falter.

*She cannot help but wonder if perhaps the king has chosen this dress specifically for this reason, that she cannot manage it on her own. It is a reminder that she lives, at least in part, in his debt and by his kindness; that she manages only with the help of others. But such dark musings are hard to cultivate and nourish while wearing such a dress, and she lets them fall by the wayside as the last of the pearl buttons are fastened.*

The sides of her hair are pulled loosely back with mother of pearl combs. Her only other
ornamentation is a gold locket on a delicate chain, something Jareth had gifted her when she'd first come to live in the palace (when the castle had somehow become a palace). It is enchanted, of course, this locket, with a magic that allows her to see the face of whomever she is missing most when she opens it.

_The king is most certainly capable of cruelty, and no reasonable argument can be made to the contrary, but then, in the most unexpected moments, and in the most unexpected ways, he will be startlingly kind. At such times, Sarah often does not know what to say, and so, says nothing._

When she opens the locket, she will sometimes see her father in it, though occasionally, she finds her mother's face as well (nowadays, this is rare, and when Linda does appear, it is always a picture from Sarah's youth, before her mother had become famous; before she'd left the family). But mostly, Sarah sees Toby. He is no longer the baby of her memories, but Toby as he should be now, a robust preschooler with rosy cheeks and a head full of sandy blonde hair, all the baby fine curls grown straight. When she sees him, Sarah stares and stares, and wonders if her brother would even remember her. She's been gone so long.

When she is ready, a goblin phalanx escorts her down the corridors and she is confused when they arrive at the king's apartments, expecting as she is to be taken to the grand dining room where they typically take their meals. She looks questioningly at the captain of the guard.

"Are we to escort the king as well?"

"No, majesty," the captain replies. "Breakfast will be served here. In the king's private dining room."

Sarah schools her features, masking her surprise and concern. Jareth is a creature of habit, and he relishes every bit of pomp and pageantry that his position allows him. For him, fanfare is almost as necessary as oxygen. She cannot fathom what would inspire him to dine in relative isolation, at a small table, out of view of the majority of his servants and advisors. She is not certain the king is even capable of chewing food out of the glare of a thousand tall candelabras and the sound of the court minstrels singing and playing for his pleasure. Before she has time to contemplate it further, the doors of Jareth's antechamber are thrown open by the royal guard and she is led through and into the small dining room.

Jareth is standing in front of the round table, waiting for her. "My queen," he says, bowing. Three arched windows, tall enough to walk through, occupy the far wall and the morning light filtering through them strikes the king's hair and gives it a nearly ethereal glow. Like a halo. It mesmerizes Sarah for a moment but she remembers herself and her courtesies before her lapse is too apparent.

"Good morning, my king," she replies, dipping a curtsy to him.

Like Sarah, Jareth is dressed in white (well, mostly ivory, to be precise). Unlike Sarah, this is very unusual for him. She has trouble not gaping. His snow-white blouse, fitted ivory vest done up with mother of pearl buttons, and ivory breeches somehow give him the appearance of an angel, she thinks. His boots are the only thing he wears which is dark. They are as black and shining as ever.

The king takes Sarah's hand and lifts her from her curtsy, guiding her to her seat. "I trust you slept well?" he says, taking the seat across the small table from her. It, too, is white, as are the sheer curtains which wave gently in the breeze through the arched windows. For all its lack of pretense, for all its small size, for all its lack of heavy tapestries and gilded doors and rows of silver candelabras polished to glistening and blazing with tapers, somehow, this room is dazzling.

Sarah is dazzled.
White orchids are arranged at the center of the table and the plaster walls are painted a soft white, like linen. The crystal chandelier hanging over the table catches the sunlight streaming through the windows in its many prisms and\textit{shatters} the beams into hundreds of winking novas, stars bursting overhead as if even they cannot compete with the bright glory of this place and exhaust themselves with the effort. When Sarah closes her eyes, she can still sense the light which surrounds her, as if the whole room is made of it.

The girl opens her eyes to see the king looking at her across the table. "Sarah?" he says, and she realizes he has asked her a question which she has failed to answer. Her mind scrambles for it. \textit{Something about sleep.}

"Y-yes," she says, finally seizing upon it. "I slept quite well." There is a pause before she thinks to add, "And you?"

Jareth hums, a pleasant sound. "I always sleep well, but it's very kind of you to ask."

The food is marched in, platters and plates and bowls, pastries and pots of cream and lemon curd, butter, warm bread, poached eggs, and fruit, oh, such delicious, ripe fruit, and the vivid color of the berries stands out in this brilliantly white room. When Jareth plucks a strawberry from a milk glass bowl and takes a bite, the red of it in his fingers, and then against his mouth, draws Sarah's eye and her lips part for a moment as she breathes in. The king gives a pleased little moan.

"You must have one, my dear," he insists, indicating the bowl with his long fingers. "They are so sweet this morning."

She is lulled by his voice and this place and the sunlight and the breeze through the tall, arched windows. Above their heads, the chandelier's crystal prisms twist slowly as the air shifts, glittering in the sun filtered through the sheers. It's almost dizzying, somehow, and Sarah feels as though she has awakened in an impressionistic painting, a Renoir perhaps, or one of Mary Cassatt's works. \textit{No}. \textit{Frank Bramley. A lady in the garden, reading, surrounded by white blooms.} There's so much ease, and beauty, and \textit{light}. Too much. She can hardly bear it, can hardly look at it all without blinking against it. It's so hypnotic, and it drains her of her suspicions and fears and hesitations. She realizes it, all at once, and that is the thought which prevents her from slipping entirely into the dream. She catches herself as she is reaching for a strawberry.

"You asked me here for a reason," Sarah says, pulling her hand away from the berry bowl and settling it in her lap. "You wanted to tell me something."

The Goblin King has been leaning forward, watching her, forearms resting on the table, but as she speaks, he sighs, straightens, and then reclines in his chair. "So I did," he agrees.

"Something about… my birthday?"

"Yes, precious. Your eighteenth birthday."

"Alright, then. What is it?"

Jareth regards Sarah carefully and she does not understand what she is seeing behind his eyes. Concern, she thinks, but cannot fathom the reason for it. The ease which has cloaked her since entering the king's private dining chamber begins to fade and her skin prickles slightly. After a brief moment, Jareth's expression changes, and his look becomes both haughty and untroubled.

"Though I know you are aware that there are many differences between our two realms," he begins, but is immediately cut off.
"Sure. In my world, when a head becomes detached from a body, it invariably results in death, to name one." She still hasn't quite worked out the nature of the Fireys' special talent, nor the reason for it. For the longest time, she had wondered if what she'd seen on her first encounter with them was merely a hallucination. Subsequent interaction with the tribe has proven this is not the case. Additionally, it has inspired some rather disturbing nightmares.

The king's lips press together in a displeased line, but he does not comment on her interruption and continues. "There are also things which we share in common. One of them is the age at which humans are regarded as adults."

"There are so few humans who've ever visited your kingdom, I'm surprised you have any sort of policy addressing this," Sarah remarks.

"Nevertheless, we do. Though policy is probably not the best term."

"So, what, after my birthday, I can register to vote here?"

"Don't be silly. There are no elections in the Goblin Realm." He makes a face as he says it, as if he can imagine nothing more repugnant than an election, then his expression becomes more thoughtful. "There are sometimes violent rebellions, and the rare bloody coup, but it's been near a century since that last, and no one registered for it…"

"Jareth!" Sarah barks, exasperated. "Focus."

"Yes, fine. Soon, you will be eighteen, whereby, in keeping with the traditions of the human realm," (here, he makes a face, but she lets it pass) "and according to the laws of the state of New Blerk…"

"New York."

"That's what I said, New York. According to the laws of… your home state, you will be, for all intents and purposes, grown up."

"And?"

"And, as a newly recognized subject…"

"Subject?"

"Hmm. Denizen? Resident?"

She nods.

"As a resident of a realm which is sustained, at least in part, by the whimsical beliefs of children…"

"And fears. Don't forget that."

"Yes, alright, also in part by their childish fears…"

"Does that ever bother you?" she asks, propping her elbows on the table and resting her chin on her interlaced fingers as she looks at him. "That the fruitfulness of your land, and its infrastructure, has to be supported by the dreams and pretenses and whimsies of human children?"

"I don't know, precious, does it bother you that your New Blerk relies on rains and climate and… what do you call them? Tax dollars? What could be more whimsical than that?"

She sits up, crossing her arms over her chest. "Tax dollars are not whimsical."
"If you say so." He does not look convinced. "Though the dollar itself is a bit whimsical, no? What value has paper? Even in the human realm, it's nearly worthless. You print your news on it and then use it to line pet cages. How can you accept it in trade?"

"It's not the same kind of paper!"

"Paper is paper, just as gold is gold. Your locket, for example." The king points to Sarah's necklace as he speaks and she reaches up, clutching it in her palm protectively. "It has a value, does it not? And that value isn't changed if you melt it down and mint a coin from it."

She disagrees. Her locket is far more valuable to her in its present form, but she does not wish to grant Jareth the satisfaction of knowing how much his gift means to her, so she does not make this point.

"Well, carrying around bags of gold to grab dinner at a drive through or put gas in your car isn't exactly practical," Sarah says instead, releasing the locket from her grasp. "We can use the paper in lieu of the gold, and the gold can stay in Fort Knox."

"But it's not as if the paper represents gold," he laughs. "Not anymore. Now, it represents nothing."

How did the Goblin King learn so much about the American financial system, anyway? Next, she expects a lecture on the fraudulent nature of the Federal Reserve.

"It represents faith in the government," she replies. She recalls learning this in one of her history classes.

He gives her a skeptical look. "Really, Sarah dear, and you're questioning the value of a child's beliefs? How is this different?"

"It… it just is," she snaps.

He shrugs. "Doubtless you would know." He does not sound as if he is free of doubt, however.

"This whole conversation has taken a strange turn. You're supposed to be telling me why it matters that I'm turning eighteen."

"I am trying, precious, but you seem hell bent on convincing me your realm's financial systems aren't destined for spectacular failure when people realize they're being paid for their labor in cage-liners."

"Jareth!"

He shrugs again, but before he can continue, there is a sharp knock at the door. A large wolf enters, fur as dark as midnight, and he is walking on two legs. Lord Draimen. He is one of the advisors on the king's council, serving as Jareth's war chief. He has always rather unnerved Sarah. The unique talking creatures of the Goblin Realm are one thing but seeing an animal from her own world drinking toasts at state dinners and strategizing with the king on border security is quite another. He also has an air of menace about him, which she supposes is an attribute in a war chief, but it does nothing to persuade her that her anxieties regarding him are unfounded.

"Sire," Lord Draimen says, "I apologize, but it's urgent." He nods politely at Sarah, his yellow eyes alert and shrewd.

"Yes, alright, what is it, Draimen?" the king asks, waving the wolf to his side.

"A rider from Lucidesa, only just arrived. He bears a message that requires your immediate
"So immediate that I can't eat my eggs before they get cold?"

"I'm sorry, sire, but yes. It's regarding their alliance with the other coastal kingdoms, and the tensions
to the north. There's been movement along the border, and…"

"Yes, I see." The king swipes at his mouth with his napkin and rises. He looks at his breakfast
companion. "Forgive me." At the look on his face, at his bearing and his mood, all protests and
castigations die on Sarah's tongue. She is not much involved in the politics of the wider realm,
confining her influence and interests primarily to the Labyrinth, but she knows enough to understand
that the clans of the Northern Mountains and the kingdoms along the coast would not be averse to
using the Goblin Realm as their bloody battleground under the right circumstances.

Sarah nods at the Goblin King and he leaves her there, amongst dazzling light and shimmering
crystal and warm breezes. Her brow furrows and she falls back in her seat, slumping a bit as she
thinks about what Jareth has said, and what he hasn't, and what Lord Draimen must be telling the
king even now. Would there be war? Would Jareth ride at the head of his army? She bites her lip,
thoughtful, and absently rubs her golden locket between her thumb and forefinger. After a moment,
she leans forward and takes a strawberry from the bowl on the table. As she bites into it, smiling at
the flavor, she flicks the locket open and glances down, surprised to see that it is Jareth's face looking
back at her.
As she leaves the art room behind and makes her way to group therapy, Dr. Prevarant's words turn over inside of Sarah's head.

'I had hoped to have you stabilized by the time you turned eighteen.'

This thought, with all its implications, sits with her as she moves down the bright hall. Luke is trailing just behind her, following her to the group room. He carefully walks where she has already walked, taking her sure steps as a sign the floor is safe here. This is his habit and it annoys some of the other patients, but not Sarah. She understands the desire for reassurance that the ground will not open beneath your feet.

*If only there were trustworthy footsteps she could follow, but her whole world seems to be built upon shifting sands.*

They walk through the door and into the room where group therapy is held each afternoon at four. Luke watches as Sarah takes her usual place. There are bean bags and bungee chairs arranged in a circle, but Sarah resists Brooksong’s efforts to appeal to their teen patients and seats herself on a vinyl covered sofa instead. It's the sort of robust hospital furnishing which boasts cushions that stick to the backs of your bare legs if you sit on them too long, but it's also closest to the bank of windows along the back wall. When she sits there, Sarah can feel the late afternoon sunlight warming her hair. She likes to think the slant of the sunbeams streaming onto the back of her head creates the appearance of a halo, like in those historic paintings of Mary cradling baby Jesus. Also, the sofa, with its long lines, ruins the perfect circle of teen-friendly chairs by replacing one rounded section of the seating ring with a flat edge.

*Like a deflating basketball on the ground,* she thinks, and when she pictures this in her mind's eye, she smiles. Well, smirks, really.

The lone sofa visibly irritates one of the group members. *Mandy.* She has OCD, among other things, and kicks off a fair percentage of the group's sessions by demanding that Sarah's favorite seat be banned from the circle. She wants it replaced with alternating bean bags and bungee chairs (that Mandy also spends a few minutes before each session arranging the seating pattern—bean bag, bean bag, bungee, bean bag, bean bag, bungee—and inspecting the spacing between each chair is a testament to the ineffectual nature of Dr. Prevarant's medical management of her condition thus far. If Mandy's righteous campaigning against a functional piece of hospital furniture weren't so annoying, her doctor's failure here would amuse Sarah greatly).

The failure to establish stability abounds at Brooksong.

The teen patients file in and find their seats. Mandy makes her usual protests to the group counselor as Luke plops down next to his friend. "Sarah," he croons and she smiles at him, gently squeezing his shoulder. After being told (once again) that there aren't enough bean bags and bungee chairs for everyone and therefore, the sofa is necessary to provide adequate seating for the group, Mandy flings herself into the bungee chair furthest from Sarah, crossing her arms over her chest and glaring across the open circle at the object of her scorn. Sarah does not bother to change her mask, not for group, not for Mandy. Her look continues to say, 'Whatever.'

"Good afternoon, everyone," says the counselor. *Kathy.* She beams, her outsized optimism bubbling to the surface, as ever. Kathy is here to *help,* and no amount of apathy or anger or complex pathology or squabbling over the seating arrangements seems to affect her dedication to that mission.
Sarah finds her *tenaciously* pleasant, a quality which simultaneously disturbs and fascinates her. The sheer energy required to maintain this demeanor, especially when surrounded by such blindingly white walls and shiny floors, is impressive, the girl thinks.

There is a mumbled chorus of *good afternoons* produced by the reluctant throats of approximately half of the group's attendees and then they begin.

"Who would like to start?" Kathy chirps, the corners of her mouth pulling up as she raises her eyebrows. When no one volunteers, the counselor gently prompts them. "Does anyone have anything to share about how they're feeling today?" When Mandy's hand shoots up, Kathy takes one look at the scowl on the girl's face and amends, "Anything that isn't about the seating arrangement?" Mandy's face pinches even tighter, but she drops her hand.

The counselor's eyes move over her charges as she searches their faces for any sign that one of them merely needs her encouragement to say what's on his or her mind. Her gaze settles on Sarah.

*Oh no,* the girl thinks, bringing her fingers to her mouth to chew on her nails as she averts her eyes, staring down at the flecks in the travertine flooring. It seems to have been buffed and waxed recently. The glaring shine of it is nearly painful to her eyes.

"Sarah," Kathy says brightly, "How was arts and crafts?"

"Fine," the girl replies. The response is automatic; Sarah's focus is still on the floor. *She has no desire to discuss her painting, especially this particular one, with the group.*

"I understand you're working on a beautiful landscape," Kathy tries. A snort from Mandy draws Sarah's gaze from the floor. Sarah should be irritated, but Mandy's attitude has drawn the counselor's attention, and so she chooses to be grateful instead. "Alright, Mandy, what are you working on in arts and crafts?"

Sarah successfully avoids further attempts at drawing any contribution from her to the group and her mind wanders as she enjoys the warmth of the sun on her hair. As the other kids drone on about how their parents make them feel, or how their nightmares make them feel, or what they'll change when they finally leave Brooksong, or what sort of plans they have for the future, Sarah thinks on riddles and door knockers and bogs. *She thinks on a king who is no ordinary man.* She is so deep into her contemplations that it takes her a moment to realize someone is saying her name, discussing her. *Mandy, of course.*

*Borderline personality disorder,* Sarah thinks, frowning as she remembers another of the girl's diagnoses.

"I don't know why we always have to talk about our future plans when it doesn't apply to everyone," Mandy is saying. "Some people don't get to make plans, like Sarah, and it's stupid to make us do a *Life Goals* worksheet when she'll never get the chance to use hers." The girl smiles at Sarah, practically oozing her sickening, feigned sweetness. Sarah looks at her across the circle, her brows drawing together.

The unpleasant patient is arguing with Kathy, who is trying to pass out copies of the *Life Goals* worksheets Mandy is grousing about, using Sarah's case to make her point.

"Mandy!" the counselor rebukes softly. "You can't possibly know what Sarah's future holds."

"I know she's never getting released," Mandy laughs, "not after what she did. She's just lucky she's not in prison."
Something clicks inside Sarah's head then, and it's almost a physical sensation, jarring and immediate. She shivers. It's as if she's made entirely of iron and someone is striking her chest with a sledgehammer. She vibrates everywhere, inside and out, and her palms feel suddenly sticky. Even though she knows it's just sweat, she can't help imagining her hands are coated in blood, thick and drying. Her heart pounds and she is swaddled in a leaden and cold feeling. Dread. It reminds her of when she'd learned her mother was leaving and she cried herself to sleep.

_The next morning, when the sun woke her, Sarah had opened her eyes and felt happy, normal for a moment, because she'd forgotten. And then, reality set in, and she remembered, and the sorrow and dread descended upon her anew, pressing so hard on her chest that she'd been convinced she would suffocate._

Sarah jumps up then, giving the girl across the circle a dirty look. Her fists are clenched at her side and her chest aches, as if she really has been beaten with a hammer. She feels that she somehow exists outside of her own body, with no control over it at all. Her head is suddenly filled with a loud, continuous roar, as if she's trapped beneath a waterfall, millions of gallons of water crashing against limestone boulders with a deafening echo. She's not sure what she'll do next. Her eyes widen in fear.

_The fear of her own self._

"You horrible little troll!" Sarah hisses, teeth gritting. She takes a step toward Mandy. For her part, Mandy's false sympathy morphs into a sneering satisfaction before being replaced with an emerging fearfulness. Sarah has advanced by this point and occupies the very center of the circle.

"Alright, let's everyone calm down," Kathy says in her most soothing voice, but it's not her direction which convinces Sarah to take her seat. It's Luke.

"Sarah?" he says, and he sounds frightened. She supposes her sudden movement has startled the boy, and also perhaps her expression and her angered tone. Admittedly, she feels ready launch herself at Mandy and beat that hateful smirk off her stupid face. To beat her until she can never smirk again. Sarah tenses. But Luke is sensitive to violence (Sarah has wondered if this hints at something in his past). Once, a fight broke out between two girls in the dayroom while he was sitting in the corner, working on a puzzle by himself. It had taken three days for Luke to speak again after that.

(The first thing he had said was, 'Sarah, promise.' He had wanted her to promise never to leave him alone again. She'd only gone to the bathroom, just as she had a hundred times before, but she'd promised him nonetheless.)

Sarah turns and looks at her friend. He is trying to shrink into the stiff cushions of the sofa, no easy task for someone of his size. The sight cuts through the roar in her head and she gains control of herself again, smiling apologetically at her friend.

_This is the mask she wears for his sake. It gives the illusion that she's tranquil. It is a lie which says she's harmless._

"It's okay, Luke," Sarah whispers, ashamed. She takes her place beside him once more. Her fists relax and she uncurls her fingers, reaching out for her friend's hand. Gently, she rubs his knuckles. "It's okay."

"Well, then," Kathy says, her familiar smile emerging once she is sure the crisis has passed. After a few words about _empathy_ and _employing mature coping skills_, the counselor dismisses the group. She stops Sarah before she leaves the room, however, drawing the girl aside so they may have a private word.
"Are you okay?" There is concern in the counselor's voice.

*Okay? She's not even sure what that means anymore.*

Sarah nods but says nothing, staring at Kathy's lips. Her lipstick is the exact shade of the flags the girl had painted on the castle turrets in her landscape earlier. She wants to reach up and smear it off with her thumb. Her fingers flex at her side.

"Look, you know Mandy has issues with impulsivity and anger, but that has nothing to do with you. Your future can be anything you make it."

Sarah swallows and then mumbles, "I guess." Her response might lack the enthusiasm or conviction Kathy is seeking, but it will have to do, because group is over and the counselor has somewhere else to be. She smiles one last time at Sarah and then leaves. It is only then that the girl notices Dr. Prevarant, peering at her intently through the rectangular window in the door.

*How long has he been watching?* she wonders, worrying he's seen her small outburst. *Oh, God, he's going to think I'm even crazier than before, and it's not my fault!*

This is precisely the time *not* to give Dr. Prevarant reason to doubt her progress. She thinks of Mandy, and her provocations, and decides she hates the girl. Sarah grinds her teeth. She starts to reach up to her face, to scratch the healing sore there, but thinks the better of it.

The doctor watches her for a few seconds more, then pushes the door open slightly to stick his head in.

"Sarah, you're meant to be in the dining hall now. You can't stay here alone."

She squares her shoulders and holds her head high. "But I'm not alone, doctor. I'm with you."

"Come on, Sarah. I've got a session in about two minutes. Let's go."

He pushes the door open further, allowing Sarah to pass, and she brushes against him slightly as she does. The girl pauses for just a moment, stealing a glance up at Dr. Prevarant, but his face is immobile, his expression giving nothing away.

"Good afternoon, Sarah," he says after a second or two, dismissing her.

"Good afternoon, doctor," she responds politely before continuing to the dining hall.

As Sarah walks down the corridor past the white walls with their signs, she forces herself to stop thinking about Dr. Prevarant and what he did or did not see while spying on her through that window (and whether or not he meant to stand so close to her that she was forced to touch him as she passed). Instead, she directs her thoughts to her exchange with Kathy and she shakes her head a little. She knows the woman means well, but she can't help scoffing at the futility of it all (can't help but see the futility).

*Everything is sharper today. She must remember to thank Dr. Prevarant for that.*

The idea that Sarah will be allowed to have a hand in shaping her own future is beginning to seem more and more far-fetched. Mandy is right: They are never going to release her. She's just been fooling herself into thinking they will, but the truth is as clear to her now as the chicken wire embedded in the glass of the windows and the electronic locks mounted on the walls next to the doors.
That bitch got one thing wrong, though, Sarah thinks. There's nothing lucky about ending up here.

Brooksong Behavioral Health Center.

They can call it what they want, but she knows exactly what this place is. Bean bags and art therapy aren't fooling anyone.

She is most certainly in prison, and will be, forevermore.
Fever Dream

All talk of birthdays and their consequences is delayed as the palace is thrown into a purposeful sort of chaos. Sarah is only peripherally acquainted with the reasons for it. Riders from the coastal kingdoms bearing messages. Troop movements along the borders of the Goblin Realm, to the north and to the south. Alliances, trade partnerships, and treaties, all in play. She has gleaned some minor details, bits and pieces, but no one has seen fit to brief her on the entirety of the situation. Still, it does not escape her notice that the guards which accompany her everywhere and stand outside her door have doubled in number and are fully armored.

No one has told her that she should fear, but this message is clear enough.

Jareth remains cloistered with Lord Draimen, the Honourable Vergess Trindlebark (the king's chief law advisor), and a handful of his most trusted councilors as missives come in and go out at least thrice daily, arriving from or bound for one of the coastal kingdoms, or the clan chiefs beyond the Goblin Realm's mountainous northern border. Additionally, edicts and instructions leave the council chamber nearly hourly, sending goblins and dwarves and lesser advisors scrambling to carry them out.

Sarah herself soldiers on, unmolested and seemingly unremembered, ascending the thirteen steps to her throne and meeting with petitioners when duty dictates. She does not spare a glance for the unoccupied throne next to hers, but she feels its emptiness nonetheless. When she has nothing else to do, she walks the splendid halls of the palace, her contemplative pace at odds with the rushing goblins and dwarves who pass her with respectful but quick acknowledgment before getting on with whatever business they are engaged in at Jareth's bidding. There are no less than a hundred souls beneath the roof of the Goblin King's palace at any given time, yet the Queen of the Labyrinth feels utterly alone.

The king does not involve Sarah in his plans. She doesn't see him often during this time, but when she does, she asks him what is happening and what she might do that would be helpful to the realm, and to him. He smiles distractedly, patting her arm and assuring her that everything is well in hand and she should not trouble herself over these matters.

"What matters?" she longs to scream but does not. Jareth seems to be under enough strain as it is, and she does not wish to increase his burden. She can't quite recall when she began to concern herself with the Goblin King's worries. She only knows that she does so now, and there is no help for it.

The king has told Sarah not to trouble herself, and so, she tries not to, and throws herself into the business of the Labyrinth, the governance of which has been ceded solely to her. If she doesn't care for it, no one will. Masonry will crumble, skirmishes erupt, sections overgrow and become impassible. There are even rumors of a door-knocker revolt, but personally, she thinks this is a lot of empty talk. Still, she will not allow her small domain to be neglected, no matter what else is happening in the wider realm. She even considers a journey to the maze's center to assess Ludo's progress with the trolls, but when Sir Didymus hears of her plan, he implores her not to leave the safety of the palace walls. They argue over it for two full days.

' War may break out at any moment, my queen!'

' Not in my labyrinth, though,' Sarah counters. 'It's far from any danger along the borders.'

' You do not know what foreign spies may lurk in the realm, perhaps even within your own
'Dear Sir Didymus, don't you think you're being a touch dramatic?'

The fox-terrier is affronted. 'I most certainly am not being dramatic!' he declares. 'What's more, I do not think the king will think me dramatic. Not when it comes to your majesty's safety.'

The knight has cornered Sarah with this last. If the Lord Commander of the Royal Guard will not endorse her plan, there is no hope of Jareth allowing her beyond the palace walls. The king may not like Sir Didymus, but he respects his judgment in matters of security.

Reluctantly, the queen finally defers to the wisdom of her personal protector. In return, she insists he himself go as her proxy. He does not like to leave her side, especially in the current climate, but accepts the compromise in order to end her mad plan to make the journey herself.

"Return with news," she bids her faithful knight.

"Yes, your majesty," Sir Didymus vows, pressing a kiss to his queen's hand. She bends to whisper in his ear.

"Make haste. I don't wish to be too long without your company." With Jareth preoccupied and both Ludo and Sir Didymus away, the palace is sure to be an even lonelier place for her.

"Your majesty is gracious to say so. I will do my best."

And then, he is gone.

Sarah meets with Hoggle frequently to discuss the plight of the Labyrinth worms and consider deterrents to the Gate fairy incursions (the meetings go predictably, with Hoggle adamantly insisting there's only one deterrent a Gate fairy understands and Sarah insisting with equal fervor that pixie genocide is not a policy she can support). The Gate fairies themselves send a representative to the palace, and Sarah is nearly persuaded to consider their cause more sympathetically, right up until the point when the wretched thing bites her. And quite unprovoked, too!

(Hoggle seems to nearly exult in the incident. It appears to Sarah that the dwarf has to exercise every molecule of his restraint in order not to dance as he declares, "See? I told you! Vile little buggers! Now will you let me handle them, your majesty?")

Though she forbids outright extermination, the queen defers to Hoggle's judgment and agrees to more aggressive intervention in the matter as the court surgeon bandages her finger and administers a tincture. Apparently, fairy bites have a nasty habit of becoming infected, even when properly tended. Later that night, Sarah tosses in her bed with fever and dreams that Jareth visits her and presses cool, damp cloths against her forehead. He murmurs soothing words in her ear as she aches and moans. In the morning, she is quite herself again and the king is nowhere to be seen, still locked away with his advisors.

The queen's days play out this way, one after another, and she wonders when things might go back to normal. Then she wonders what normal is. There was a time she would have been thrilled to be out from under Jareth's thumb; when she perceived his constant presence and heavy-handedness as a sign of his mistrust, and a means to control her. But now, she's not so sure. Bereft of the king's attention and his direction, she has had time to consider the value of each. Now, she thinks perhaps he only wished to guide her, to tutor her in the ways of this odd world so that she did not misstep too dangerously.

For even in her beloved labyrinth, unsure footing could result in dire consequences.
In Jareth's absence, Sarah has become much more reflective and much less reactive. She has also begu to feel an ache, familiar and unwelcome, deep inside her chest. It's the same ache she felt after her mother left, a sort of constant want, made all the worse for the passing days it is left unsatisfied. But now, it's not her mother's presence she longs for; it's the king's. The girl fills some of her free time pondering why it should be so.

Then, one day, as Sarah once again takes her tea by herself in the vast emptiness of the grand dining room, they are invaded.

It's as if all at once, the halls of the palace awaken. There's a small noise outside of the closed doors of the dining room that grows and grows until Sarah can ignore it no longer. She rises and leaves the table, pushing the gilded doors open with her own strength when they do not open for her automatically. As she steps into the corridor, she is nearly swept away amid the rush of people and goblins and dwarves and talking animals, moving this way and that. Some are familiar to her. Most are not. She has never seen the palace in such a state!

The queen cranes her neck, searching for Jareth, hoping he can tell her what is causing this commotion; why the halls are suddenly alive with creatures chattering and skittering and hauling luggage and crates and trunks. Were they... evacuating? Though she wanders and hunts, she does not find the king. Instead, it is her loyal knight who finds her.

"Sir Didymus!" she cries, a mixture of delight at his unexpected arrival and alarm at the sudden, unexplained activity within the palace walls. "You've returned!"

"Yes, my queen, only just," the noble knight says rather breathlessly as he bows. Before she can ask anything further, he continues. "You're wanted in the gallery, to greet your guests."

"Wanted by whom? And what do you mean, 'guests'!?"

"Wanted by the king, your majesty. He caught me as I entered the palace and bid me find you quickly."

Jareth wanted her. She bites her lip.

"Alright, you'd best take me to him," the girl says, still confused about the guests the knight mentioned. Surely all these rushing creatures weren't guests? Of hers?

Sir Didymus says nothing further but turns and scurries through the ceaselessly moving throng toward the main gallery. Even with her longer stride, Sarah has trouble keeping pace with the fox-terrier. He is nimble, deceptively so, and wastes no time, weaving through the masses expertly. When she arrives in the gallery, she finds Jareth there, along with Lord Draimen and a bevy of other courtiers and advisors. Jareth seems at ease as he greets her, a complete contrast to her own bewilderment.

"My queen," he says, taking her hand and bowing low to kiss it. Sarah curtsies in response, ignoring the way her heart seems to stutter as the king's lips press against the back of her hand.

"What's happening?" She's a little breathless after her mad dash to keep up with Sir Didymus, but she cannot deny she is disconcerted and there is more than a little anxiety robbing her of her breath as well. Anxiety, and something else. Jareth senses it and bends to murmur in her ear.

"Take heart, precious. What you are about to see is hopefully the beginning of a lasting peace." He straightens without explaining himself further and after a moment, the doors are thrown open at one end of the gallery and a procession begins. Sarah is nearly agape at what she sees but manages to
check her expression so that it reads as gracious and staid rather than astonished and unprepared.

This is the mask she wears for the sake of the Labyrinth she rules, and for the wider realm. It gives the illusion that she's tranquil. It is a lie which says she's adept.

She only hopes the mask does not fail her; that it does not crack and reveal her insecurities to those around her; to Jareth.
The day room is where the residents of Brooksong Behavioral attend music therapy, because it's where the piano is located. They don't always use that instrument, but even when they don't, they still gather around it, which Sarah has recently begun to regard as weird. It's as if the piano is a sacred tree or carved idol or holy stone ring and they are the pagan worshippers who seek it out for its perceived power.

The idea has never bothered Sarah before. In fact, it's not something that had even really occurred to her. But for some reason, lately, it's started to grate on her. Just the idea of it; the routine, unquestioned, and senseless. When the announcement is made that it's time for music therapy, the patients in the day room enjoying their free time start to rise from their puzzles and sudoku and whatnot and move toward the piano. Sarah rolls her eyes and sighs. Like so many mentally-ill moths to the proverbial flame, the patients wander toward the blessed instrument, seemingly without conscious thought.

St. Steinway of the Ivory Keys. Sarah stifles a derisive snort. Touch the pedals and you shall be healed.

The patients pull their plastic chairs near to the thing (mostly acquiescing to Mandy's insistent whine that they only use the orange and blue chairs, because orange and blue are complementary colors. 'Leave the gray chairs on the other side of the room, out of sight!' Mandy instructs. There is a degree of imperiousness in her voice that Sarah dislikes very much). Sarah pulls a gray chair near to the piano in a decidedly deliberate manner and drops into it, keeping watch on Mandy in her peripheral vision. When the OCD patient makes no move to confront her, Sarah smirks, knowing Mandy is likely still wary of her after their aborted confrontation in group therapy the other day.

Good thing, too. Sarah isn't so sure she'd be able to pull back from another such dispute today, even considering her empathy for Luke's PTSD.

Their music therapist is running late and the other patients grow bored, chatting and milling about. One of them begins to tap on the piano's keys. Chopsticks. Of course. It makes Sarah's eye twitch. The girl spies an acoustic guitar on a stand in the corner. She supposes this is what the therapist plans on using for their session and has called ahead to have a staff member place it out to save time. Instruments usually stay in a locked storage closet near the nurses' station.

Rising from her chair, Sarah retrieves the guitar and sits back down to tinker with it. She's not incredibly proficient, but she'd learned the chords to With or Without You some time ago, and she starts strumming them now. Luke is sitting next to her and has been humming to himself, but as Sarah begins playing, the boy grows still and silent.

"So pretty, Sarah," he remarks after she has played a few moments. One corner of her mouth lifts at the compliment. "Sing," he urges.

And so, she does. Quietly. She can carry a tune but has never considered her voice one of her attributes. Not like painting. Or solving puzzles. But her voice seems to make Luke happy, and so she plays and sings in her gray plastic chair. If she's honest, she has to admit it makes her happy too. Or, at least, as close to happy as she can get just now. She stares at the frets, watching her own finger movements as she calls forth the lyrics, and there's a sort of purpose and peace in all of it.

Peace is not something she's felt much of lately. Or, ever.
"Nothing to win and nothing left to lose," she croons, "and you give yourself away, and you give
yourself away." Her voice grows stronger as she sings. The other patients have quieted and are
listening to her. The therapist arrives then.

"Oh, Sarah," he says, interrupting the impromptu performance. His name is Ashley, which is funny,
because he does remind Sarah a bit of Leslie Howard, with his naturally sad eyes, thin build, and
wavy brown hair. "I didn't know you played guitar."

She shrugs. "Only a couple of songs."

"Well, your voice is lovely," he continues, reaching out for the instrument. Sarah surrenders it
without protest but Luke grunts discontentedly. "Perhaps you can use it to sing something less
maudlin. How about if we do Don't Worry, Be Happy?"

It's not really a question. Rock star angst is frowned upon in music therapy and not even a band as
respected as U2 can pass muster with Ashley if the music has any hint of yearning to it. Songs about
grief, sadness, and anger are held in similar contempt. There is an approved list of songs,
aggressively upbeat ones, and anything not on that list is practically given the Fahrenheit 451
treatment here.

Ashley throws the guitar strap around his neck and begins to play, weaving slowly among the
occupied orange and blue (and gray) chairs, smiling as he sings. He's gauging the patients'
enthusiasm at participating, Sarah is quite sure. She always feels judged in music therapy, like she's
not peppy enough for Ashley's liking. Of course, she's not peppy at all, so perhaps he has a point.
Today, she tries to picture him as Ashley Wilkes, the sad-eyed Southern gentleman at the barbecue at
Twelve Oaks, but it's been a long time since she's seen Gone with the Wind, and she seems to be
suffering from a lack of imagination since Dr. Prevarant changed her meds. Or, perhaps it's less that
she's incapable of imagination and more that she vacillates between ennui and aggravation, leaving
room for little else, particularly anything fanciful.

Today, it's ennui she exudes. She'd roll her eyes at the strolling therapist, but she can't work up
enough interest for even that. At times, she feels as though she's been dulled on the inside, even as
the outside world seems sharp, as if it's in some sort of hyper-focus. She's singing, so she can't be
criticized for not participating, but her indifference is unmistakable. It seems the only thing capable of
breaking through her walls of apathy these days is her own anger, and Ashley does nothing to incur
her wrath. In fact, he attempts to draw her in; to breach her walls. He tries so hard, it's almost
pathetic. She'd feel sorry for him, if she could be bothered to care that much.

She just isn't.

As he finishes the song, he pulls the guitar strap back over his head and holds the instrument by the
neck, offering it to Sarah.

"What's the other song you know?" he asks hopefully. "You said you knew a couple. Maybe you
could play for us and we can sing along."

"Hurt," she replies in a bored tone. Ashley freezes, the guitar just beyond Sarah's reach, and then
slowly, he pulls it back.

"Maybe not," he says, his brows drooping. His sad eyes look sadder.

"We could do the Johnny Cash version," she suggests innocently. When Ashley shakes his head and
makes a dubious sound, she tells him, "I also know I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry..."
She doesn't. 

*Her walls aren't meant to be breached.*

"Or, how about *Walking on Sunshine*?" the therapist says quickly, turning way from Sarah. His voice pitches up cheerfully as he smiles at the group. The guitar strap goes back over his shoulder. "Everyone know that one?" And off he goes, vigorously plucking out the tune.

Later, when Sarah meets with Dr. Prevarant, he chastises her. She doesn't mind. It reminds her that he is not always so calm, so sedate. It reminds her that psychiatrist *is* merely an illusion he's created for her benefit, and that practiced as he is, she can sometimes still see behind his mask, almost as if it doesn't exist at all.

Especially on days like today, when things are so clear to her.

So sharp.

"Sarah," the doctor says as she enters his office, his tone distinctly *disappointed.*

"Dr. Prevarant," she replies crisply, overly annunciating each syllable.

"Take a seat."

She does, nodding politely at her physician. Her thoughts, though, are less courteous than her actions and she looks at him keenly. A slow smile spreads across her mouth.

*Let the games begin.*
The Prisoner of Zenda

The king and queen stand side by side at the far end of the palace's main gallery. They are situated between their own larger-than-life portraits which hang on opposite walls on the west end of the gallery, eternally staring at one another. Behind them are the gilded double doors which open into the western wing. A clichéd red carpet has been rolled out in the room, end to end, and they stand at the head of it, flanked by the high-ranking members of Jareth's privy council. At the foot, the open east wing doors admit their distinguished guests, serious men of serious purpose.

Princes, archdukes, chieftains, and ambassadors are announced, titles and ranks trumpeted along with the kingdoms and chiefdoms they represent. These are the emissaries of nations on the brink of war, subjects of the nine coastal kingdoms and sworn men of the five most prominent mountain clans. Each is clad in the formal military dress of his country or the colors of his lord. All at once, the room is overflowing with gold braids, epaulets, sashes, sporrans, spats, and medals in an endless array of colors.

It's like a scene out of one of those color saturated 1950s movies, and just as stunning to observe. Sarah drinks it in with her eyes, the reds and blues and golds and greens. 'The Prisoner of Zenda', she thinks, remembering one of her favorite such films, where nearly every man in the cast is costumed in rich, Technicolor splendor.

Jareth's usual ostentation would pale before this visually astounding display of military might and perhaps that is why he's chosen relatively simple dress today. He alone is without ornament or rank wrought in embroidered gold thread or indicated by gem-encrusted badge. He alone lacks a scarlet plumed hat or ribbon adorned cap or insignia stamped helmet to cradle in his arm, pressed respectfully against his side. He alone is not fitted in a coat closed with brass buttons polished to gleaming, embossed with the head of a lion or a coiled serpent or a ferocious bear or the crest of the ruling family of his kingdom.

Instead, the king is garbed in brown, of all things. Brown. A simple woolen coat the color of milk chocolate cut to the waist in the front with tails skimming the backs of his knees. Nut brown buttons trail in parallel columns down the coat's double-breasted front. He wears it over fawn colored breeches tucked into rich, brown leather boots. Beneath his coat he sports a light beige linen blouse and its ruffled cuffs are completely devoid of lace, peeking from beneath the ends of his coat sleeves in the least dramatic way possible. Nothing sparkles. It is quite undeniably the dullest outfit Sarah has ever seen on Jareth, yet he is resplendent. In his lack of pretension, he alone stands apart.

Sarah thinks perhaps she has never seen him look more handsome than he does at this moment. Odd thought, that, she tells herself, with all that's going on right now. She shakes her head slightly as if to deny she has wasted time on such a foolish consideration.

But as she and Jareth and his cabinet receive more and more guests, the contrast between the new arrivals and the Goblin King becomes increasingly apparent. She wonders if he means to send a signal to these people, to show his power needs no vulgar display, or if perhaps he means to put them at their ease and make them think on things other than war. If a commander's uniform had been required in this instance, Sarah has no doubt Jareth could conjure as many gilded sword belts and bedecked bicorn caps and ornamental gorgets as needed to declare his military prowess and underscore the power of his realm. But she thinks there is something else at play here; some strategy she cannot quite make out.

Her uncertainty disquiets her.
She does not like this feeling, as if she's been suddenly knocked from her feet and swept along in a powerful current, having no control over the direction in which she moves; as if the sands are shifting beneath her feet. Sarah appears to be the only one who feels this way, however. Everyone else present seems sure in their role.

*But perhaps that is only the mask they wear, as convincing as her own.*

She stands at the king's side, bowing her head graciously as some marquess or another greets her before paying his respects to the Goblin King. There seems to be a nearly endless line of such distinguished men to receive. She wonders why diplomacy must be so tedious.

The ambassador from Selkeys is standing before her now, clad in a coat of flaming crimson wool crossed by a gold and crimson sash. The intricate embroidery at his collar and his cuff hints at the high rank he surely holds in his homeland. With a crisp bow, he says, "Queen Sarah, I see the rumors of your beauty have not been exaggerated. It is a great honor to finally meet you in person."

"You are kind to say so, your excellency," Sarah replies, "and I hope that upon further acquaintance, you will find less superficial things about me which make me worth knowing."

*She hears a faint chuckle from Jareth.*

"Undoubtedly, that will prove true, your grace," the ambassador intones, unruffled. "I look forward to discovering all your fine qualities for myself. And for my part, I hope that this meeting marks the first of many, and that our two kingdoms will always remain staunch allies and friends."

"Well said, your excellency," the Goblin King cuts in. "I trust we are able to do better than merely hope, however." The ambassador bows once again, facing Jareth.

"Your majesty," he greets elegantly. "Selkeys is, as ever, your faithful friend and will never give cause for you to doubt it. I merely meant to say that I hope we shall also have a lasting relationship with your charming queen."

Jareth smiles, and inclines his head in acknowledgment of the ambassador's words, but they strike a strange chord with Sarah. She stares at the man, thinking, as he bows again. A frown mars her face, but it is a quick thing, and she rearranges her expression into what she believes is a look of calm superiority. As the ambassador makes to move on and clear the way for the young chieftain representing Clan Hulluus, she stops him with a question.

"Your excellency, why should we not have a lasting relationship? Do you suppose I'm going somewhere?"

"I would be only too delighted to learn that you're not, your majesty," the Selkeysan ambassador replies as he turns to face her once again.

"Well, then, I'm happy to inform you that I'm not," Sarah assures him.

"How wonderful!" the man declares and the queen senses Jareth's tension beside her. "And the royal family of Selkeys will be just as pleased as I am to hear it. Does this mean we will have an official announcement soon?"

Sarah's brows draw together and she starts to ask what announcement he means but before she can form the words, the Goblin King speaks.

"Your excellency, this is hardly the place."
"Yes, of course," the ambassador agrees apologetically. "Forgive me, your grace. I understand completely. You'll not want such joyful news tied up with these grimmer matters which have drawn us all here." He moves on and as the spokesman for Clan Hulluus pays his respects, Sarah leans over and whispers uncertainly to the king.

"Jareth? What was he talking about?" It is that feeling again, those shifting sands. Not for the first time, Sarah wishes for sure steps which she can follow. She hopes Jareth will provide them.

The king says nothing to the queen but slips his hand against the small of Sarah's back, his touch imparting reassurance and strength. Then, just as quickly, it's gone. She still feels the heat of it, though, a warm spot beneath the bodice of her gown, and she relaxes.

When the last envoy has been properly introduced and made welcome, Jareth's household stands at the ready. It seems that Sarah is the only one who has been caught off guard by the sudden influx of nobles and ambassadors and clansmen from surrounding lands. Everyone else appears to understand their duty and the new arrivals, along with those in their traveling parties (secretaries, valets, guards, and in some cases, wives and mistresses), are offered refreshment, apprised of the evening's schedule, and directed to quarters. Sarah overhears a goblin inform the private secretary to the Prince of Egludur that the banquet will begin at seven.

"Banquet?" she asks the king then. "What banquet?"

"Of course there's to be a banquet, precious," he says, and he takes on a tone of mock admonishment as he continues. "We can't very well invite all these guests to our home and not feed and entertain them! Not if we hope to prevent a war, anyway."

"I didn't invite anybody," Sarah mutters. "I didn't even know about all this."

Jareth brushes aside her complaint, assuring her that the banquet will be lovely. "The baker has made raspberry tarts, especially for you, because he knows how you love them."

Am I a child to be bribed with sweets? She thinks but does not ask. She is afraid she would not like Jareth's answer.

Later that evening, as Sarah readies herself for the event she has taken to calling the big-important-banquet-no-one-bothered-to-tell-me-about, her gown appears on the dress form in her room. She gasps at it, as much for the beauty of the garment (it always surprises her how many different ways there are to fashion white gowns) as for the color she sees set against it. She's unused to such contrast in her garb, but a deep burgundy sash crosses the bodice, bisecting the field of white with one bold slash of sanguine color. It is held in place with a diamond encrusted brooch in the shape of two overlapping stars at the hip and a silver enameled square at the breast. The upper badge depicts her small territory in exquisite detail. The lower represents the stars Jareth moves for no one. No one but her.

Together, the brooches and sash are the insignia which mark her as a member of the Royal Order of the Labyrinth. Appointments to the order are bestowed upon those who have either solved the treacherous maze or successfully performed a feat of selfless bravery within it. Aside from herself, only Jareth, Sir Didymus, and Ludo can claim this particular honor currently. She alone can wear the double star brooch. The others have the hip of their sashes secured with a crossed-swords emblem wrought in gold, awarded for valor in battle. Sarah herself sports this medal as well, but for her, it is pinned near the waist of her gown, just above where her sash meets her hip.

If Jareth has pulled out the stars and sashes for the evening, he means to make an altogether
different impression at the banquet than he did in the gallery, she realizes. Or, perhaps it is more
accurate to say he desires that she should. The markings of the Order declare quite clearly what
power she wields in this realm, and they hint at the violence of which she is capable, despite her
youth and her humble beginnings.

It steels her at bit, lending her a small measure of courage, this thought of declaring strength without
opening her mouth. Perhaps Jareth has meant it for this reason as well. Sarah had most likely
impressed upon him her timorousness regarding this whole affair before they parted earlier.

As her goblin attendants fasten her gown and place a starburst tiara atop her carefully arranged
coiffure, she feels as though she is girding for battle. And, perhaps she is; a subtle sort of battle,
where skirmishes are won and lost on a turn of phrase or a choice in dance partner. The idea of
walking into a hall full of the most accomplished diplomats and warriors in all the surrounding lands
has her on edge, for she knows on such a battleground, every word can be a weapon and the even
staunchest of soldiers can be outflanked by a look.

This is the part of diplomacy which is not tedious. This is the part of diplomacy which is dangerous.
The thought that the application of courtesies and a single spoken jest can be as deadly as a
sharpened blade is of no comfort to her. Rather, it unnerves her.

And perhaps this is why Jareth had not previously informed her that they would be hosting such a
gathering. He did not wish for her to fret over it for an unnecessarily long amount of time.

It will help to think of it as a great game, she decides, rather than a hazardous field filled with
potential perils and pratfalls.

"A game," she reassures herself out loud and the goblins give her queer looks.

Well, let the games begin.
Behind Cocktails and Chess

Sarah is in her psychiatrist's office, sitting in her usual place, staring at Dr. Prevarant across his desk. He looks back at her as if waiting for her to say something. To explain. When the silence stretches out for an uncomfortable length of time with no word from his patient, the doctor speaks, prompting her.

"I heard you were making trouble in music therapy today," he says.

Sarah shrugs. "It's not my fault Ashley has different taste in music than I do."

"Are you telling me that you weren't being deliberately disruptive?" The psychiatrist lifts one perfect eyebrow, declaring his skepticism.

"If that's what he told you, then I'd say he's just a little too sensitive." *Just like Ashley Wilkes.* It takes effort not to snicker at her inside joke. "Maybe he has an inferiority complex. Or, it could be gynophobia."

"You think he fears you?" A note of something creeps into the doctor's voice. Sarah can't tell if it's amusement or annoyance.

"Not just me. All women. Particularly, strong women."

"And you're a strong woman, Sarah? Someone to be feared?" Dr. Prevarant's fingers reach out for his pen and wrap around it. He picks it up, ready to make notes.

Sarah involuntarily squints a little with one eye, almost as if she's winking; a new motor tic. "Don't you think so, doctor?" She laughs, charming; light headed; demonstrating just how harmless she is; how *innocent.* "You're not saying I'm responsible for anyone else's phobia, are you?"

He answers her question with another question. "And you're convinced Mr. Sikes has a phobia?"

She sighs. "He must, if I rattled him so much."

"So now you're diagnosing your therapists?"

"Well, I've certainly been in here long enough to learn a bit about your trade."

"It's not a trade. It's a profession, and it requires years of rigorous education and even more years of intensive training to practice responsibly." Her doctor is scolding her. This suddenly makes attempting to push his buttons infinitely more appealing to her.

"Be that as it may, we all have our own pathology, don't we doctor?" Sarah asks rhetorically. "Am I to blame because Ashley's is so easy to spot? Am I supposed to feel guilty that his feelings are too fragile to stand up to a teenager's choice in sing-alongs?"

*Her ennui is fading. She has always enjoyed defying the Goblin King. It's exhilarating and it fills her with purpose.*

"It's not your musical tastes that are your weapon, Sarah…"*

"Weapon?" she scoffs. *As if he'd allow her a weapon.*

"…it's your words," he continues, ignoring her interruption, "and that too-clever mind of yours. You
should think carefully before you lacerate others so indifferently with your sharp tongue."

Sarah scrunches her nose. "Lacerate? That seems a bit theatrical." *It seems like something her mother would say.*

"It doesn't make it any less true, though."

"So, according to you, my tongue is so sharp that I wound my music therapist just by naming the two or three songs I've learned to play on the guitar after he asks me to name them? Honestly, I don't know what you want from me. If I don't answer direct questions, I'm surly and uncooperative. If I do, I'm stabbing people with my tongue, apparently."

"You could try being more empathetic."

Sarah frowns. "Ashley could try being less delicate."

"It wasn't Mr. Sikes who complained about your behavior. You upset the other patients."

"The other patients?" Sarah laughs. "I doubt that." *It had to be Mandy, she's sure of it. Tattling like a kindergartener, trying to make trouble. Borderlines!*

It strikes Sarah then that Mandy has likely run crying to Dr. Prevarant in order to create precisely this scenario in retaliation for the gray chair. *That crazy, OCD bitch!*

"Well, why don't you tell me what happened, then?" The doctor's ways are subtle, leading her down the path of self-defense, offering her the irresistible chance to tell her side (after all, doesn't everyone want to be understood?) But really, he just wants her to confide. *To confess.* He's an expert at plumbing the depths of the mind for useful nuggets of information to use to his advantage later. She sees it well enough, for all his bland expression and non-judgmental tone. Well, she can play his game.

*This is a chess match,* she decides, and makes her move, threatening his knight.

"Ashley was late, so I was just playing with the guitar. I sang a song. Luke asked me to. There was no harm meant."

"I believe there was an issue with your choice of song."

Sarah’s face shapes itself into the sincerest expression of surprise she can muster. *"With or Without You? What's wrong with that? You know it, I'm sure. Everyone knows it."*

Dr. Prevarant nods, giving an affirmative hum, encouraging her to continue.

*She maneuvers again, placing herself in the path of the king.*

"I can't live," Sarah says softly, leaning forward and peering into the doctor's eyes. *Greener today, she thinks, but not glimmering with the usual arrogance. "With or without you."*

"What?" His brows pinch together and he is momentarily puzzled. Or… *thrown off?*

*You're in check.*

The girl stares, unmoving, for long seconds, and then her face breaks into a large grin. *"The lyrics. You know. To the song you were asking about?"* She chuckles as if the doctor has asked the most ridiculous question in the world.
"I wasn't asking about a song, Sarah. I was asking what happened."

*He defends himself ably, but he's harried, no matter how cool his reaction.* She studies his face, looking for a tell-tale bead of sweat or muscles twitching in his jaw. There is nothing. Not yet.

"And I was telling you." *See the thorn twist in your side, your majesty?* She squints again, a quick, involuntary wink.

Dr. Prevarant leans back in his chair and folds his hand together, fingers interlaced, resting them lightly on the edge of his desk. He looks at her a moment before speaking. "Sarah, I want to help you, but I can't do that without your cooperation."

*A pawn, in her path, meant as a simple obstruction. The 'I'm just a concerned physician' move. Not difficult to overcome, but tedious.*

Tiresome.

*He underestimates her. He has always underestimated her, and it galls her to no end.*

*If there were a real chess board between them, she would turn it over and knock all the pieces to the ground. She would grind them into dust with her heel.*

Sarah reaches up, absently scratching at her cheek.

It irks her, this reasonable façade of his. He is *not* reasonable. He is not practical, or moderate, or sensible in the least! He is a raging tempest disguised as a man, driven by whim, motivated by uncurbed desire. He is not accustomed to defiance. He expects to be obeyed, and when he is not, he becomes cruel, or petulant, or cold. His capacity for fury is endless. He tantrums like a child, for God's sake! There is nothing measured about him, and it's pissing her off that he's behaving as if there is.

*There was ennui for a while, and then the momentary thrill of sparring with a master, but now, only anger remains. Her fingers twitch as the anger grows.*

The girl's eyes snap up and she meets the psychiatrist's gaze. A voice inside of her head, small and distant, pleads with her to *keep her mouth shut,* but it fades away and she finds herself addressing the doctor in low tones. There is a subtle menace in her voice.

"Why are you here?"

Dr. Prevarant seems unperturbed. "What do you mean?"

"Why are you here, doctor?" Her glare is filled with animosity. Her mockery is unmistakable.

"I'm here to help you, Sarah. You know that."

"Do I?" She laughs a little, but it's a bitter, mirthless sound. "When have you ever helped me?"

The doctor places his forearms on his desk, leaning toward his patient. "I've tried my best ever since I took over your case." *His pupils are large, making his eyes dark; dangerous.*

Ah, she thinks, *there it is. Just a little further, and his mask will slip.*

Sarah's lip curls. "Have you? Your best?"

"My absolute best."
The girl snorts, then says, "I don't know what you're up to here. I don't know what sort of end game you have in mind, but…"

"This is no game," Dr. Prevarant interrupts. "Your well-being is no game to me, Sarah."

"No game!" Her jaw drops for a moment, self-control slipping through her fingers like water. "Are you kidding me?"

The doctor cocks his head and regards his patient. "Where is this hostility coming from?" he asks. Sarah's eyes flick briefly to the desk top as her physician jots a note on a small pad near his right hand. She reads it, upside down. Irritability, it says. Mood swings. Her annoyance intensifies. How dare he judge her! Him!

"Everything is a game to you," she replies. "Everything. From the moment I met you. And you change the rules as you see fit!"

Where I come from, we call that 'cheating', your majesty. Write that down on your little notepad.

"Why don't you tell me what you're so angry about," the doctor suggests.

"I'm not angry!" Sarah spits, then watches as the doctor jots down another observation. Poor insight, the pad now reads. Her face pinches into a look of discontent. Her insight isn't poor, not by a long shot. She sees exactly what's going on here. What Dr. Prevarant doesn't realize yet is that she's tired of playing his game.

"How are you sleeping?" he wants to know.

"Fine," she grunts, crossing her arms over chest. His expression tells her he doesn't believe her. She looks away from him, staring at the bookshelf to her right instead.

The doctor suggests that her mood is a side effect of her medication, one that he hoped would lessen with time. "But it seems to be intensifying," he remarks, looking at his pad as he jots another note to himself. Insomnia, it says, followed by a question mark. He goes on to explain the adverse effects of poor sleep on mood.

She sneers at that; at that banal medical talk. He sounds so officious, so dull. Sarah wonders how he can even stand himself. She wants to ask him that very question, but she knows he'll willfully misinterpret her words and suggest that simply by posing the question, she is providing more evidence of her irritability and poor insight. She can practically hear him now. He'll say, This isn't about me, Sarah. I'm not the patient.

Patient. Her lip curls at the thought. She's no patient. She's a captive; a hostage meant to pay her own ransom.

As he discusses his reluctance to change her regimen despite the side effects, she stares down at Dr. Prevarant's silver pen cup on his desk. Sarah sinks lower in her chair. She's increasingly on edge and feels like grabbing that pen cup and pitching it at his head. She wants to vault onto that faux-mahogany desk, tower over him, and roar until she's hoarse. Roar. Somehow, she manages not to do this. Sarah exercises what little self-control she has left to keep from creating a scene. She has the upper hand now, and she does not wish to give it up so easily. Her fingers curl tightly, forming fists with her hands, and she keeps them hidden, tucked against her sides. She tries to concentrate on his words but finds that they are meaningless babble.

Meaningless.
"This is the most successful medication combination we've ever tried with you," the psychiatrist is saying. "No hallucinations. No thoughts of self-harm. You seem much sharper. So, your condition has vastly improved, despite the worsening irritability."

Vastly improved? She wants bark with laughter. She wants to fall out of her chair and onto Dr. Prevarant's commercial grade carpeting, rolling around with her uncontrollable, endless laughter, because what he's saying to her is obviously one huge joke.

Only he would lock her away and drug her and call her 'improved.'

They try and they try and they try to blind her with these pills, red ones and blue ones and gold ones and green ones; they try to shackle her. Chemical shackles. He doesn't want her to see. She doesn't know why, but he wants her here, blinded and chained, helpless and insensible at his fingertips. But she sees. She sees everything. Despite his best efforts, she knows. It may have worked for a little while, they may have blinded her temporarily, but the truth cannot be denied and her vision is clearer now than ever.

Sharper.

Just like he said.

Sarah has tried her best, but she can contain her ire no longer.

"Why the pretense?" she hisses. "I've never understood it, even though I've played your game." She scratches her cheek again.

The doctor sighs wearily. "What pretense?"

She mentally tacks on the 'precious' after his question. That's more like him, no matter how he play-acts in his doctor costume with his doctor props.

"Why don't you just admit who you are, so we can be done with this charade?"

"Who do you think I am?" Dr Prevarant's voice is soft; soothing. Sarah narrows her eyes. She will not be soothed.

"You think I don't know? I've always known!"

The doctor leans forward, locking his gaze with Sarah's, and very deliberately pronounces the words, "I am your doctor."

Sarah growls angrily, shaking her head and uncrossing her arms so she can grasp the edge of the desk in front of her. She leans towards the doctor. "Aren't you tired of all this?" The words are gritted out slowly. "Because I am. So tired. Of all of it. I want it to be over!"

Dr. Prevarant appraises his patient carefully. "Sarah, are you having thoughts about hurting yourself again?"

"Oh, nice one," she mutters. This is how he corners her queen, by purposefully distorting her words; by accusing her of being suicidal. Those words carry weight here. They allow him a larger measure of control over her. He's been biding his time, she realizes, letting her move about the board, setting it up as she sees fit; letting her feel as though she is marshaling him, but he's the one on the attack now.

"Do you have a plan?" he presses.
She bares her teeth at the hint of concern she hears around the edges of his voice. He can't fool her. She's the daughter of an accomplished actress. She knows the tricks.

"A plan? Yeah, of course. I'm going to hang myself with Ashley's guitar strings."

"This is not a joke, Sarah."

"Well, that's a relief," she replies sarcastically. "I guess I can cross playing practical jokes off the list of your possible motivations. So, what is it then? Did you get bored back home? Are you trying to punish me? What?"

"Why would I want to punish you?"

"Because it's what you do! When things don't go your way, it's what you do! You steal time from me, you steal my friends…"

Sarah is becoming more and more animated. Her mood is completely changed from when she'd first entered Dr. Prevarant's office. He frowns and jots another note. Emotional lability. Persecutory delusions.

"Alright, let's take a deep breath and think for a moment," the doctor suggests and Sarah reluctantly quiets, but her mind is spinning faster and faster. She has so many suspicions and memories and worries running through her brain, she is having trouble organizing them into one train of thought.

"Now," Dr. Prevarant says, "tell me what it is that's upsetting you as precisely as you can."

Don't, a little voice warns, and she flinches at it, but Sarah is no longer capable of holding her tongue. She will speak the truth and he will hear it, by God. She is visibly agitated as she considers her answer, her eyes flicking side to side as if inspecting the corners of the room for something lurking there. She hasn't seen them in a while, his little minions, but she knows that doesn't mean much. They're masters at hiding. They could've been here all along, creeping in the shadows, and no one the wiser. She starts to blink in an exaggerated way, hard and rapid, trying to clear her eyes so she can see.

She thinks if she stares at him hard enough, his white coat will shimmer out of existence and his long hair will escape its neat binding, and he will be himself again. She just has to clear her eyes first.

"Sarah," the doctor says, "I've asked you a question."

"Yeah, I know. What's upsetting me?" She sniffs and rubs her nose. "Well, maybe I'm still upset that you kidnapped my brother. And then there was the time you tried to kill me. Twice. Or, maybe three times. Does the oubliette count? And when you convinced one of my friends to betray me. And when you drugged me and trapped me in one of your magic crystals. Or, how about how you turned yourself into a nocturnal bird so you could spy on me?"

Dr. Prevarant visibly deflates with each accusation. Sarah triumphs at the sight of it. Surely now, he will realize she's defeated him. Again. Surely now, he'll admit who he is, what he is, and these bright white walls will melt away and she will awaken from this monotonous nightmare. The doctor sighs, and then speaks.

"This again, Sarah?"

"Always," she hisses.

"I thought we were past this."
"Never."

"I had really hoped this would be the regimen," he tells her, his voice heavy with his disappointment. "I'd thought once your levels were therapeutic for a while, even the irritability would wane and you'd be well-controlled, but it's obvious you're not tolerating these meds. They've pushed you into a paranoid state. I'm very sorry."

"Not tolerating… What are you talking about, Jareth?" She's starting to yell. "Why won't you just say it? Why don't you just admit who you are?" The doctor presses a button on his large desk phone and a nurse answers him via the intercom feature.

"Yes, doctor?"

"Please send Sam in to take Sarah back to her room," Dr. Prevarant instructs. "And hold her afternoon meds. I'll be changing them shortly."

"Alright, doctor," the nurse replies.

He pushes back in his chair, creating more distance between himself and his irate patient. So cautious. So practical. Checkmate. Sarah's mouth drops open in disbelief, and then she hangs her head, defeated. She'd only thought she'd had the upper hand. He's been two moves ahead of her the whole time.

The nurse must be the model of efficiency, because thirty seconds later, Sam is there. Sarah fights him a little. Not to hurt him, because she likes Sam and she would never, but twisting in his grasp so she can stare at the man behind the desk. His white coat has not shimmered away and his hair is still tidy in its low ponytail. His changeable eyes reveal nothing. Taking in his continued masquerade, his emotionless expression and his calm demeanor, Sarah gives Dr. Prevarant a hateful glare. His will is as strong as hers and apparently, he's not ready to stop playing this particular game.

Half an hour later, a nurse is administering an injection. The cocktail, they call it, and as Sarah drowses off, she thinks cocktail is an apt description, because she certainly feels drunk.

And then she dreams. And in her dreams, she is staring into the crib. Staring and staring as her hands clutch the rail.
That evening, as the banquet begins, the Goblin King and the Queen of the Labyrinth are presented with gifts by the attendees, the offerings of nation states and tribal leadership to their hosts. Each guest hopes to outdo the other, for these are not just tokens of gratitude and friendship from foreign rulers, but also visible symbols of the power and wealth of their respective homes.

No one wishes to be seen as poor or weak, for that will be interpreted as vulnerability and there is nothing more dangerous to the security of these territories, particularly now when the national blood is up in so many various realms. For this reason, the gifts are thoughtfully chosen and presented.

Oh, and such gifts they are!

There are heavy golden bowls set with precious stones, bolts of rich fabrics (hand worked, requiring years to produce), and exotic animals to populate the king's menagerie. They are given pearls from the coast and moonstones from the mountains, strung into belts and bracelets and chokers or formed into brooches. There rare spices and valuable books. Clan Norost has sent a chess board of ivory and onyx, with detailed pieces carved by a stonemason from a tribe of fabled dwarf artisans now thought to be extinct. The kingdom of Lucidesa has gifted them with a silver key, rumored to open any lock (The power to come and go as you please, Sarah thinks. What must that be like?) There are jeweled boxes which hold more jeweled boxes within and all manner of wonderous things nearly beyond counting. The king graciously thanks his guests for honoring the queen and himself so generously. Sarah is not required to respond at all except to smile and nod in agreement with the king.

She's not sure she could gather her thoughts enough to speak anyway. The brilliance of the banquet hall has mesmerized her, the whole thing luminous and twinkling, even her own gown. She hadn't seen it in the dim light of her chamber, but here, exposed to the blaze of a thousand candles, ten thousand, she realizes that the fabric is somehow reflective. It becomes incandescent and she feels as though she exists in the very center of a star (and her, the iron ash at its core; the pinpoint of darkness within the explosion of searing radiance). When she turns this way and that, she almost seems to project light, and it's overwhelming. And beautiful. Her head swims with it.

And Sarah can't help but think that somehow, all this was accomplished without her knowledge or help. It stings a little.

Throughout the banquet, Sarah tries to discover what the Selkeysan ambassador meant about an official announcement, and what the king meant by this is hardly the place, but she is frustrated that she cannot seem to get either of them alone to inquire. For his part, Jareth appears to be very deftly avoiding her. They are seated at opposite ends of the large banquet table, as protocol dictates, but when the meal is finished and the dancing begins, she feels as though she chases him round and round the room, losing him in the crowd repeatedly.

If this were a great game of hide and seek, she would be losing abysmally. And she's not entirely certain the king isn't using his magic to frustrate her efforts…

Where I come from, we call that 'cheating', your majesty, she thinks, frowning.

"It's not even that big of a crowd," she mutters to herself in irritation, losing sight of the king once again. It reminds her very much of a dream of a ball she'd once had, only in her dream, she'd finally found Jareth. She'd even danced with him. She is having no such luck tonight. She wanders at the edges of the mad dancing, skirting clusters of guests laughing uproariously. Drifting along the periphery of what is becoming a rather raucous gathering, Sarah peers intently this way and that,
searching. It's all in vain.

Finally, she gives up, crossing her arms over her chest and huffing a bit, until she spies a table in the corner which supports a bubbling silver fountain surrounded by delicate crystal goblets. *Champagne?* she wonders, walking towards it.

It's a magnificent thing, this fountain, and tall. It's made of three fluted silver bowls, graduated in size, stacked one atop another, held in place by a central arm. She supposes the center of the arm is how the beverage returns to the top once it has spilled into the lowest bowl, though whether by sorcery or some more mundane method, such as a mechanical pump, who can say? The highly polished bowls catch the ambient light and reflect it back, gleaming brilliantly. Sarah squints a bit, and one corner of her mouth lifts as she sees her own face reflected in the silver.

The girl leans in, peering at the pinkish beverage as it spills from one bowl into the next, the splashing creating a slight, ruby froth. Swiping a small goblet, she holds it beneath one of the fizzing streams and fills it nearly to the brim. She sniffs at it, and, finding the scent sweet, takes a small sip. The flavor delights her, reminding her of the cream soda she used to drink when she was a young child, and it tickles the back of her throat pleasantly. She downs the drink and then fills her goblet again. It is only as she is finishing her second glass that she notices Jareth staring at her across the chamber.

*So, there you are,* she thinks, and laughs, hiccupping slightly.

Jareth's perfectly shaped eyebrows are raised. A vague notion occurs to Sarah. She thinks she should go and speak to him, that there is something important she means to ask, but as soon as she determines to do so, her head begins to feel strangely light and just that quickly, she completely forgets what it is she intends to discuss. In fact, she forgets that she had intended to discuss anything at all.

The king begins to cross the banquet hall toward her, moving slowly and holding her in his gaze. Sarah watches him, though it becomes increasingly difficult to do so. For some reason, Jareth starts to look blurry to her, and after a moment, there are two Jareths. The queen reaches out her goblet once again, holding it a bit unsteadily in the stream of cream-soda-bubble-fizz-drink, and notes that both Jareths are shaking their heads at her. She laughs and turns away, walking toward the dance floor and taking her sloshing goblet with her.

The Archduke of Selgust intercepts her, making pleasant small talk. He complements her on the beauty of the room and the excellence of the food at the banquet.

"Well, not that I had anything to do with it," she says, a trace of bitterness behind her words, "but wait until you try the raspberry tarts." She slurs a bit, and winks conspiratorially, her face alight with her own anticipation of the royal baker's special treat. She encircles his arm with her one hand for emphasis. "They're the best thing I've ever put in my mouth." Her eyes are wide, innocent, as she gazes up at him, like a young girl eagerly awaiting Santa's visit on Christmas Eve. The archduke's expression is openly pleased, which is surprising considering the need for his presence here is dictated by the fact that his kingdom is a single breath away from open war.

"I must say, your majesty, that you have been the most unexpected delight."

"The tarts are the real delight," she counters. "Just wait and see." She feels nearly weightless, as if she might float away, and grasps the archduke's sleeve tighter, to anchor herself. The man makes no indication he is offended by her behavior, and instead tells her that raspberries do not grow well in the climate of Selgust, so such tarts are a rare indulgence for him.
"No raspberries? I'm so sorry!" Sarah's face falls, and she seems genuinely sad, as if she might shed a tear. "So, so sorry…." She takes a sip from her goblet. The archduke rushes to reassure her.

"Please don't grieve on my account, your majesty. Selgust has many other attributes to recommend it, despite its lack of raspberries." As Sarah takes another sip of her drink, he says something about trees, she thinks.

"Trees?" she asks to clarify. "Did you say 'trees'? I have the most wonderful trees in my labyrinth. They really are top notch."

At that moment, Sarah feels a gloved hand wrap around her arm.

"My darling girl," the Goblin King murmurs, "I don't think you've eaten enough food to absorb all the fairy wine you've consumed."

Sarah turns to face Jareth and very deliberately lifts her small goblet to her lips and drains it. She makes to refill her glass but the king's grip on her arm stops her.

"Come now," he says, a laugh in his voice, "wouldn't you rather dance with me than stay hidden in the corner, drinking?"

She shakes her head with an almost comical vigor. "I was having a conversheshan… conver… sasshun… conversation with the archduke," she says. "Don't be so rrrrude." Her lips curl into an exaggerated frown. Her eyes grow unfocused as she looks past Jareth at the glowing candles collected in clusters here and there, lifted by candelabras both great and small. There is so much wavering, warm light all around and she finds it distracting.

"Oh, my dear, I have no wish to be impolite. Do continue, Archduke Valo."

By this time, the oldest son and heir to Clan Ludilo's chief has joined them, listening with interest as the archduke describes the beauty of the trees in his kingdom's eastern province, in a thickly forested region called the Whitewood. He offers to import some saplings for planting in the queen's labyrinth.

"I don't need your sssssilly old trees!" Sarah declares, indignant. She draws up straight and tall, squaring her shoulders and lifting her chin imperiously. The effect is rather blunted by the uncoordinated and exaggerated way she blinks, as if in doing so, she can make the hazy outline of the archduke's dinner jacket sharp again.

"Oh, most ungracious, my queen," the Goblin King chastises, but there is a fondness in his tone. His grip on Sarah's arm relaxes and his two fingers lightly trace a path down to her elbow.

"Not at all, your majesty," demurs the archduke affably. "The queen has simply never seen the Whitewood. I'm certain I can change her opinion with a gift of saplings. Or, perhaps a visit to Selgust is in order? I'd be only too happy to serve as her guide." Jareth raises an eyebrow at the offer, prompting the emissary to amend his invitation slightly. "And, yours as well, of course, King Jareth."

The rest is a confused muddle in Sarah's mind. Tamsos Neviltis (the clan chief's son who had drifted over to join their discussion earlier) remarks on his territory's own wooded province, an area named Bluutvalder. He explains the name translates to Blood Forest in the ancient tongue of his people. Though he acknowledges the towering evergreens there have a dark beauty all their own ('Not well suited to the Labyrinth,' he concedes, 'Too tall'), it is the crystalline mountain springs which burble and flow in the shade of the dark wood that fill him with the most pride. He suggests Sarah's time would be better spent touring his territory rather than the archduke's.

"Sparkly mountain water is fine, if you like that sort of thing," Sarah replies, her speech a gentle slur,
"but what you really need is a bog."

Neither the archduke, nor the young lieutenant chieftain, nor the Goblin King are certain if she's serious. Sarah herself would be unable to reliably attest to the degree of her earnestness here, not when she's caught between the light and the madness of the evening, and under the influence of the free-flowing fairy wine she's been consuming. She loves her labyrinth, though, every square inch of it, and she means for these men to know it.

There is another glass of fizz-cream-soda-fairy-wine then, she thinks, and… an argument? But that can't be right, because Jareth is laughing as she has rarely heard him laugh; delighted, and so sweet. Indulgent. She considers that maybe his laugh is a sound she would like to hear more of, but she can't be certain, because her head is spinning, and she is spinning (is she dancing? Yes, she is. She's quite certain now. Someone is whirling her around the floor in his arms and her head tilts back and she laughs and closes her eyes, shutting out the glittering brightness of it all. She's not sure who holds her. Perhaps a prince—that one from Egludur, or possibly the young prince of Klarhet—or maybe the war chief of Clan Nebunie? She has a vague impression of flashing black eyes and a beard…) and then the world is a blur of shimmering crystal and ten thousand blazing candles and music and raspberry tarts and the words of men she does not know.

And one she does.

'I'll have my dance now,' he'd said, leading her from the arms of another, and in her breathlessness, she'd merely nodded, and allowed herself to be led.

Sarah's nose is pressed against the Goblin King's jaw. She breathes him in, all soap and good whiskey and the leather of his fitted vest. His skin is warm velvet against hers and the feel of it causes her chest to ache. He is speaking to her softly, his breath caressing her ear, and she hums, hearing the words, but not understanding them. The satin toes of her slippers barely touch the floor as he holds her, her body following his effortlessly, without thought, as though she has ceded control of it to him. They move to music both sweet and hypnotic. She drifts on the waves of it, this delicate singing of strings, not remembering how she came to be in this grand place but wishing to stay nonetheless. To stay and stay and stay. She says so, her hope a bare whisper of want into the neck of the king.

How much time has passed? Hours? Years? She doesn't know. The clock strikes thirteen and Sarah is floating, down the corridor, dim lights flickering at the edges of her vision. She blinks lazily. Tapers? Yes, tapers set in wall sconces, she is sure, but she's not floating, she's being carried. Strong arms are wrapped around her and she is being carried through a passageway to her bedchamber and then she is there. Her head is so light, it's filled with helium and it floats away. She feels the linens cool around her and her featherbed is soft beneath her as she sinks. Her lips tug up into a smile, because she feels so very happy. Exquisitely so.

For the first time in a long time.

"Goodnight, sweet Sarah," Jareth says and her eyes flicker open to see his face leaning over her, his hands tucking the sheets around her. Her fingertips find his cheek and they trail there for a moment, touching him as he hovers just above her, and then her eyes slowly close, her hand dropping away.

"Goodnight, my love," she murmurs before she sighs and falls into the deepest sleep.
Sarah doesn't feel like painting in Arts and Crafts. She doesn't feel like doing much of anything, really. She's so groggy, simply lifting her eyelids takes effort. Turning her head nearly exhausts her. There's no way she can stand at an easel for an hour, and so, she doesn't. Luke says something to her. She hears it, but she doesn't really understand. The words lay there, in her ear, and she can't process them. It's like her brain is a muddy swamp and her thoughts are having difficulty slogging through it, and so they remain stuck. And unattached.

Debris discarded in murky waters, sinking to the bottom where it remains, static and undisturbed.

She doesn't catch glimpses of tittering goblins scrabbling around corners anymore, doesn't hear voices talking about babes or oubliettes or crystals that will show her dreams to her. Everything has gone silent and still all around her, and her world is dimmed, as she herself is silent and still. As she herself is dimmed.

Not the walls, though, she thinks, slowly lifting her eyes from the craft before her on the table to stare at the white expanse. Not the floors. Somehow, they are brighter than ever. The glaring whiteness of it all assaults her vision between languid blinks. She wants to close her eyes altogether, to block out the searing white; to sleep until she can wake in a place with movement and color and the sounds of what she knows to be true.

To sleep away the chemical insulation which buffers her reality and restrains her free will. To sleep away this most tiresome existence.

But that isn't allowed. The art therapist has already warned her once.

'This isn't rest time, Sarah, it's arts and crafts.'

Sarah hadn't responded, hadn't nodded or replied. That took too much energy. She'd merely opened her eyes and gone back to her craft.

Stupid, useless, waste-of-time project.

She doesn't have the ability or the desire to paint today, and so the therapist digs out some supplies Sarah suspects are borrowed from the primary wing (where all the patients twelve and under are housed). Three cheap, cardboard nesting boxes, the largest the size of a standard saucer. She has markers (washable Crayolas) and a pile of plastic stick-on gems with which to decorate the boxes. It's the sort of craft elementary teachers have their students do the first week of May so they will have something hand-made to wrap up for Mother's Day. The only thing lacking is a sticky bottle of Elmer's glue and a handful of uncooked macaroni. Sarah works on it just enough to keep the therapist from bitching at her.

Slowly, the girl peels the backing off an oval gem the size of her thumbnail. It's a deep blue, a fake sapphire. She presses it against the center of the lid of the third box and grunts a little. Somewhere in the back of her mind there sits a thought: that she should be humiliated by all this; that they have reduced her to a nearly drooling mess performing a meaningless task meant for a preschooler. The thought tries to push to the forefront of her considerations, tries to ignite some rage, but the swamp is too mucky and so the inflammatory idea remains mired and the heat of it dies, fizzling out in the morass of her mind. She peels the backing off a fake emerald and applies it haphazardly to the side of the small box.
"Treasure box," Luke remarks. He, too, is creating this craft. He always follows Sarah's lead, even when she's not leading. Unlike Sarah, he's applying his gems in a pattern, very carefully. This is no easy task for him with his large hands, and he wrinkles his brow in concentration. Plastic rubies are followed by plastic sapphires then plastic citrines then plastic emeralds. Red, blue, gold, green, red, blue, gold, green, red blue gold green, redbluegoldgreen...

It draws Sarah's eye.

When Luke attaches the last gem on the smallest box, he places the finished container inside of a slightly larger box which he has marked with zigzags of Crayola color, alternating the four shades in the same manner of his smaller jeweled box. The third and largest of the boxes is topped with an 'S' made of plastic rubies. Above it, Luke has drawn a crown with the gold marker. It's little more than three triangles on a flat base with red, blue, and green dots along it to represent the gems set in the crown, but the boy seems proud of his work as he places the two nested boxes inside this third.

"Present," he tells Sarah, handing her the craft.

She has to muster the determination to do it, but Sarah extends her hand, palm upturned, and Luke gifts her his project.

"Thank you," she says, willing the corners of her mouth to lift a bit. She feels as though her face is made of poured concrete which has nearly set. Sarah glances at the decorated box top. "A crown?"

The boy grins. "Princess Sarah."

"I'm a princess?" The question is slightly slurred. Luke nods, still grinning. "That makes you my gallant knight."

At Sarah's quiet declaration, the boy's grin widens and he says, "I slay dragons. For you."

I am the dragon.

It's another thought that sits in the back of her mind, whispering itself aloud, slowly seeping forward like a fog rolling over the swamp. The monster takes shape in her mind, hard scales of red and blue and gold and green, sitting atop its hoard: golden bowls set with precious stones; piles of pearls and moonstones and gems beyond counting; large treasure chests spilling over with jewelry, chokers and bracelets and brooches.

Sarah blinks and the image fades away. All she sees now is Luke's gift and her own feckless craft. She sets the box marked with the jeweled 'S' aside and then balls her hand into a fist, using it to slowly smash her own craft flat. The cardboard gives way easily, the corner seams making a slight popping sound as they come apart, and the action draws the attention of the therapist.

"Sarah!" the woman exclaims. Her name is… Rumer? Scout? Sarah frowns as she tries to rally her recall. Her memory is a slippery thing now. No, those are Demi Moore's daughters with Bruce Willis. But she knows it's something like that. Something edgy, trendy. The therapist's parents had obviously named her as a wink to their friends, and to trumpet their own artistic sensibilities. Saylor? Harlowe? She gives up. "What on earth…"

Sarah shrugs, but the movement is slight. She's conserving energy. For what, she's not sure, but just sitting upright is work. The name comes to her then. Lyric. Lyric Langley.

It makes Sarah think of music in the air, waves of it rolling past her. If she closes her eyes, she can almost hear it: strings, high and sweet. She sways slightly. Lyric sighs and seems to mentally gather herself before speaking.
"Is there something you'd rather be doing, Sarah?" The words are civil, but there's a barely disguised sharpness in her voice.

"Sleeping," the girl mumbles. She punctuates her answer with slow, lazy blinks.

Lyric shakes her head. "I meant some other craft."

Sarah's eyes drift to Luke's project. The red 'S' on the box lid almost seems to writhe beneath her tired gaze, like a snake. A bloody snake, ready to strike. She listens for the tell-tale hissing, but it never comes. The world is quiet now. If she focuses, she can hear Luke's breathing and the slight buzz of the overhead fluorescents, but not much else. Lyric clears her throat. When Sarah does not respond, the therapist breathes out of her mouth and then finds a blank sheet of drawing paper. She sets it in front of Sarah and gives her a pointed look before walking on.

Luke hands Sarah a marker, the red one. Absently, she begins to draw with it. Craft time is nearly over, so she doesn't get very far and when the patients are dismissed and sent on their way, the girl abandons her drawing, leaving it on the table as she shuffles out of the art room and toward Dr. Prevarant's office for their one o'clock session. When Lyric goes around the room, straightening and putting away supplies, she finds the incomplete drawing. It shows what looks like a gloved hand holding a ball. Even in red washable marker, Sarah has been able to convey that the object has a sort of reflective surface, as though the ball is made of polished silver or glass.

Lyric's expression is bemused. She knows Sarah's talent, and her imagination, and this simple drawing does not seem to touch the depths of what the girl has created in the past despite the obvious skill displayed in it. But had Sarah been there and been inclined to explain, she would've told the art therapist that contained within that orb is more wonder and intrigue and heartache than could be painted onto a thousand canvases. She would've told her that inside of the sphere, there is war and peace, love and loss, loyalty and treachery, desire and fear, and all the splendor of light and dark to bind them together; that there is more madness contained therein than in all the locked wards in the world, and more clarity than could be achieved with every red and blue and gold and green pill ever produced.

She would've explained that even made deaf and dumb and blind by injectable cocktails, the truth of things still sits stuck in the swamp of her mind, and it cannot be so easily dismissed. Though it rests beneath murky waters, it cannot be simply dissolved by the contents of a syringe.

What appears on the paper may be crude by her usual standard, and it may seem simple, but had Sarah been there to explain, she would've told Lyric Langley that there is nothing simple about a crystal which can show you all your dreams.

And there is nothing simple about the hand which offers it.
Sarah, my sweet," Jareth coos and Sarah groans, pulling a pillow over her face. She only enjoys the cool underside of it for a moment before poof, it explodes and she finds herself in a gentle snowfall of goose down. She cracks an eye to see her bed, her hair, and several goblin servants covered in feathers. The king himself is untouched.

Bastard.

"That was my favorite pillow," Sarah croaks, pushing up on her elbows to glare at the Goblin King. He stands at the foot of her bed, gazing down at her with an amused look. As she watches, he makes a circle with his thumb and forefinger and after a second, flicks the forefinger up crisply. A pile of fluffy pillows suddenly appears behind him.

"There. You can have your pick," he replies with a smirk.

Sarah's tone is caught between a sort of fatigued anguish and undisguised irritation when she next speaks. "Jareth, I'm really not up to whatever it is you're here for. My head is pounding."

The previous evening had been a raucous one in the palace. Entertaining ambassadors from bordering lands is a critical endeavor which calls for the utmost in hospitality. Jareth's interpretation of "utmost" and "hospitality" typically means "too much" and "magical frat party" (if the frat party were a black-tie affair). Last night was no different. Too much food, too much music, too much laughter, too much dancing, too much wine…

Sarah has a vague recollection of a fountain of bubbling fairy wine, which, as far as she can tell, is like champagne, but sweeter, and more colorful, and with a much higher alcohol content, apparently (an aspect about which no one, especially not a certain King of the Goblin Realm, had bothered to warn her).

It is a widely known but little discussed fact that most of the peoples of this realm and the surrounding lands are renowned for their high alcohol tolerance. They seem to metabolize it easier, and more quickly, than their human counterparts. Unfortunately, widely known is not the same as universally understood, and so this fact is one of which Sarah has been ignorant until now. She has always assumed the potency of the spirits produced in the fairy kingdoms to be weaker than those found in her own world, judging by their effect (or lack thereof) on those who consume them. She has observed that the volumes the king requires to produce any sort of altered state are considerable. She has never entertained the alternative explanation: that the physiologic make-up of Jareth and his ilk gifts them with the ability to drink hard with little side effect.

Bad influences, she moans internally. The lot of them.

Sarah is reminded just how human she really is as the Goblin King continues prattling happily on, with no indication he has been affected by the fairy wine, or the rich foods (really, who candies then fries goose liver?), or the lack of sleep, or the mental strain of keeping the representatives of the mountain clans entertained so that they do not insult or openly attack the ambassadors from the coastal kingdoms.

Jareth proves to be a surprisingly adept diplomat.

He displays none of that diplomacy at this moment.

"Darling, you look a mess." He snaps his fingers and a large, mirrored tray appears on Sarah's
bedside table. Arranged upon it are brushes, combs, elixirs meant to help detangle unruly locks, hairpins, barrettes, ribbons, and an absurd pile of tiaras.

*Enough royal jewels to make Queen Elizabeth blush,* the girl thinks, stifling another groan.

Sarah blearily regards the ostentatious assortment of gem-encrusted crowns. Most of them are standard fare, diamonds arranged in various pleasing patterns, and some are even tasteful, as tiaras go; dainty enough to pass for simple jeweled headbands. But this is the Goblin Realm, after all, and Jareth's interpretation of "utmost" is still in effect, so of course, some of them stray a bit too far into *reigning-beauty-pageant-winner* territory. She can practically feel the mascara running down her face as she regards them. Then she sees a couple which strain credulity. One of them looks positively medieval, made of thick, crudely hammered gold and set with several emeralds the size of her thumbnail. Another has a pear-shaped ruby at its center the size of an actual pear.

*Make that Queen Elizabeth the First,* she mentally amends. *Or, a sultan from 1001 Arabian Nights.*

Sarah sits up, flicking away the feathers on her face, and three goblins get to work on her grooming.

"Whatever it is you think I need to be made presentable for, I can't, Jareth," Sarah complains. "I have just the *worst* headache. And I feel like puking."

"Oh, dear," Jareth says with exaggerated sympathy, "my poor Sarah." His eyes narrow a bit as he appraises her more closely. "You do look a bit green this morning, darling."

"Shh," the queen directs, shutting her eyes and leaning back to rest her throbbing skull against the ornately carved headboard of her bed. The goblins mutter under their breath, scolding her for impeding their work. "Not so loud."

The Goblin King shakes his head and makes an annoying *tsk* sound several times before telling her she ought to mind her wine consumption better.

"After all, you're not even of legal drinking age yet, precious." He has the audacity to sound concerned.

"There's no *legal drinking age* in the Goblin Realm!" she huffs, cracking an eye to glare at him.

"True," he admits, curling his fingers gingerly. A crystal ball appears in his palm and he draws it close to his mouth. "But, as you like to remind me, you're a *human* and a citizen of… what was it again? New Blerk?"

"*York.* Upstate New *York.*"

"Yes, New York. Incidentally, I've always wondered. Where is *Old* York?"

"It's in England," Sarah growls. *With Queen Elizabeth, who's probably missing some crown jewels.* Her lips pull into a frown. She's in no mood for foolishness. Not while her head is pounding like a jackhammer. "And it's not Old York. It's just York." She grimaces in disbelief that she's actually entertaining his asanine questions. "Do you really want a lesson in the history of the settlement of the United States right now?"

"No, not particularly," the king admits. He blows gently on the crystal he is holding and it shimmers, then seems to melt in his hand, taking a new form. After a moment, he is holding a crystal goblet, intricately cut and faceted. It contains a clear green liquid that reminds Sarah of the Absinthe she's seen in movies. She shudders. "But I had thought you still constrained yourself to the laws and mores of New Blerk." He extends his arm, offering her the goblet.
"New York," she seethes, "and that's hilarious, coming from you." She says it as if it's anything but hilarious. "Since when have you ever respected any laws or mores, particularly those of other realms?" Sarah accepts the goblet and sniffs its contents suspiciously. They exude a pleasant floral odor.

"Me? I don't. But then, I'm not the one with the blinding hangover this morning, am I darling?"

"What is this?" Her brow wrinkles skeptically as she swirls the green draft around in the goblet, watching it to see if it exhibits any characteristics of a drink that's been tampered with (she has no idea what such characteristics might be, but she hopes they will be obvious should they appear).

"Your mistrust is ill-placed."

Her eyes snap up from the goblet to Jareth's face. She glowers at him. "Says the king who once sent me a poisoned peach."

"Poisoned! Bah! Hardly that." He tries to look wounded but only succeeds in appearing slightly less arrogant.

"Roofied, then."

The Goblin King stares off, his look still a combination of haughtiness and poorly-feigned innocence. "I don't know what that means."

Sarah suspects he knows very well what it means but decides to try to turn the tables. "Well, if not poisoned, what would you call it, then?"

"Enchanted," he replies without hesitation. He has the nerve to smile at her and bow his head, as if he has somehow done her a great service by answering her question.

"Well, poisoned, or roofied, or enchanted, I'm not drinking this."

"It will help," Jareth assures her softly. The haughtiness is gone.

"It will help," Sarah mocks under her breath, pitching her voice high, but his demeanor has convinced her the concoction is safe enough. She drinks it and after a few moments, her headache and nausea recede and she feels rested and whole. After a breathing a deep sigh of relief, she thanks him, then asks, "Why are you so…" She waves her hand at him, disconcerted, then frowns.

"Why am I so what?" he laughs.

"So… unscary and… unmoody."

"Am I?" He cocks an eyebrow, bemused.

"You're downright pleasant this morning. It's weird."

Jareth leans down and grips the edge of the footboard of Sarah's bed with both hands. He pins her in place with his stare. "I can amend my mood to suit you anytime you like," he says ominously, and his eyes flicker with something dark. It unnerves her and she immediately regrets the flippant way she'd spoken to him. "Say your right words, little Sarah, and I can be as terrifying as you desire."

She draws in a steadying breath. "No. That won't be necessary."

He smiles then, but it does not reach his eyes. They remain dark. "I'm only as frightening as you make me, precious. You know that."
Jareth has told her this many times, insisting that he bows only to her will; that he merely wants to make her happy; that he only seeks her comfort and contentment. He tells her that he is her slave. He tells her and tells her, but still, Sarah isn't sure. Even after all this time, she isn't sure.

"And it isn't morning," he tacks on carelessly. Sarah notices a clock then, sitting on the center of a fireplace mantle that glimmers into view. The hands of the clock indicate the time is half past noon.

*As if time really means anything in this realm.*

"Why are you here?" she finally asks the king. A goblin hands her a warm slice of thick, buttered bread and she begins to nibble. Sarah has become used to goblins flitting around her, doing things for her, handing her things, sometimes even before she has voiced a desire for them. A second goblin is winding thin platinum wires around her curls while a third compares two tiaras, trying to decide which goes best with the gown which has appeared in the corner the bedchamber, fitted around her dress form. It is ivory silk organza, loosely layered so that it will have movement, and it looks like something from a painting of a Greek goddess, the girl thinks. *A Greek goddess styled by Dior.*

"Don't tell me you've forgotten." The king *tsks* her again and straightens, walking over to the gown and inspecting it. "You've agreed to, no, you've *insisted* on taking the ambassadors of the coastal kingdoms and the mountain clans on a tour of the center of your labyrinth."

Sarah snorts. "As if…" She would sooner swim a few laps in the Bog of Eternal Stench as get in the middle of *that* political quagmire. Besides, the center of the Labyrinth, though certainly beautiful (the most breathtakingly beautiful place in all creation, as far as Sarah is concerned), is currently the focus of a territorial dispute between the troll tribes. Only an idiot would take a tour of it now. "Why are you really here, Jareth?"

"Oh, I'm quite serious, dumpling. Your guests are assembling in the gallery as we speak."

"*What?*" she cries in disbelief. She's too distraught to even berate him over the *dumpling* remark. *Oh, this is disastrous,* she thinks. *Disastrous!*

"Mmm." Jareth runs his hands over the shoulder straps of the dress, brushing away some loose thread or lint speck only he can see. "Yes. It seems you took exception to the Archduke Valo's opinion of trees."

"Archduke who?"

"Valo. He's here representing Selgust."

*Yes. The Archduke of Selgust. That seems familiar.*

"And I took exception to his opinion on…trees," Sarah repeats skeptically. She still suspects the king of playing a joke.

"Indeed you did. He said the trees in the eastern province of his kingdom are the greenest in the land. And then you were particularly offended with what Tamsos Neviltis had to say."

"Tamsos…" Sarah wonders if Jareth is making these names up.

"Neviltis," he provides helpfully.

"And who is Tamsos… Neviltis?"

"He's the eldest son of the Chief of Clan Ludilo," Jareth explained. "Don't you remember? You
danced with him. *Twice.*" There is a note of disapproval in the king's tone as he relates this bit of information. Sarah ignores it.

"And what could Tamsos Whoever-he-is have said to offend me?"

"Well, there was quite a lot going on at the time, but as I recall, he was describing the *Bluutvalder.* I think he remarked on the superior clarity of the springs there."

*Well, that was obviously an overstatement by the clansman but Sarah cannot fathom she was troubled enough to react in any notable way.*

"I don't remember this at all…"

"No? I'm surprised. The look on your face was practically murderous. You see, it was his assertion that the mountain springs are naturally purer while you insisted that the magic of the Labyrinth renders yours more so and…"

Sarah frowns, interrupting the king. "And I was offended?" She seems to remember talking about the Bog of Eternal Stench last night with a group of men, but her recollections are too hazy to be sure.

"Oh, yes. Quite. And when the Vice Admiral of Klarhet's navy agreed with Valo, you jabbed him in the chest so hard with your finger, I fear you may have left a bruise on the poor man."

"Why would I…"

"I believe you said something along the lines of *putting his money where his mouth is.*" Jareth lifts a few of the fine layers of the gown's skirt and releases them, letting them drift back down. He watches them fall with satisfaction before remarking, "Yes, this will do nicely. Beautiful, lighthearted, but *sober.*" He chuckles to himself then turns back towards Sarah, leaning against the wall and crossing his arms over his chest. "I'd never heard that expression before," he admits. "The one about money and mouths. Apparently, it's some quaint way humans challenge each other to place wagers. Though why you'd want to hold your money in your mouth, I don't really understand."

"Wager? With a fairy?" She closes her eyes and feels her panic rising. It feels a lot like vomit. "Did I bet something, Jareth?"

*Please say no. Please say no. Please say no say nosayno."

"Only your first-born child."

"*What?*" she cries.

"Calm yourself, darling, the archduke was unwilling to offer commensurate collateral. He declined your reckless wager. I rather think he's entertaining a small hope that your first-born and his will be the same, silly man. As if you could ever be tempted to leave the Goblin Realm for Selgust. They don't even have raspberries…"

"Jareth!" Sarah interrupts. "Focus!"

"Yes, well, you insisted they all take a tour of the Labyrinth's center, so they could, and I quote, *'eat their words'.* You humans do seem preoccupied with mouths…"

"I don't remember any of this! When did I even…"

"I believe it was after your third… no, *fourth* glass of fairy wine." He gives her a look of mock
"They were such tiny glasses," she replies weakly.

"There's a reason they're so tiny."

"I see that now."

"Frankly, I was surprised you were conscious enough to articulate the invitation. Well, I say invitation, but it would be more precise to call it a royal citation."

"A royal citation!" Sarah clutches at her temples in disbelief, interfering with the work of her goblin servants again. One of them slaps her hands away, causing the girl to give a hurt little whine, but she's too flabbergasted by the tale Jareth is spinning to react with more fervor.

"You even called your dwarf scribe to write it up," Jareth says, then pauses for dramatic effect. "On a napkin. The poor creature kept muttering about how the linen was causing his quill to blot so much, the citation was barely legible. You know how prideful dwarf scribes can be about their penmanship."

The girl moans as she covers her face with her hands, mortified. "I'm never drinking fairy wine again." It is the most solemn oath she has ever pledged.

Though Sarah says she's not sure she wants to know the rest, the king is only too glad to continue his account of her shenanigans the previous evening. "You asked Sir Didymus to sign the document as an official witness. When he tried to talk you out of it, you gathered up your skirts and climbed onto the head table, over the pudding, to grab a candle out of the candelabra." Sarah gapes at him, but he doesn't seem to notice. He appears thoughtful as he adds, "You know, I don't believe I'd ever seen your knees before that."

"What?"

"Your knees, precious. As knees go, they're really very lovely."

"No, I mean the climbing-on-the-table thing."

He chuckles. "Oh, yes, it was quite a sight."

"But… why?" She cannot fathom a reason for the behavior Jareth is rather gleefully describing.

"You needed wax for your royal seal."

"My royal seal?" she scoffs. "I don't have a royal seal. It's an oversight she continues to hound the king about routinely, but one he has not yet seen fit to correct."

"Yes, my dear, I know. Which is likely why you begged me to use mine." The king holds up his hand, showing Sarah his signet ring. He flips his hand back so he can inspect the ring himself. What he sees causes him to purse his lips and rub at the signet. "There's still a bit of wax caught in it. Dinner candles really aren't meant for…"

"Jareth!" Sarah wavers between anger and alarm. "Why didn't you stop me?"

The Goblin King sniffs indignantly. "Sarah Williams, when has anyone ever been able to prevent you from doing precisely as you please?" Before Sarah can challenge that assertion, he adds, "Besides, when you begged for my ring, you kissed me so sweetly, I was left quite powerless to
resist you." He is grinning as he says this last. "You are immensely charming when you're deep in your cups, if a bit tyrannical." He pauses for a moment before saying, "And those knees..." His voice trails off suggestively but the girl is too preoccupied to care.

_She had kissed him?_

Sarah shakes her head. She has no memory of any of these things. Then a thought strikes her. Does this alleged kiss have anything to do with Jareth's mood being so... _unmoody_? She doesn't get the chance to ask. She's not sure she wants to know the answer, anyway.

"Now, dress yourself, and be quick. The ambassadors are waiting, and it won't do to leave them all together without supervision for too long, unless you wish to be responsible for reigniting the talk of war." He walks to the door, saying, "After the enormous amount of work we've put into this treaty, I would certainly hate for it to end up being known as _The Thirteen Hours Accord._" Before he can exit, Sarah stops him.

"Jareth?"

"Yes, precious?"

She looks at the king sheepishly.

_How could she have done this? She has legally obligated several adversarial kingdoms to tour the most unstable part of the Labyrinth, where, at this precise moment, Ludo is in the midst of sensitive negotiations, hoping to establish even the most fragile peace between the troll tribes._

"Do you think... would you be able to..."

The Goblin King raises his perfectly sculpted brows and leans against her doorframe, hands on his hips. Somehow, his intricate lace cuffs do not look ridiculous.

"Will you come with me?" She hates how small and pleading her voice sounds, but it perfectly reflects how she feels. Sarah holds her breath, awaiting his answer.

Jareth smiles warmly. "Of course, my dear. I'd be delighted."

She exhales, and her relief is nearly a palpable thing.

Sometimes, Sarah thinks she really does love the Goblin King.
“Sarah, tell me about the baby.”

Sarah has been staring off, looking at the patch of white-painted wall just beyond Dr. Prevarant’s left ear, her gaze unfocused. At the sound of his voice, at that request, her eyes harden, and she glares at him.

“What baby?” Her voice is low and her question sounds more like a dare.

“Whichever baby you wish to talk about.”

Toby?

The toddler who had come to the dayroom and disturbed her peace?

The baby whose crib she could not avoid in her dreams?

There is something vicious in her smile as she smirks at her psychiatrist. Her head is bowed slightly, and she squints a little, looking up at him through her lashes.

“The dayroom is no place for infants. They could…” Here, she looks off, up and to her left, as if considering her next words. “They could get hurt,” she finally says, flicking her eyes back to the doctor’s. Blue. Green. Hazel.

“Brooksong has a policy allowing any family member to visit a patient not in lockdown once a week, you know that, Sarah. That includes infants and toddlers.” His voice is infuriatingly moderate; reasonable. And so, so patient. It makes her flesh crawl. “And the dayroom is the only approved place for visitation.”

No one has ever visited her. Not in the dayroom. Not anywhere.

She changes tactics then. Her face rearranges itself into a new mask. Not menacing. Sympathetic. Compassionate. She tries very hard to look as though she cares.

“But he fell down,” she says then, her voice soft, her gaze even softer. Her breath hitches a little. “He hurt his knees. He cried.” She looks as though she might cry herself.

She can’t remember the last time she cried. When her mother left? No, it was after that. Maybe that time Karen brought her to the doctor. She had certainly cried then.

“I doubt he was seriously hurt, Sarah. Children fall all the time, especially when they’re learning to walk.” Dr. Prevarant leans forward slightly in his chair. “Is that what upset you? You were worried the baby was hurt?” He picks up his pen and jots a quick note in her chart as he waits for her answer.

It was the wailing. The red-faced squalling. The horrid little monster couldn’t shut himself up and screamed and screamed until all she had wanted to do was…

“Goblin king, goblin king, wherever you may be,” she whispers, so quietly, it almost sounds like breathing.

“What was that?”

“I wasn’t upset,” Sarah says, sniffing.
“You screamed so much that you had to be removed from the room. You had to be sedated. Don’t you remember that, Sarah?”

*What a stupid question. Of course she remembers that.*

“No.”

Dr. Prevarant sighs, then nods, making another note in her chart.

“Would you like to talk about any other babies?” he prompts after a moment.

Sarah shrugs, looking down at her fingernails. They’ve started to grow out. She isn’t chewing them anymore. She wants to, she just doesn’t. Dr. Prevarant says it’s her meds; that they’re working. She knows different. It’s not her meds.

*It’s discipline.*

She knows if she can stop chewing her fingernails, she can stop doing anything.

*She can stop walking toward that crib every time she closes her eyes.*

“Think hard, Sarah. Think carefully. You know your time here is short, and when you’re gone, I can’t help you anymore.”

Sarah shakes her head and wraps her arms around her middle, drawing her eyebrows together, staring down at the surface of Dr. Prevarant’s fake mahogany desk.

“Well, then,” he says, clearing his throat. He opens a drawer, the center drawer of his desk, and takes out a piece of paper, carefully setting it between them. He uses both hands to turn the paper, so the girl can see what’s on it.

*What’s been drawn upon it.*

It’s a picture, done in red marker.

A gloved hand, holding a crystal orb.

She flinches.

“Where’d you get that?” she hisses, forgetting her mask for a moment.

“Ms. Langley showed it to me in our weekly meeting.”

“That nosy bitch. She had no right!”

“Sarah, you know all the therapists discuss mutual patients with me at our team meetings. I need more information than I can get from our one-on-one sessions to know how you’re progressing. This isn’t some new practice.”

Sarah’s fingers curl into her palms, her newly elongated nails digging into the skin there.

“She had no right,” the girl insists hoarsely, staring down at the picture. The red orb almost seems to shimmer in the harsh light of the fluorescent bulbs overhead. “It’s mine.”

Dr. Prevarant nods. “I know it’s yours. I’d like to discuss it with you.”
Sarah stares at it, at the simple rendering, trying to recall when she’d drawn it; what she’d been thinking at the time. She was usually more careful, and her art less obvious. The earlier part of her week is a fog, though. It must’ve been then that she’s done it. She has a vague recollection: a stupid preschool craft, smashed flat; Lyric Langley placing a sheet of blank drawing paper in front of her and walking away; Luke handing her a marker.

Red. How apropos.

She looks at the doctor expectantly, saying nothing. If he wants to discuss it, let him discuss it.

Dr. Prevarant has removed his long fingers from the paper. He is leaning back in his seat and his white hands are now resting on the arms of his chair, a rolling leather wingback that looks very executive.

To match the executive fake mahogany desk and bookshelves, she thinks, suppressing a snicker. To match the executive man. He certainly looks the part. She stares across that wide desk, taking in the crispness of the doctor’s lapels. His white coat appears freshly pressed. Sarah thinks if she leans in and breathes deep, she might detect the faint scent of spray starch. She wonders if he does his own ironing. Or, maybe a wife?

No, that couldn’t be right. Not him. If he had a wife, he’d be too busy to bother with this whole charade. J. Prevarant M.D. spent far too much time torturing her to think he had much else going on in his life at the moment. Her eyes drop down to the picture again and her imagination fills in the background for her, painting the details of the scene just out of frame. No, there was no wife to do his ironing, but perhaps goblin servants…

“What do you think of when you see this picture, Sarah?” The doctor’s words startle her, pulling her from her contemplations.

She blinks and snorts a little, quietly, but he hears it. She can tell by the way the corners of his mouth twitch, then still.

“I think of how art therapy is an annoying waste of time.”

“What were you thinking when you drew it?” he persists with remarkable forbearance, bringing his two hands together then, interlacing his fingers loosely and settling them on his desk before him. His forehead wrinkles slightly and there is the subtlest tilt of his head as he awaits her response. His posture and expression give the impression of keen interest; of professional caring.

He’s very good, Sarah thinks.

She can give an impression, too. An impression of thoughtful consideration; of agreeable cooperation. She tilts her own head and blinks, looking up at the wall above the doctor’s head as if trying very hard to recall something. She makes a soft humming noise as she studies his medical school diploma for a moment.

“I was thinking…” Here, she looks back at Dr. Prevarant, locking her gaze with his own. She smiles. “I was thinking I wished I could go to sleep. That was right after you changed my meds again. I was sleepy all the time. I fell asleep sitting up in the art room. You know how the therapists hate that.” Her smile broadens then. “No worries, though, doc. It’s so much better now.” She leans forward and in an exaggerated stage whisper, adds, “I’m wide awake.”

He scribbles something in her chart. Sarah’s eyes flick down quickly as he finishes. It’s a phrase, but his hand blocks most of it. The only words she can make out are ‘prevaricating’ and ‘avoidant.’
“I’m so much better,” she emphasizes, settling back in her chair. “No more side effects.” She looks comfortable; sincere; the very picture of progress.

Of therapeutic success.

The doctor regards her for a moment, taking in her demeanor. He makes a sound, a sort of noncommittal, ‘hmm,’ before reaching into the hip pocket of his white coat and fishing for something. After a moment, he draws out a small keyring, four or five keys jangling together as he inspects the collection, looking for the one he wants. The sound seems to unmask Sarah’s old motor tic and she blinks hard once, then winks her right eye. She can’t be certain, but she thinks Dr. Prevarant is too occupied with his task to notice. He’s located the correct key and has used it to unlock a drawer to his left, at knee level.

Leaning over, the psychiatrist reaches into the drawer and seems to sift through a few items inside. Finally, he pulls one out and places it on his desk, setting it overtop of Sarah’s drawing. It’s a book with a hard cover, black, with no title embossed there. A journal or sketchbook, if she had to guess about it. Then she sees something on the cover which catches her attention.

Stickers.

Very specific, very familiar stickers, small and peeling slightly. They line the right lower edge of the cover and they spell out a name.

Her name.

All pretense of thoughtful consideration and cooperation flies out the window.

“Where did you get that?” the girl hisses. The doctor doesn’t answer. He merely opens the cover and begins to turn the pages, searching for something. The sound of the paper leaves grating against each other as he flips rapidly through the book seems to almost stab her eardrums. It’s painful. Sarah stifles the urge to slap her hands over her ears like a toddler startled by the vacuum cleaner.

Dr. Prevarant finds what he is looking for and turns the book around so it’s facing her in its correct orientation, just as he’d done with her drawing earlier. The girl’s eyes drift down and she sees the pages displayed before her. On the first, there is another drawing, much like the one which is hidden now beneath the book, only this one is rendered in pencil, not marker, black rather than red, with richer detail; more subtle shading. The subject, however, is the same: a gloved hand, holding a crystal orb.

The ball has a depth to it, and it appears to be spinning.

Despite her surprise and irritation at being so unexpectedly confronted by her forgotten sketch, she smiles a little at her own skill. She couldn’t have been older than sixteen when she’d drawn it, with no formal art training whatsoever, beyond the hour a week she’d spent making bright flowers with finger paints on butcher’s paper or forming simple animals with modeling clay in her elementary school’s art class. Still, there is an undeniable life-like quality to the picture. It almost looks as if she can reach out and take the ball from the gloved hand.

And if she did, she’s sure she could gaze into it, and see her dreams.

“Do you notice anything about this drawing, Sarah?” Dr. Prevarant inquires, tapping the index finger of his right hand on the edge of the picture.

“It’s incredibly detailed,” she replies, leaning forward to admire her own work. The doctor’s lips make a thin line then and his finger slides across the paper to the next page.
“You had quite a bit to say here about this drawing,” he says. His finger is now resting on cramped writing, too small for her to read well from her vantage point. The entire page is filled with line after line of tight, upright cursive, the words so close together that it is difficult to say where one ends and the next begins.

She is immediately defensive. “I don’t remember any of that.”

*She does.*

“You write about the baby here,” the doctor observes, his finger gliding along a line near the middle of the page.

Sarah shakes her head in denial, but says nothing.

“You say that you wished he were gone but regretted it.”

Her bottom lip has begun to tremble. She bites it to make it stop.

“You write that you were offered a choice.”

The girl squeezes her eyes shut and rocks slightly. A thought plays in her head, over and over; a correction to the doctor’s interpretation of what she’d written so long ago. *I didn’t wish he were gone, I wished him gone.*

“Here, you say that you traded your dreams for the baby.”

“Stop,” Sarah moans, her eyes opening to plead with him. “It wasn’t like that! You don’t understand!”

Dr. Prevarant sets his pen down on the desk and sits back in his chair. “Then what was it like, Sarah? Tell me.”

Her breathing has become heavy, harsh and forced, and she sits upright, her back stiff. She reaches out and grips the edge of her psychiatrist’s desk, pressing her fingertips into it so forcefully that her nailbeds go from pink to white.

“You make it sound like I’m some resentful teenager. Like I’m selfish and awful! *Oh, poor me, I have to give up my stupid girly dreams for this baby.* It wasn’t like that! I did it to *save* him! *I saved* him!”

The doctor’s voice is steady, nonconfrontational, as if he is nothing more than a disinterested observer. “What did you save him from, Sarah?”

His feigned innocence sets her teeth on edge. Her lips pull back in a snarl and in an instant, she’s up, leaning as far over the desk as she can to stare into his changeable eyes. *No human has eyes like that. Everyone here is blind not to see it.*

“For you!” she screams. “I saved him from you!”

She hears their laughter then, goblin laughter, raspy and cruel, but when she whips her head this way and that, they scurry away, hiding in corners and behind furniture, snickering hatefully.

“Sarah!” Dr. Prevarant barks, pushing his chair back until it meets the wall and standing himself. He is out of her reach then. “This behavior is unacceptable!”

“Stealing babies is unacceptable, Jareth!” She’s screaming when Sam and another orderly burst into
the room. “Preying on young girls is unacceptable!” She feels their arms hook around hers and she is dragged back, away from the Goblin King.

The doctor is ignoring her at this point and gives instructions to the orderlies.

“Take her to her room. Let her nurse know I’m writing new orders right now.”

“Yes, doctor,” Sam replies as he and his partner pull her across the room. She’s kicking and fighting, still screeching at the man on the other side of the desk.

“Tell them who you are! Say it, you coward! Tell them!”

Dr. Prevarant says nothing. He merely stares after her, and his eyes look alternately blue, then green, then hazel. As Sarah is pulled through the door, she sees him glance down at her opened sketchbook, and though she cannot be certain, she thinks she sees a hint of a smile forming on his lips as he stares down at the gloved hand twirling the crystal ball.
The Lesson of Opium

She’s standing in the room with the crib. It's her father's room; the room he shares with Karen, her stepmother. Everything is still at the moment, including Sarah herself. She's frozen in place, watching; waiting. She doesn't know how she got here; it's not where she wants to be, but it's where she is. It's nighttime. The lights are out, save for the faint glow of a lamp in the hallway behind her. A storm has blown up outside and it rages with a fury which is frightening in its intensity.

*Always that same storm, sudden and severe, the sort of storm that carries within it its own innate warning.*

*The sort of storm that brings with it more than just rain and wind.*

The intermittent crack of the lightning and the rumble of the thunder are the only sounds she hears apart from her own hitching breaths.

Apart from the dull thudding of her heart beneath her breast.

*That's just imagination,* she tells herself, though she is not at all sure of what she's asserting. *A human heart doesn’t beat that loud. The naked ear can’t detect it buried beneath muscle and bone.*

In between it all, in between the lightning and thunder and apprehensive breaths, in between the rhythmic pounding of her heart which beats against her ribs like a march played in double time, there is silence. The quiet is strange; heavy; complete.

*Wrong.*

The lightning is so bright, it feels as though it sears her retinas each time it strikes, irradiating the objects around her, obliterating the darkness in sudden, violent bursts. She tries to squint against it, the blinding white of it, but she's too slow. The room is already dim and gray again before she succeeds in closing her sluggish lids. It leaves her with the floating green ghosts of her surroundings, dying a little at a time. The furniture, the windows, the framed prints decorating the walls, their electric phantoms fade with each subsequent blink of her eyes, and then they are no more, until the next transient tentacle burns its path from the sky to the ground with an ear-piercing crash.

*She had once stared at the sun during an eclipse. It was only for a second or two, a foolish impulse she was powerless to resist in her naïveté. Her father had placed his broad palm over her eyes protectively, quickly, when he'd seen her peering over the top of the special glasses the school had given their young students, but that brief moment had been enough. After that, the sun had appeared wherever she looked, for nearly an hour, its fiery shape superimposed over the landscape, and her father’s chest, and the wallpaper in her room, and even her face when she'd tried to check her eyes for damage in the mirror of her vanity table.*

It's not the image of the sun which plagues her now, insinuating itself into whatever scene her gaze may behold, like a celluloid film negative held up to her unblinking eye. No, it's not the sun she sees.

It's the crib.

That flashing impression drawn by the lightning, lingering in the dark, fading bit by bit until it disappears, only to be resurrected, again and again.

*She looks at the crib across from her; that quiet crib, painted in shades of black and gray by the stormy night and the dark room, until another bolt of lightning outlines it in harsh luminosity.*
"I wish..."

No, no, no, she thinks, but does not say. This time she'll stop herself. She'll stop in time.

She is walking toward the crib and she can't make her feet stop. She tries, she strains to do it, but she can't. Her steps draw her closer to it even though she wants nothing more than to run in the opposite direction. Don't! she wants to command herself, but her lips won't part to release the word her tongue won't move to shape. And then, she's there. Just like that, she's there, her thighs touching the slats of the crib's front panel and it doesn't matter if they are black or gray or ghostly green.

It doesn't matter if they are glaringly white.

Slowly, carefully, she wraps her fingers around the top rail. It's raised all the way up, and locked in place. For safety.

Safety!

She would choke on her laughter if her lips and tongue weren't too frozen to make such sounds.

She grasps the crib rail with a strength that makes her ache deep in her bones. Lightning strikes at that moment, illuminating the room and everything in it in a single, electric instant, bright as the day. She tries not to look, but her eyes still will not close fast enough, and so she sees.

She sees what's in the crib.

The patterned baby blanket, so carefully chosen, and the sheets, oh, the sheets!

(Tiny whales, cartoonish and smiling. Happy.)

Red and blue and gold and green.

Her face contorts in a silent, anguished cry. She cannot unsee it, what's in the crib.

And she cannot unsee what isn't.

I wish I wish I wish...

But she hadn't said her right words. Not this time, not really. Not all of them. So, why? Why?

Sarah is caught somewhere between her nightmare and a panicked wakefulness, and she screams and screams, thrashing in her bed while her fingers clutch at her cool sheets. She grips them as though she is afraid she will fall to her death if she lets them go. Jareth is there in an instant.

"Shh," he soothes, his long fingers slipping into her hair, cradling her head. "I'm here, my darling girl."

Sarah is gasping and trembling, and she says the same thing, over and over.

"I didn't mean it. I didn't mean it. I didn't mean it."

"It isn't real, Sarah. Open your eyes."

"I didn't mean it, I didn't! I didn't mean it," she babbles, her eyes still squeezed tightly shut.

"It was a dream, precious. Just a bad dream."
She sits up, looking wildly around, and insists, "I didn't mean it! I wouldn't wish him away. Not again!" A sob escapes her throat.

"I know," the Goblin King tells her. He settles next to her on her bed and pulls her closer to him. "I know."

Slowly, her panting abates and Sarah relaxes against Jareth, shivering.

"I'm stupid," she laments, now fully awake. She reaches up to wipe away the next tear that threatens to fall. "Like a child."

"No, darling, you're not stupid," he tells her, but then chastises her softly. "You have nothing to fear. Not here. You know this!"

"Do I?" The girl shuts her eyes, pushing away the image that seems reluctant to fade from her mind.

Red and blue and gold and green.

"Yes, you do. You're safe here. Nothing can harm you," he murmurs, rocking her slightly. "You know I will always protect you. There is no need for these nightmares."

She sits up then, pulling from his grasp and straightening her shoulders. "Do you think I want them? That I seek them out?" Anger tinges her words.

The king sighs, grasping her chin gently in his one hand, tipping her face up so he can look her in the eye. "You should not torment yourself, Sarah. You can choose…"

"Choose," she repeats, and her disbelief is evident in her voice.

"While you are under my protection, you have no reason to fear," he assures her. "I will always guard you against the bad things. All of them."

Sarah slumps and turns her face so that her chin slips from the king's grip, hanging her head before she whispers a question.

"How can you protect me from myself?"

The king's eyes narrow in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, what if I'm the bad thing?"

Jareth snatches her closer to him then, his fingers digging almost painfully into her scalp, her back.

"You're not," he declares gruffly, and though Sarah cannot see his face, she can well imagine his expression. "You're not, and I'll eat the liver of anyone who says otherwise."

The girl nods against his chest. She isn't sure why she should believe him, she only knows that she does. His promise is monstrous, and frightening, and it fills her with a sense of satisfaction so complete, it almost seems unreal.

The king spends the next hour murmuring words of comfort into the queen's ear. He says Sarah is simply over-tired; that she's been placed in difficult circumstances with the near-war in the center of the Labyrinth, with the near-war at their borders, and the stress of her royal duties has manifested as a disturbing dream.

"That's all this is," he tells her, stroking her cheek gently with the back of his hand.
He does not acknowledge that this is not the first time she's had this dream, and neither does she.

He urges her to rest. He says that sleep will do her a world of good. And when she is unable to close her eyes without seeing the ghost of the crib behind her lids (the shape of it floating in the darkness as though it were the sun and she had stared at it too long), the Goblin King conjures a crystal which he shapes into a cordial glass containing a colorless draft, a small amount she can finish in two small sips.

"What will it do?" the girl asks softly as she reaches for what he offers her.

"Nothing more than give you a deep and dreamless sleep."

And it does.

When she finally awakes, she feels refreshed and her dream has faded enough that she can barely recall she has even had it. She certainly cannot remember what about it had upset her so much. She'd been standing in her parents' empty room, and it was raining. Hardly the stuff of nightmares, she thinks, laughing a little to herself. Goblins stream into the room then and distract her from her thoughts as they set about making her look regal.

She'd slept through breakfast, but the king joins her for luncheon, along with Lord Draimen, Vergess Trindlebark, and Sir Didymus. It's odd company, she thinks: the king's war chief, Minister of Justice, and head of royal security (amongst his other duties), making small talk in the grand dining room over their cold salmon, roasted fowl, and a selection of spring vegetables from the royal garden. The queen takes a sip from her water glass (the others are drinking wine, a dry white with their salmon and a beautiful Bordeaux with their pheasant, but Sarah has refused anything but hot tea and water since the incident with the bubbling fairy wine fountain). She swallows the water and clears her throat.

"Perhaps it's time to explain why you're all here," she suggests. "Am I being deposed? Arrested? What?"

Jareth bursts out laughing at this while the Honourable Vergess Trindlebark chokes a bit on his asparagus and fiddlehead salad, coughing rather forcefully to clear his airway. Sir Didymus' furry face dissolves into an expression of alarm as he regards his queen.

"Oh, my gracious, no!" the fox-terrier exclaims. "I would never betray your majesty that way."

Sarah notices her loyal knight does not presume to speak for the others here.

Only Lord Draimen seems unaffected. He gazes at Sarah with his yellow eyes, appraising her openly. She finds it unnerving.

"Then what is it?" the girl demands, ignoring the dark wolf who sits to Jareth's right.

"I do apologize for the need to involve our advisors in this matter, my dear. It was not my original intention, but our time grows so short, I'm afraid I have no other choice," Jareth explains.

"It was not your original intention," the queen repeats slowly, her confusion apparent.

"They each have a unique perspective on the laws and customs of this land," he continues, "and I felt having them here, perhaps to speak to their areas of expertise, would be helpful." The Goblin King looks at the girl, then adds, "Should you have questions."

"Should I have questions…" Sarah's apprehension grows. "What are you talking about, Jareth?"
"You'll recall that before our attentions were diverted to important diplomatic matters, we were discussing your upcoming birthday."

"Yes." In truth, she'd wondered about Jareth's intentions in bringing up her birthday for a day or two after they'd breakfasted in his private dining room, but shortly thereafter, she'd brushed it from her mind. They'd both been busy then, and had not found time to continue their conversation. She had become immersed in the business of the Labyrinth, as usual. Then there was the precarious dance she'd been forced into while the peace accords were being negotiated between the coastal kingdoms and the mountain clans. It had all left her little time to give the matter of her birthday (and Jareth's preoccupation with it) much thought. And then, she'd simply forgotten.

"There are some ramifications of your achieving the age of majority," the king tells her. "Ramifications we've not had to deal with in recent memory…"

"Ever," Vergess Trindlebark corrects. "Not in our recorded history, anyway."

"Yes, thank you, Vergess," Jareth says sourly, glowering a little at his law advisor. "As I was saying, we've no experience with these… consequences… owing to the fact that humans are…" Here, he pauses, seeming to consider his words carefully, trying to say what needs saying without giving offense.

"Humans have not been welcomed in our society," Lord Draimen drawls helpfully, relieving the king of the burden of completing his thought. The wolf's deep voice rumbles as he speaks, and he studies the queen for a moment before adding, "Traditionally."

A line forms between Sarah's eyebrows as she pinches them together, mulling the wolf's words. When she speaks, it's haltingly, as if she is working through a problem.

"But… I'm human, and I've been here for…"

"Yes, my dear, but you are a child," the king says softly. Sarah bristles at that, but she knows it's technically true.


"Precious, do you recall the morning we began this discussion?"

Sarah's head fills with the images from that breakfast. Sunlight streaming through the crystal prisms of a chandelier, beams breaking apart into twinkling starbursts, bright and wonderful and hypnotic. So much soft white all around her: the walls, the table, the dishes, the draperies, her own dress. The very air seemed soft and white. It was like a dream. And there had been just one point of color, brilliantly red berries in a bowl of white milk glass, with long, elegant fingers reaching in to pluck one from among the many. That ripe berry was brought to a mouth, his mouth, lips parted, teeth bared to take that first, sweet bite, the mere act of it hypnotic in its own way.

"Yes," she replies hoarsely, looking down her plate, hoping the heat creeping up her neck isn't detectible to the king's eyes, or those of his advisors.

"I told you that my kingdom is sustained, at least in part, by the beliefs of children."

"I recall the discussion." She eyes Lord Draimen defiantly then. "Ironic, isn't it? That this kingdom relies so heavily on humans when we aren't even welcome in this society?" Sarah smirks a little, then tacks on a sneering, "Traditionally."
Lord Draimen's countenance remains dispassionate as he responds to the queen. "No slight was meant, your majesty, but you must understand, the iron in your blood alone is enough to…"

"Draimen!" the king barks, giving the wolf a withering look.

"I do beg your pardon, sire," the wolf lord says, bowing his head in deference to his sovereign. Sarah glares at him, and then at Jareth. In return, the king gives her a pleading look and it catches her off her guard.

"Sarah, you must understand, you are the first human who has ever solved the Labyrinth. And you're the only human who has ever chosen to return to this realm; the only one who even could return."

"It's true, your majesty." Sir Didymus is looking at his queen as he speaks, nodding his head in agreement with the Goblin King. "There have been laws regarding humans in the Goblin Realm for many centuries, but we have never needed to consider them. Until now."

Sarah bites her lip, looking troubled. She glances at the king's advisors, then at her own loyal knight before finally settling her gaze on Jareth.

"I don't understand what you're trying to say." Her words are barely more than a whisper, but the king comprehends her well enough.

"May I speak plainly?" he inquires.

"Please," she says. "I wish you would."

Jareth takes a deep breath before he explains. "On your eighteenth birthday, you will be expelled from the Goblin Realm, transported back to your own world and never allowed to return, unless you bind yourself to this kingdom."

The girl's head spins. Expelled? Never to return?

"But… the Labyrinth…"

"It will crumble, your majesty," Sir Didymus says sadly. "In short order. And all those within its walls will perish."

Sarah's shoulders slump and she stares at her half-eaten salmon. "I don't understand," she murmurs. "I've been here all this time. No one cared until now."

Lord Draimen looks as if he wishes to say that indeed, there are those who have cared, but one pointed glare from Jareth keeps the wolf from opening his mouth to speak. Sarah misses the silent exchange because she is still frowning at her food.

"In the same way that the beliefs and fears of human children preserve your labyrinth and the wider realm, the skepticism and practicality of human adults drain them. Rapidly," the king tells her. "Dangerously so."

"But… I believe!" the girl cries, gripping the edge of the table with enough force to turn her fingers white. "Why should I be punished? And why should those in my Labyrinth suffer? I'm not skeptical. I believe!"

"It's no judgement of you personally, your majesty," Vergess Trindlebark remarks in an attempt to reassure her.
"It certainly feels personal," she growls.

"Your belief is not the issue here," Trindlebark continues in a tone which can best be described as conciliatory. The chief law advisor is a man who does not relish conflict, particularly with a ruling monarch. "We speak of it only to explain why such laws came into being. The fact of your belief is immaterial to the problem, my queen. The law is the law, and we are all bound by it."

"I'm afraid he's right, your majesty," Sir Didymus says apologetically. "We've had a score of justices poring over the written code for at least a fortnight, trying to find some way around it, but there is none to be had. The law is quite clear in this instance."

"Laws can be changed," she tries.

Jareth shakes his head. "Perhaps in your world, Sarah, but here, it's not a matter of a referendum or an executive order. There is magic involved, and that is no small thing to undo."

The girl thinks to ask Jareth how he knows so much about the inner workings of a representative democracy, but decides that's less important than figuring a way out of her current mess. As she understands it, she will be eighteen soon, and therefore an adult, a fact which apparently means her world will come crashing down.

Quite literally.

"You can reorder time!" She gasps with the realization, looking hopefully up at the Goblin King. "I don't have to turn eighteen!"

The king's expression is decidedly melancholy at her suggestion. "I could," he admits, "once. Or twice. Perhaps a few times. But it's a temporary solution at best, and one that has its own repercussions and challenges."

"One that would threaten our newly signed peace treaties before the ink on them is even dry," the black wolf warns.

"What? Why? What has any of this to do with the peace treaties?" the girl presses, irritated that her every solution seems to have some flaw which cannot be overcome.

"The why of it isn't important. The only thing which is important is that Lord Draimen speaks the truth," Jareth assures the queen. "Reordering time is not something we should consider here. The reward would be short-lived, and long term… well, it wouldn't do any of us any good."

"Then what, Jareth?" Sarah moans, exasperated. "What am I to do?"

The Goblin King gives her a pitying look, and it makes her angry. She does not want his pity, she wants a resolution! The queen tries to shake her worries and doubts so that she can find an answer. She stares off, concentrating on what Jareth has told her so far, and then her eyes snap into focus and she looks at the king, speaking in a rush.

"You said I could bind myself to this world. What does that mean? What would I need to do?"

Jareth hesitates, but only for a moment, then replies, "Practically speaking, it means you would give up your ability to return to your own world at will; that this would become your world."

The queen blanches, but then nods. She could've guessed as much. "This has been my home for well over two years now," she says softly, trying to convince herself that this condition is not so terrible. She's not been home during the entirety of her reign, but just knowing that she can go, whenever she
wants, provides her some comfort. She bites her lip, deciding that she can give up that comfort, if it means saving the Labyrinth.

As he watches her fear, and her uncertainty, and then her resolve play out in her expression, the king adds quietly, "And it also means you would have to renounce your humanity."

The queen scrunches her nose. "Renounce my humanity? I don't even know what that means. How can I renounce what I am?"

"By becoming something else entirely," Draimen answers, and at his tone, Sarah feels sick to her stomach. She swallows down the bile that burns her throat. Jareth watches her keenly.

"Something else entirely… like… a… a goblin?" she breathes.

"No, my dear, not a goblin. Nothing so extreme as that. You would hardly notice a difference," Jareth soothes. "It's a simple tincture, and, once consumed, it would prevent the magic of the realm from expelling you."

A million questions swirl in her head then. Questions about the tincture, what it is made of, what it would do to her, and why it even works. Questions about what will happen if she doesn't consume it, and how exactly the magic of the realm will affect her if it expels her. Questions about the Labyrinth, and how it might change if she herself changes. Questions about how she will change, if she renounces her humanity. She can hardly believe she is having to consider all these things now, but she is, and there's nothing to be done for it. All these questions and more dance on her tongue, begging to be asked, but a clarification by Jareth's law advisor erases all these queries from her mind for the moment.

"Of course, before you can be allowed to consume the tincture, we must have your unbreakable pledge," Vergess Trindlebark says matter-of-factly. "The contract must be signed and sealed with an oath of blood."

"Unbreakable pledge? Contract?" The girl looks at each of the advisors, confusion once again marring her features, then her eyes turn to the king suspiciously. "What contract?"

Jareth regards the queen for a moment, his face lacking all its typical mockery and arrogance and amusement. His changeable eyes do not sparkle with delight, or ire, or indulgence for once. His perfect brows do not raise or furrow to hint at his emotion. He is utterly serious and utterly sober as he pronounces his next words.

"A marriage contract, precious. If you wish to stay in my kingdom, if you wish to save your Labyrinth from destruction, you must sign it. You must swear a blood oath." Jareth leans forward, his gloved palms placed flat against the surface of the table as he stares down its length at the Queen of the Labyrinth. He watches as the girl swallows, his gaze trailing up her white throat, over her lips, and to her own startled eyes before he says, "You must agree to marry me, Sarah."
Fairy Tales

Sarah's vision flickers as if she is a starlet caught in the frenzied flashes of paparazzi cameras while walking the red carpet. She thinks it must be happening in her head, this rapid alternating of dark and bright, because no one around her seems bothered by it. No one else seems to think that lightning is striking in the dayroom, or across the stark and wide hallways, or over the nurses' station. She squints, but the action does nothing to calm the phosphorescent bolts that materialize around her with little warning.

The meds, Sarah realizes, but it's not really the medications so much as her withdrawal from them. She'd been told this might happen, a long time ago, by the first doctor who had ever written her prescriptions. Not Dr. Prevarant. Not even Dr. Penrose with his strange, nonsensical tattoos. It was the one before him. She is having trouble calling up his name, but she supposes it isn't terribly important, anyway. He'd told her that she should never abruptly stop her meds; that there would be unpleasant side effects if she did.

He'd told her that hers were meds which were meant to be weaned.

Despite being fully aware of this fact, she has been secretly retching her pills up in the bathroom for several days now. The notion had come to her come in a strange, recurrent dream.

In it, she comes face to face with herself, only it is her in a different time; in a different world. This different-her is wearing a gown that glimmers and shines like stars in the night sky, silvery white, with extravagantly full skirts and long sleeves that stand stiffly out from her shoulders and arms; a beautiful ball gown. She finds herself amid a raucous crowd filled with masked revelers clad in glamorous clothes and dripping with ostentatious jewels. As she paces slowly around, searching and uncertain, this throng of party goers parts, making way for her unbidden, and she suddenly finds herself confronted by her mirror image.

After the briefest of pauses, Sarah, the other Sarah, takes hold of her hands abruptly, telling her, "The bad thing is inside of you." She stares into her own eyes, green and fathomless, and tries to understand what is meant by those words. Her own words. She doesn't have much time to work it out. The Goblin King approaches, smiling at her, the interloper, as he takes the white-clad version of her in his arms, whisking her away into a mad, twirling dance.

The next night, her dream is nearly the same, only this time, dream-Sarah is wearing a lavish gown of blue and gold and green, a garish necklace of red rubies clutching at her throat and cascading down to her chest.

"The bad thing is inside of you," her dream-self insists before Jareth approaches and pulls her into his arms. Sarah watches the king lead the other Sarah away and when she awakens in her narrow bed at Brooksong, she realizes what it is she has been trying to tell herself.

'They are poisoning me.'

The realization hits her and she can no longer deny it. The bad thing which is inside of her, she has put it there. She continues to put it there without protest. It is red, and it is blue. It is gold and green. It is offered to her in little paper cups twice a day, under the watchful eye of a woman in white who insists Sarah sip cool water through a straw. The woman nods her encouragement as the patient swallows.

The woman nods, and down go the poisons which incarcerate Sarah's body and mind and will.
The reality of her existence comes crashing down on her then.

She is Aurora, her blood tainted by the prick of a cursed spindle on a spinning wheel. She sleeps for one hundred years; one thousand; insensible; imprisoned inside of her own dream, but no one is coming to awaken her with a kiss.

She is Snow White, done in by a single bite of an apple, her glass coffin undisturbed by any charming prince bent on her resurrection.

She is undeniably under a spell, but unlike the fairy tales, it is up to her to break it herself.

And so, she does.

Mandy's distaste for her notwithstanding, Sarah has managed to befriend a number of residents of the behavioral health center during her time here. The constant stream of bulimics enrolling in and working through Brooksong's eating disorder program have lent her their considerable expertise. Though she's never had cause to utilize their lessons before, she now feels she has no other choice. They dull and weaken her, these little pills, and she needs to be clear. She needs to be strong.

How can she outsmart him if she keeps allowing him to shackle her with chemicals? He's trapped her in this dream, this nightmare, and she has come to realize she has been his accomplice; that her cooperation has tightened her bonds. He has made her complicit in her own captivity. She decides she can't afford such a handicap. Not if she's to free herself.

She must rebel.

Red and blue and gold and green.

She watches as the colorful capsules and tablets sink through the floating foam and half-digested bits of her breakfast, drifting to the bottom of the toilet bowl. Sarah wipes her mouth with the back of her hand, swallowing hard against the acidic scratchiness in the back of her throat. She sniffs and straightens before flushing the evidence away.

The electric shocks which rip through her head and blaze across her vision are a known side effect of abruptly stopping certain psychiatric drugs, but she has no choice but to endure it. The headaches and the visual disturbances are a small price to pay for autonomy and power.

They are a small price to pay for the chance to escape.

Her time is so short.

Besides, she can't be entirely certain these really even are side effects. A part of her wonders if the flashes and streaks aren't simply proof that this illusory world is coming apart at its seams; visible evidence of the dissolution of a conjured fantasy; the consequence of magic fading, losing its grip on her; the result of the scales falling from her eyes.

Delicate crystal walls shattering beneath the force of a chair hurled against them in desperation.

Sarah walks down the shining hallway under buzzing fluorescent bulbs. Sam escorts her as he hums some jolly melody she doesn't recognize. The white walls and glittering travertine floors are made brighter every few seconds by the flashes in her head, behind her eyes. These flashes are growing more frequent; more intense. She grimaces but Sam takes no notice and she says nothing to indicate her discomfort. He's bringing her to her standing appointment with Dr. Prevarant; it's nearly one in the afternoon.
Today, between her exaggerated blinks, she has begun to hear the rasping titters of the goblins around her, but when she tries to turn and spy them, they scramble and hide. They are indecently fast and all she sees are the very edges of their shadows as they manage to slip behind doors or escape through ceiling tiles or hide behind the legs of orderlies and patients and nurses. Sarah grinds her teeth in frustration but she says nothing; does nothing. She lets them think she isn't aware of them at all.

*Let them tease and stalk, she thinks. I'm not giving them the satisfaction of acknowledging them.*

*In their world, acknowledgement is power. Belief is power. And she's had enough of goblin power. She will not cede more to them.*

Besides that, Sarah has bigger fish to fry, for what are a few wretched, sniggering goblins when weighed against their king?

"Here we are," Sam says, first knocking, then pushing Dr. Prevarant's door open for her. Sarah nods politely, but as she looks at the orderly, she cannot discern his expression to know if he's smiling or frowning or looking over her head into the distance. His face is obliterated by a searing burst of light at that moment, his features lost in the bright white that seems to radiate from behind her own skull in that instant.

She flinches.

"Go ahead," Sam urges, gently nudging her shoulder with his broad palm, directing her across the threshold and into the psychiatrist's office. She stumbles a little, unable to see the floor, but after a few seconds, her vision returns, crisp and sharp. She steadies herself, moving toward one of the chairs situated in front of the doctor's desk.

Her psychiatrist regards her for a second, then greets her almost hesitantly. "Hello, Sarah," he says. "Are you… feeling well today?"

"I'm fine," she lies automatically, taking a seat. Mentally, she grapples for a mask, any mask, but it feels as though all those she usually has available to her are beyond her reach. When she grasps for one, and then another, and then another, it's as if they slip through her fingers, no more solid than the very air in her grip as she curls her fist around it.

She blinks hard once, then twice. Dr. Prevarant's blonde hair glows as if lit from behind. She thinks he looks like he's been graced with a halo, just like the ones painted around the heads of Russian orthodox icons: mother Mary, or baby Jesus, or St. John the Baptist kneeling reverently before the son of God.

"You're no saint," the girl mutters sourly, looking away from her psychiatrist with a frown. She can feel his eyes appraising her as she studies the floor.

"What was that?"

"Nothing." Her voice is a low growl.

The doctor raises his eyebrows but does not press her any further for an answer. Instead, he leans back in his chair and watches her, waiting. She continues staring at a patch of carpet near the corner of his desk, making no sound, so finally, he addresses her again.

"Sarah, at the team meeting this morning, all of your therapists expressed concerns about you."
"Concerns," she spits derisively, cutting her eyes back toward his. The glow behind his head had faded. See? No kind of saint at all. "I'll bet."

"I wondered if you had any insight into the sort of things they might be noticing?"

Sure. They don't like that I'm refusing to take part in this charade anymore.

She thinks it, but what she says is, "Not really." Why should she do his job for him?

Dr. Prevarant's effort to stifle his sigh is not entirely successful.

"Lyric tells me you've been staring at your canvas and haven't touched it with a paint brush all week."

"I'm visualizing." She's not. "It's part of my artistic process." It isn't. "I don't want to start painting until I know for sure exactly what I want it to be." In truth, she suspects the goblins of sabotage. She's been inspecting the canvas for tell-tale signs they've been molesting it, looking for evidence of their dirty little fingerprints or scratches indicating they've gnawed on it with their needle-sharp teeth.

"Kathy says that for the last three group sessions, you've sat curled into the corner of the couch with your eyes closed and you haven't participated at all."

Today, Sarah had closed her eyes to block out the lightning which kept striking the center of their conversation circle, but the days prior, she'd done it so she wouldn't have to see the goblins silently taunting her, weaving their way around bungee chairs and bean bags in an odd, uncoordinated dance. One had hopped onto Mandy's shoulders and the idiot hadn't even noticed it! She was too busy complaining about the couch where Sarah and Luke were seated. As usual.

"Sometimes I need to block out the world. It helps me internalize and focus."

Shrink talk. He should like that.

"Focus on what, Sarah?"

"The things we discuss in group."

"And what things would those be?"

The girl sneers inwardly. Does he think he's caught me now? Does he think he's trapped me?

You'll have to do better than that, Jareth.

"The future, doctor," she replies, just enough angst in her voice to sound as if her thoughts from group therapy are still weighing heavily on her mind. "My future."

It's a safe guess. In one way or another, they always discuss their futures in group.

"And what is it about your future that troubles you, Sarah?"

Sarah desperately wishes for one of her masks, but her longing is brief. Before she can even properly lament her vulnerability, a visible electric zap seems to split the room, from one side to the other, cutting a path straight through her brain. The crackle is so loud, so harsh, her chest vibrates with it. It paralyzes her for a moment.

A storm, she thinks a bit wildly, eyes darting side to side to search for black clouds and hail. Only a
storm could explain such a violent burst. *The sort of storm that carries within it its own innate warning.*

"Sarah? Did you hear me?"

Dr. Prevarant's voice seems muffled; distant. Sarah blinks her emerald eyes slowly, pressing her lids together and opening her lips in a tiny 'O' before settling her gaze on the doctor's face. She stares at his mouth as it comes back into focus, his teeth looking sharper, more pointed than they have seemed before; sharper and more pointed than they *should* be. Her heart begins to race. She notices his eyes then. They glitter like onyx in firelight, all the green and blue and hazel inexplicably leeched from them.

*The waters of Antigua, yes, but at midnight instead of under the noonday sun.*

"Sarah!" The doctor's voice sounds alarmed now. The girl's breath hitches, but before she can answer him, scrabbling sounds behind the walls of the office disturb her train of thought. She can imagine the small claws and yellowed teeth and rough paws and scaly tails striking the studs and scratching at the plaster and the insulation behind it. She wonders how long it will take for the plaster to give way; for the goblins to create a hole large enough to gain admission to this room.

Her eyes flick to the fake mahogany bookcase to her right. There are faint whispers emanating from behind it. She cannot quite make out what the voices are saying. She thinks it might be something like, *'Say your right words.'*

"Sarah," Dr Prevarant calls to her cautiously then. His voice has gone soft; soothing and careful. His tone a lie which says he is concerned for her.

"What?" the girl hisses, pressing the index and middle finger of each hand hard against her temples. She thinks if she pushes firmly enough, she can dull the sounds of the goblins scampering and whispering, and maybe she can quell the burning flares which pierce her skull and repeatedly render her blind.

"Can you explain what's happening right now?" he asks.

Sarah's hands drop into her lap and she lifts her head so that she can look at the man seated across from her. She opens her mouth, ready to offer him another falsehood, but before she can, a jarring bolt of lightning crashes across her vision. It snakes its way toward Dr. Prevarant and stabs him directly through his forehead. It is a shocking thing to witness and she gasps, grasping at the edge of his desk and rising partially from her seat, mouth agape. For his part, the doctor is immediately engulfed in brilliance and heat, swallowed whole by a dazzling radiance. After a single second, the cocooning blaze is all she can perceive.

*To see it is like looking at a welder's arc. The girl can feel her retinas burning and closes her eyes.*

"Sarah."

Her name is uttered by a voice projecting from the molten center of a star. Dr. Prevarant is speaking, she thinks, but he sounds different somehow; less placid. Less soothing. More… *mocking?*

As she watches, the man shimmers back into view, the luminosity slowly cooling around him, revealing his new form. Gone is his neat ponytail. It has vanished, taking with it his white coat and his concerned expression. Gone also are the swiveling office chair, the plastic badge clipped to his breast pocket, and the expensive pen with which he makes all his notes. In their place stands something entirely *other.*
What remains is the King of the Goblin Realm.

His silvery blonde locks are now wild and unbound, defying gravity to sprout off his scalp like a ceremonial headdress. His body is clad in his black Goblin armor. His mouth shapes itself into a half-smile that does nothing to soften his eyes, giving him a look that can best be described as cruel. Sarah's eyes widen as she drinks him in. He is exactly as she remembers him, yet he is also somehow more.

So much more.

It's as if her memory has been unable to retain the totality of him and now, suddenly confronted with his presence, she realizes just how wan and thin her recollections have been.

"I knew it," she whispers, dropping slowly back into her seat. Sarah swallows, her brow wrinkling as she stares at Jareth. He is beautiful, and terrifying, all at once. Magic radiates from him like heat from the summer sun. Her cheeks flush under the intensity of it. She grabs her knees with her fingers to keep her palms from pressing themselves against her face in alarm. She knows this would be read as weakness and she does not wish to be seen as weak.

"What did you know, precious?" the king asks, and his smile morphs then, touched with curiosity. His expression rearranges itself as well. It becomes almost benevolent.

Almost.

"I knew it was you. This whole time, I knew."

Jareth raises his brows and smirks, giving a small snort of laughter. He claps his hands together in false delight. The sound of it seems to echo.

Like distant thunder.

"You knew it the whole time?" he purrs, and his voice resonates, thrumming against her ear drums and calling up memories of a time long past, when she was in his labyrinth and he had taunted and baited her. "Aren't you a clever girl!" He says it as if he believes her to be anything but clever. She ignores his tone and presses on.

"It's like you weren't even trying. Did you think a ponytail and a white coat would be enough to fool me?"

"What makes you believe I have any desire to deceive you?" The king arches an eyebrow, gazing down at Sarah in her seat.

"You can stop now. You aren't going to convince me this hasn't all been your doing. I've been onto your game since day one."

Jareth makes a tsking sound, shaking his head theatrically. "Well, that is disappointing. Have I made it so easy for you, little Sarah?"

"Easy? Keeping me a prisoner in this… this… nightmare?" she seethes. "You call that easy?"

Peals of high-pitched laughter break out then and she twists this way and that, looking all around the room. There are at least a dozen goblins in attendance now, jeering and hooting, hopping from one foot to the other. One sniffs at her ankle, nipping the bare skin there. She kicks at it and snarls.

"I?" the king asks, pressing his gloved hand to his chest directly over the coat of arms embossed on
his breastplate. "Imprison you? Oh, my darling girl, that's an obscenely unfair thing to say."

"No, Jareth, what's obscenely unfair is you making all… this." Here, Sarah stands and throws her arms out, indicating the room with its commercial grade carpet, plain white plaster walls, and inexpensive office furniture. The edges of the room appear to be wavering like a distant mirage, as if the illusion may fade away at any moment, revealing the truth behind the deception. She wonders where they are, really. In the Goblin Castle? In the wasteland of broken things? In her own bedroom? "All this, and everything else besides."

"Everything else?"

"The hospital and the staff. The patients. Mandy." She scowls as she says the name, then murmurs, "Dr. Prevarant."

The king looks amused. "All this you ascribe to me? Well, perhaps you're right…" He surveys their surroundings, frowning slightly. "It's not my usual taste, though, is it?" He shrugs.

"My point exactly," Sarah spits accusingly. "Of all the beautiful things you can conjure, you chose to trap me here." She glares at him. "A mental hospital, Jareth!"

The Goblin King draws up to his full height, crossing his arms over his chest, staring down at her with a haughty expression. Sarah works her jaw under his gaze, determined not to flinch away from him, no matter how imposing he may make himself.

"Your rancor is misplaced, precious thing," he drawls. "I had nothing to do with this."

Sarah's face becomes a perfect picture of enraged disbelief. She leans forward and yells, "That's total bullshit, Jareth!" The ceiling undulates over her head, glowing softly. The floor follows suit and the girl struggles to keep her balance. The ground feels solid beneath her feet but her eyes tell her it is not.

"No, my dear, it's the truth. And if anyone should be angry, it is I."

"You?" she screeches, unable to contain her frustration. "What do you have to be angry about? That I didn't let you keep poisoning me? That I ruined your game?"

The king looks down at the girl, his expression patronizing. He smiles a bit as she reaches for a desk that is no longer there. It has faded from existence as she rails at him, and she stumbles forward, unable to catch herself before she falls to her knees at his feet.

"Ah!" he croons in delight. "The fierce, defiant Sarah finally bows before her rightful king. It almost makes me glad you dragged me here."

The girl scrambles to her feet, backing away from Jareth furiously, her expression dark.

"Dragged you?"

He nods regally. "Oh, yes."

"What the hell are you talking about?" she demands.

"What I am talking about, my darling Sarah, is your attempt to blame me for your own transgressions." The goblins have gathered around him now, following him as he approaches her slowly, gloved hands clasped behind his back. "Did you really think I created all this?" He shakes his head, one brow arched in a way she is sure is meant to censure her. "You've seen what I can do."
He glances around again. "This dreary, uninspired landscape is nothing to do with me."

She snorts, the sound more scornful than amused. "Come off it, Jareth. I know you did this."

"No, precious. You did all this."

Refusing to back away from him even as he stops just short of touching her, Sarah places her balled up fists on her hips and glares up at the Goblin King. He smiles down at her indulgently.

"You're lying," Sarah hisses. "I couldn't do this. You're the one with all the magic."

Jareth cocks his head and holds out one hand to his side, pulling a crystal orb from thin air. It begins to spin slowly in his palm.

"True," he says, his eyes never leaving hers. "I'm the one with all the magic. But this, Sarah?" He pulls the crystal between them, holding it at her eye level so she can gaze into it. Inside, she sees a series of shifting images: her room at Brooksong with its narrow bed; Luke on the couch next to her in group therapy; her own hands gripping a paint brush in the art room; Mandy's glare; Dr. Prevarant seated at his desk. Jareth leans in to whisper in her ear. "None of this is magic."

Before she can object to this assertion, she feels invisible hands grabbing her arms followed by a sharp, stabbing pain in her hip. She jerks her head to the side and sees Sam standing next to her, gripping her tightly and telling her to stop struggling. When she turns back to ask Jareth what's going on, she finds Dr. Prevarant instead, standing uncharacteristically in front of his desk in a strangely defensive posture. He is breathing heavily, his hair mussed and his white coat and red tie pulled askew. The two chairs which normally sit angled toward each other before his desk are tipped over, laying on their sides.

The doctor backs away from Sarah, straightening his tie and attempting to smooth his hair.

"What?" Sarah says, confused, a line forming between her eyes as she tries to understand what she is seeing. Though she has no idea how they came to be here, there are others in the room as well: two orderlies in addition to Sam, and two nurses. One of them holds an empty syringe, capping the needle as she eyes Sarah warily.

"I'll put in an order for restraints," the doctor is telling the nurse with the syringe, "and we'll have to see how she does when she wakes up."

Before Sarah can ask where Jareth has gone with his goblins, before she can ask what Dr. Prevarant means by 'restraints,' her thoughts become sluggish and she feels her eyelids growing heavy. Moments later, she finds herself standing in a wall-papered hallway across from a dim bedroom which contains a crib.
She needs time to think.

Sarah paces the wide corridors of the palace, the soles of her slippers tapping against long stretches of marble and carpets and stone in a ceaseless rhythm. The noise echoes in her ears until she hears nothing else.

*Tap tap tap tap tap.*

In her mind, the sound of it becomes the ticking of a clock, the second hand driving ever onward, dragging her toward that thirteenth hour. The idea takes hold of her so completely that the cribs of her nightmares are replaced by chiming clocks. If asked, Sarah would swear she hears their ticking in her sleep. It makes for rather restless nights, which in turn makes for notably sour moods.

After three days, the king has had enough. He invites her to dine in his private chambers so that he may tell her so.

“Sarah, precious,” he begins sometime after the first course has been served, “you must stop this maudlin brooding. It’s unseemly, and it’s become something of a problem amongst my council.”

The queen stops toying with her food and rolls her eyes. “As if I care one whit for anything Lord Draimen has to say. And in any case, I’m not brooding, I’m thinking.”

“Despite your protests, your *thinking* has all the appearances of *brooding*, my dear, and it’s not just Draimen. The entire council has begun whispering that perhaps you aren’t suited for the throne.”

Sarah snorts, her mouth curling to form a small smile dripping with derision. “Do the whispers of foolish nobles really alarm the King of the Goblin Realm so much?”

Jareth’s back stiffens a bit and he raises his perfectly arched eyebrows, looking every inch the haughty ruler that he is. “Whispers may become shouts over time, Sarah, and shouts may become rallying cries. You would be wise to remember that.”

Sarah reads the warning in his posture, and in the stern tone he has just used to scold her, and ignores it. “Well, you’re the king, aren’t you? You have the power to stop their whispering if you choose. Shut them up if it bothers you so much.” When his strange eyes lock with hers in an unyielding gaze, the girl looks away and begins to play with her food again, pushing it across the plate slowly with her golden fork.

“I can command their tongues to be silent but I cannot command their thoughts or quell any doubts they may have in their hearts. Only you can do that.”

“And how do you suggest I go about quelling the doubts in their hearts?” she asks, and though she tries to sound sarcastic, her voice instead sounds small and tired. She gives up the pretense of eating and leaves her fork on her plate before looking up at Jareth.

“By doing your duty, which I am obligated to point out you have been shamefully neglecting since learning…”

She interrupts him. “Since learning that I have to choose between sacrificing my family or my subjects?”
“You wouldn’t be sacrificing your family, precious; they’ll be alive and well even if you won’t be there to see it for yourself. And I hardly think you’ll care much anyway, once you surrender your humanity.”

“Oh, well, that’s very comforting, Jareth. Thank you.”

The king brings his arms up and crosses them over his chest. Sarah traces his long fingers with her eyes and notes his signet ring on his left hand, wondering if he has been able to rid it of the last bits of candle wax. She is pulled from her reverie by the king’s chiding.

“You’ve not met with your petitioners for three days nor attended the meetings of your own council. You of all people should understand the implications of neglecting the Labyrinth.”

She did. She does. The Labyrinth could become quite… chaotic… if ignored, and a mess which might take only hours to create could take months to correct.

Shame wells up within the girl.

“You’re right,” Sarah whispers, and then a notion occurs to her. She narrows her eyes thoughtfully, then says, “Jareth, I… I think I should go there.”

“Go where?”

“I think I should tour the Labyrinth. It’s been a long time, and since the troll dispute has been settled and the Treaty of Kingdoms and Clans has been signed, it’s safe enough now.” Her voice becomes less tired and more animated as she speaks. Still, Jareth’s look is skeptical.

“I’m not certain this is a wise idea.”

“No, it’s a great idea. I can meet with my petitioners in their own territories and I can think on things while I’m traveling, out from under the gaze of the entire palace and your whispering council.” She becomes more convinced as she speaks. “Yes, this is a great idea.”

Sarah argues her case over the next two courses, her appetite returning. Eventually, she wins the king to her cause between bites of raspberry tart. He seems to suspect that she simply wants to see her Labyrinth one last time before she is expelled from the kingdom and its walls come tumbling down in her absence. Once she is able to convince him this is not the case, he capitulates. Still, he has stipulations.

“You must take Sir Didymus...”

“Yes, of course,” she readily agrees.

“I wasn’t finished. You must also take two of my personal guard. The Labyrinth and the realm may be safer than they once were, but that is not the same as being without peril.”

Sarah shakes her head to object. “Sir Didymus is capable enough, and...”

She had been about to say, ‘...and your personal guard unnerves me,’ but she does not wish to appear faint of heart. Still, it’s the truth. The Kingsguard is comprised solely of oversized talking wolves, of the same race as Lord Draimen, and like Lord Draimen, they are imposing figures. The guards lack the advisor’s wit, but they have all of his menace, and when in their presence, Sarah always feels as though they are mere seconds away from tearing out her throat with one swift snap of their powerful jaws.
Humans have not been welcomed in our society. Traditionally.

Jareth holds up his hand, halting her protestation. “You will ride out with Sir Didymus and two of my guards, or you will not ride out at all.”

“Fine,” she huffs, “I’ll take them along, but it’s completely unnecessary.”

The king smiles at Sarah’s acquiescence, and she wonders if perhaps he is less concerned for her safety and more concerned with having his own trustworthy informants in her camp. She eyes Jareth keenly, but says nothing about her suspicions. It doesn’t matter, anyway. If he wants to spy on her, all he has to do is conjure a crystal, simple as that.

As preparations are made for the journey, all with the king’s blessing, the girl begins to speculate about his approval of her plan. She has an inking that Jareth is simply indulging her, like the baby from the lullaby whose mother gifts him a mockingbird, then a diamond ring, then a looking glass, and so on, all to stop his crying. Either that, or her maudlin brooding (as he calls it) has so disturbed him that he is willing to send her away from the palace simply to avoid confronting it daily.

Whatever the reason, the girl is glad to be going, becoming more and more excited about the tour.

Sarah leaves in two days’ time, on horseback, and is greeted with fanfare by the Labyrinth’s denizens at her various stops. They wave colorful banners, red and blue and gold and green, some made of silk and others of paper. Over the next few days, she hears petitions, adjudicates disputes, inspects masonry, and visits with the leaders of the various clans and tribes and groups. She tours a school where young Fireys are taught the proper techniques for removing and reattaching limbs and heads, and she takes a private meeting with the Wiseman (and his talking hat).

Her attentions seem to reinforce the love her people have for her and the Labyrinth itself nearly pulses with approval as she walks its familiar paths. It had been a good idea to come, she realizes, for it has been far too long since she has admired the Labyrinth’s beauty and relished its danger. To do so now settles her a bit, and she is surer than ever that she could never abandon this place.

But in making that decision, she knows she is abandoning her family, and her life in her old world.

To think on it makes her indescribably sad, and so she thinks on other matters instead.

Staying means marriage, which is strange enough for her to contemplate on its face, but is even stranger when she considers that it specifically means marriage to Jareth.

And then she will be Queen of the Goblins, she supposes.

Sarah wears a smart scarlet riding coat atop her horse on the day she trots to the very center of the Labyrinth. The woolen coat is crossed with a gold satin sash pinned in place at her hip by her double star insignia. Her Labyrinth badge she wears higher on the sash, nearer her shoulder. She has to admit, she feels rather regal in the getup, almost as if she is already Queen of the Goblins. She dismounts her horse and allows the beast to drink from the crystal pool there, surveying the hedge height of the surrounding maze and remarking to Sir Didymus that she thinks it has been trimmed back too far.

“Seasonal pruning, your grace,” the fox-terrier knight replies. “They’ll make up the height soon enough, especially now that you are here, and desire it.”

Indeed, as Sarah watches, the hedges nearly seem to grow beneath her gaze. She smiles, shaking her head. Her labyrinth is a marvel, there’s no denying it, and there’s nothing else like it in all the world. The admission gives her comfort, somehow, and reinforces her determination to stay in the Goblin
Realm.

*The Labyrinth is better than any mockingbird, or diamond ring, or billy goat.*

The Night Trolls are assembled, awaiting the queen’s speech and she delivers it standing on the granite ledge which surrounds the pool. Her words are well-received, and she believes the peace she and Ludo have worked so hard to establish here will be a lasting one. That idea, as much as simply being present in this place, fills her with a quiet tranquility as complete as any she has known since wishing Toby away and winning him back.

*If marriage is the price I must pay for it, she thinks, then so be it.*

Sarah decides she will tell Jareth as soon as she returns to the palace.

For the return trip, they send the horses back riderless and descend into the underground passageways beneath the Labyrinth which lead to the goblin city. The route is more direct, and there, too, are denizens to whom she owes an audience.

The False Alarms are exactly as she remembers, and they greet her in the traditional way of their tribe.

“My queen!” the first one bellows. “Go no further. You are in grave danger!”

“Your majesty,” the next rumbles, “you must not return to the palace, or you will suffer untold terrors!”

“Your grace,” another warns, “turn back, or yours will be a tale of woe!”

Sarah nods graciously at each, but ignores their dire cautions as she had been taught by Hoggle years ago, moving past them at a steady pace. She barely processes what they are saying, until the words of one False Alarm stop her in her tracks.

“Sarah,” the stone face says, “tell me about the rock-a-bye baby.”

The girl halts abruptly, staring at the False Alarm, her mouth agape. “What did you say?” she demands in a hot whisper.

“I said,” the False Alarm starts hoarsely, then clears his throat and continues. “I said, ‘My queen, stop or you will come to harm.’ I said it rather loud, too, I’m surprised you didn’t hear me.”

“I… I heard, but I guess I just… misunderstood,” Sarah replies, her brow wrinkling in confusion. *Is her mind playing tricks on her? Perhaps she is merely tired. The tour, though successful, has certainly been exhausting.*

“Her majesty thanks you all for your service,” Sir Didymus cuts in, “and commends you on a job well-done.” He bows to the stony faces then ushers his queen on. “Let us make haste, your grace,” the knight suggests under his breath, “or all this continual bellowing will give you a splitting headache.”

Sarah hurries along at the fox-terrier’s urging, flanked by Jareth’s guards with their shrewd yellow eyes and closed mouths and fur as black as midnight. They emerge before nightfall just outside of the gates of the goblin city. A phalanx of local guards is there to welcome them. Called to attention by their leader, the troops part and allow the small royal party to enter the gates and pass through the city, escorting them all the way to the steps of the palace where the King of the Goblin Realm awaits the queen’s return.
As Sarah climbs the steps, Jareth bows low, sweeping his arms out wide in a gallant gesture.

“Welcome home, my queen,” he drawls, then straightens and watches as the girl drops into a curtsy before him. He stretches out his hand, offering it to her, and when she takes it, he lifts her from her curtsy until she stands before him, one step below where his own feet rest.

“Thank you, my king,” the girl replies demurely. Smiling, Jareth offers her his arm, which she takes, and together, the monarchs climb to the palace doors and enter. As they walk through the great gallery and toward Sarah’s chambers, she tells the king that she’s come to a decision.

“Oh?” he asks with interest, turning his head to look at her.

“Yes.” Sarah swallows. “I’ve decided to sign the contract. I’ll make a blood oath.”

The king stops mid-stride and steps in front of the girl. He grasps the queen’s arms with gloved hands and stares intently at her. She can hardly stand the mixture of hope and fear she reads on his face and for some reason, his expression brings the sting of tears to her eyes. She blinks them away, silently admonishing herself for her stupidity.

“Sarah,” he begins, his tone grave, “I must be sure you understand what you are saying.”

“I understand, Jareth,” she assures him. “I’m saying… I’ll marry you. I’m saying I’ll be your queen.”

The king’s unfathomable eyes pierce her own and as she watches, a slow smile shapes his lips, opening them to reveal a row of glittering, sharp teeth.

“Oh, Sarah,” he says, “what fun we’ll have. What fun, what fun, what fun.”
She is aware only of the darkness, and a dull, throbbing pain which at first seems to encompass the whole universe, but quickly collapses in on itself and localizes to the back of her skull. Her eyelids are heavy with a weight she does not think she has the strength to overcome, but after a moment, she finds the will to blink a little. Sarah opens her eyes and contemplates the dim blur of her surroundings.

*She's confused. Everything is gray, and still, and quiet.*

*She had expected the colors. Red and blue and gold and green. She had expected the lightning and the screams.*

*Perhaps it is all trapped inside a glittering crystal ball.*

There is a high, rectangular window set in the outer wall of her room. If she stands on her bed, she can just grasp the slender ledge with her fingertips but she cannot boost herself high enough to look out of it properly. She has long since given up trying, telling herself there is nothing much to see, anyway. The glass of it is thick and reinforced, just like all the glass on this ward, embedded with the metal mesh that looks like chicken wire. The precaution seems excessive. Even if she could reach it, her window is much too small to accommodate a body, even one as slight as hers. This has led her to believe that the safety glass isn't meant to keep suicidal teens from smashing their way through and flinging themselves to their deaths. Besides, Sarah's room is only on the second floor, so jumping from this height would be a poor choice for ending it all.

She supposes patients with the particular challenges of those who find themselves admitted to Brooksong Behavioral Health Center might be inspired to shatter the glass, were they able, and use the resultant shards as weapons; little glass knives for slashing and stabbing; employing them against nurses, or other patients, or themselves.

Against doctors.

The girl smiles slightly at the thought.

With no visible clock, no watch, no connection to the outside world, this window is the only thing which tells Sarah if it is day, or if it is night. As she glances around her gray and silent room, the only light she detects is the paltry glow of the security lamps in the nearby parking lot, filtering weakly through that small rectangle of reinforced glass above her head.

*Night, then.*

"Hello, Sarah."

The girl's eyes flick to the opposite wall where the lone chair in her room is situated. Dr. Prevarant occupies it, and his expression is hard for her to make out. She blinks a few times, to force her eyes to focus. She tries to reach up to rub them and finds she can't. Her wrists are buckled into padded restraints, their movements restricted to no more than three inches in any direction. Her ankles are similarly fettered. She jerks hard a few times, testing the strength of the bonds, causing a metallic rattling as the rails of her bed protest.

"I wouldn't," her doctor warns.

It's against policy for him to be in her room. Doctors are not allowed to visit their patients.
unchaperoned. A nurse or an orderly should have accompanied him—but then, she supposes he isn't really a doctor. And she isn't quite sure what the policy regarding royalty from mythical lands is.

Maybe the Goblin King is allowed special visiting hours.

"What's going on?" Sarah croaks, and notices an IV pole next to the head of her bed. Her eyes have adjusted to the light, or, lack thereof, and they trace the dim outline of plastic tubing extending from a bag hung from the pole all the way to a needle in her arm. It's held in place with a copious amount of silk tape. A crease appears between her eyes. "How long have I been in here?"

"In your room? A little over a day."

"I'm thirsty."

"I know." His voice is all sympathy; sincerity; understanding. "IV fluids can keep you technically hydrated, but it's not the same as drinking, is it?" He rises and walks toward her, causing her pulse to quicken as a cold fear begins to slither up her legs. It's a visceral response, born of the innate mistrust of a prisoner shackled in the presence of her jailer.

And such a jailer she has.

"What are you doing?" she demands with a bravado she does not feel.

The doctor does not reply and his patient has no choice but to watch him warily. The girl's eyes narrow as the man grasps the handle of a plastic pitcher which sits on the tray table near her bed. He pours whatever is in it into a cup and unwraps a straw, dropping it in. He looks at her a moment, then extends his hand, bending the end of the straw with a finger as he offers her a sip. Sarah frowns and looks at her psychiatrist suspiciously. He sighs, and she thinks the sound of it is laced with an imperious sort of disappointment.

Condescending bastard.

"Go ahead," he urges her. "It's just water."

She hesitates a moment more, but her throat feels thick and prickly, so she lifts her head and takes the straw between her lips, sucking greedily. When the doctor finally pulls the cup away, she objects.

"More," Sarah says.

"Let's give it a minute to settle. You haven't had anything to eat in nearly thirty-six hours and I don't want you vomiting while you're restrained. You'd risk aspirating."

"Then take off the restraints." The way she grits her teeth as she speaks makes her words sound more like a menace than a suggestion.

"You know I can't do that, Sarah."

She snorts. "You can do anything you want. You have all the power." She jerks against the restraints again, for emphasis.

'You have no power over me.' The girl nearly cringes at the unbidden memory. What a bunch of naïve bullshit!

"I wish that were true," Dr. Prevarant says sadly.

"It is!" Sarah hisses, giving him a hateful glare.
The doctor stares down at her, unmoving, and she cannot tell if his eyes are the color of the waters of Antigua or the green-gray of a storm over the sea or the black of charcoal briquettes (the black of an oubliette unlit by any torch or candle). After a moment, he sets the cup back on her tray table, ignoring her grunt of displeasure as he does, and glides back to the single chair. Dropping into it, he crosses one leg broadly over the other. His movements are elegant in a way which feels out of place on a locked ward. The air around Sarah's body seems to crackle as she turns her head to watch him. Dr. Prevarant steeples his fingers in his familiar way, elbows resting on the arms of the chair. Leaning his head down enough so that his chin rests on the point he has made with his fingers, he continues to observe her in silence.

She tries to outlast him, she tries, but the impulse to argue is too great, and there is something in his tone, in his manner, which pisses her off, quite frankly.

"Do you like what you see, doctor?" The bitterness of her words is unmistakable and she punctuates the taunt by jerking against her restraints again, relishing the brief cacophony resulting from her petulant action.

The man shakes his head and has the audacity to look sad. Sarah snorts in disbelief.

"This is a challenging field," Dr. Prevarant tells her, "and I've had my share of failures over the years. It's the nature of psychiatry, really. Our understanding, our therapies, are always evolving, and some cases simply exceed our capacity to treat at the time they present. But you are, by far, my greatest disappointment."

This surprises her. Her snarl falters and her brow furrows as two ideas war within her mind. One is that this is an act, a very convincing one, and she marvels that Jareth has not yet tired of playing this role (she almost admires his dedication. Almost). The other is that she pities the doctor, and regrets being the source of his sadness.

(And then she regrets the life she does not have, but might've, had she made different choices, but this thought is knotted and frayed and too hard to untangle, so she buries it, wrapped in a blanket of blue and gold and green. And red, red, red.)

The psychiatrist seems unaware of her internal struggle. Surely her own expression is as hard for him to make out in the dim light of the room as his is for her. He's speaking softly, and it's unclear if he means his words for her, or just for himself.

"I thought…" He stops, and sighs, then continues, "I had hoped… if you'd just been able to tell me about the baby, maybe we'd have made progress."

Forget about the baby.

It strikes her as funny, as hilarious, actually, that when he'd first burst into her life, and then later, as she'd stumbled her way through his labyrinth (through dangers untold and hardships unnumbered), all he'd wanted her to do was forget about the baby.

But now, he seems obsessed with wanting her to remember.

She laughs, shrilly; laughs until she cries. Cries and screams, jerking her arms and legs, pulling against the restraints holding her in her bed; against all that keeps her from being a danger to herself or others.

Sarah squeezes her eyes shut, trying to soothe the sting of her tears, but behind her lids, she sees the lightning and the crib and the little green and yellow whales bobbing on perfectly scalloped waves of
blue, lost in a creeping tide of red. She can't bear it, can't stand to see it all again, and so she opens her eyes, as wide as she can.

"The baby, the baby, the baby!" she screams. "As if you don't know! As if it isn't all your fault!"

She laughs again, arching her back and letting her head fall onto her pillow, and she looks like the subject of one of those historic illustrations of people suffering from tetanus. Sarah certainly presents a disconcerting picture, but the doctor does not seem alarmed. She wonders at that, vaguely, amidst her hysteria. She half-expects him to break character and chastise her for being overly dramatic. The girl can well imagine the Goblin King's sneering tone, the same one he'd once used to scold her when she'd complained about the lack of fairness in the Labyrinth.

'You say that so often. I wonder what your basis for comparison is.'

But instead of rebuke, she is met with remorse.

"I suppose you're right, in a way," Dr. Prevarant says. This draws her up short. Her cackling and sobbing and screeching all die and she falls back against her mattress, suddenly tired, feeling the burn in her muscles seep away as she relaxes. "It is my fault. I should've reached you, somehow. I should've found a way. And now, there's no time."

No time.

The way he says it, ominous, foreboding, invites no mirth, but she can't help but to give a little snort, anyway. Hearing those words from the mouth of a man who could simply point a finger and reorder time (a man who has resorted to stealing it; who can stop it on a whim; who has used it as currency to bargain for the things he wants—a baby, an afternoon's amusement, a dance inside of a fragile dream) both amuses and irritates her.

Her throat is dry again, and her voice cracks as she answers him. "There's all the time in the world, doctor."

"No, I'm afraid not." He rises again and crosses the room, offering her a drink from her cup once more. This time, he lets her have her fill and does not pull her cup away until she willingly releases the straw from between her lips. "Your birthday…"

Sarah interrupts him, not with words, but with actions, before he can move beyond her limited reach. She pushes the straw from her mouth with her tongue and tilts her head, just a little further, until her cheek is resting against the doctor's thumb, the one he has wrapped around the cup he holds for her. Her face is still moist with her earlier tears, and after a moment of stillness, the girl feels the doctor's thumb brushing at the wetness, smoothing away all evidence of her sorrow. It's a tender gesture, and not at all in keeping with what she knows of the man.

Neither the physician nor the king.

And then all at once, inexplicably, without making the conscious decision to do so, she's talking about the baby.

"Toby," she whispers. "Do you know why we called him that?"

Dr. Prevarant's thumb pauses its soft stroking, but only briefly. "Why don't you tell me?" he suggests, his voice quiet, almost as if he is afraid to speak louder, lest he break the spell they seem to have cast together.

(There is some sort of magic in the air, she thinks, like the Pied Piper's tune. Her head nearly swims
with it and it's as if she skips along behind him, an entranced child of Hamelin, powerless to resist his melody.)

"It was the last play I ever saw. I mean, aside from the awful holiday pageants we're forced to put on in this place. The last real play. My mother starred, of course, opposite Jeremy."

"Mmm." The doctor moves away from her then, leaving her water on the table. He walks back to the chair, but instead of sitting, he drags it across the floor and places it next to her bed. He seats himself there, at her side. If Sarah moves her arm as far as she can and stretches out her fingers, she can nearly touch his knee.

"Jeremy played the role of Tobias Blackburn in the play. It was a drama, about this childless couple. Ruby Blackburn dies at the end of the third act."

"Ruby Blackburn?"

"My mother. Tobias' wife, in the play. She… she kills herself, in the nursery."

"That's an awfully dark theme for a teenager," Dr. Prevarant remarks. "I'm surprised that your parents let you attend a showing."

"It was practically the only time I ever got to see my mother," Sarah reveals. "She was always so busy…” She swallows. "It ends when he discovers her. The curtain drops on Tobias holding Ruby in his arms, on his knees next to the empty crib, crying."

"And Toby was named for this character?"

"The performance really moved me," she tells the doctor, ignoring his question. "It left a mark. I don't think I fully understood why at the time."

"Do you understand now?"

Sarah looks at him and smiles slightly. "I would think a psychiatrist could weave a pretty convincing narrative for the why, out of all that, Dr. Prevarant."

"A melodrama, with such serious and morbid subject matter," the doctor muses. "A young, impressionable girl, taking it all in. A woman dying, cradled in the arms of her lover, both according to the script and in real life." He slides forward in his seat, just a little, and her fingertips brush his pant leg. The tweed cloth is rough against her skin, so unlike the silky feel of the Italian suits Jeremy had favored. "Ruby Blackburn, grieving a child she cannot have, so much so that she takes her own life, all while the living child of the actress playing her sits in the audience, neglected, pining for any bit of acknowledgement her mother can spare. I can weave enough narrative out of that for three volumes, Sarah, but I want to hear your thoughts." If he notices her fingers trembling against his knee, he gives no sign of it.

Sarah makes a sound of protest. "My mother didn't neglect me."

"Yes, she did. She neglected you so completely that your only hope of seeing her was on stage. She made it so that in order to even be near her, you had to be willing to sit through her depressing play."

"It wasn't depressing," she murmurs.

"No?"

She shakes her head, but then reverts to an earlier part of the conversation. "Tobias sounds like the
name of some eighteenth-century puritanical preacher," the girl says, "like he could be one of Cotton Mather's contemporaries, don't you think?" The girl had learned all about Cotton Mather in her American Lit class. "Threatening fire and brimstone from the pulpit? Publishing pamphlets on the nature of good and evil?" She pulls a breath in and holds it for long seconds as she considers; as she recalls.

(When Jeremy cried, he was always so convincing. That night in the audience, Sarah had been entirely mesmerized by the performance and for a single agonizing, thrilling second, she had believed her mother truly dead.)

"But I liked it anyway," she tells the psychiatrist. "Tobias. It didn't make me think of fire and brimstone at all."

"What did it make you think of?"

Sarah smiles, enigmatic, and that is all the answer she gives him.

"Karen said the name was too stern for a little baby, but she liked Toby. She thought the name Toby was sweet. She said you couldn't help but coo when you said it." She is no longer smiling, and she pinches her lips together before opening them again, saying, "Toby." The sound of the name on her tongue is nothing like a coo.

"Did your father and stepmother know the name you suggested came from one of your mother's plays?"

The girl shrugs. "I don't think they were paying enough attention to put two and two together."

"No," the doctor agrees. "I suppose they weren't."

Her eyes dart to his face and she looks at him sharply. Still, she cannot discern the intent behind his words. Not in the faded gray light of her room. After a moment, she shrugs again.

"I doubt Karen would've thought Toby sounded so sweet if she'd known," Sarah says.

"I imagine not."

"She doted on him." There is an air of disbelief around her revelation, as if it stuns her that her stepmother could behave that way around a baby. "It was almost funny how much, except she pretty quickly became unbearable. It was like I ceased to exist, except when she felt the need to criticize me, or when she needed a babysitter."

"I think your choice of words is interesting."

"What words?"

"When she needed a babysitter," he quotes.

"It's not interesting, it's infuriating. Nothing of mine was sacred. Nothing I wanted mattered. If she thought one of my toys would calm him, she gave it to him, without asking. If she and my dad had plans, they just expected me to drop everything to watch him."

"And that seemed unreasonable to you?"

"It doesn't to you?" Sarah retorts, incredulous. "One day, everything's normal. The next day, there's a baby in the house, and everything, everything, everything, changes!"
"Babies do that. They are precious, but they tend to turn your world upside down."

"Don't I know it," she mutters, glaring at his knee where her finger still touches him.

"How did Toby change your world?" Dr. Prevarant asks in his Freudian "tell-me-about-your-mother" way.

"Are you serious?" the girl snaps. "He was all Dad and Karen could think about, or talk about, or care about. And all of a sudden, I'm not supposed to do anything or go anywhere? I'm not supposed to have anything of my own? Is it any wonder I wished him away?"

The doctor pauses a beat, then, carefully, he says, "Why don't you tell me about that, Sarah? About wishing the baby away."

She snorts. "Like you don't know…"

"Yes, but still, I'd like to hear it from you."

The girl knows there's some trick here, even if she can't quite pick it out. As she mulls Dr. Prevarant's request, she tries to find a way to turn it to her advantage. Finally, she seizes upon it, and as she speaks, she thinks she can just make out the faint echo of goblin laughter coming from somewhere behind her wall.

"Get rid of these restraints," she whispers, "and I'll tell you anything you want to know."
How Silk and Sackcloth Are the Same

It takes almost no time for the whirlwind to commence.

No sooner does Sarah tell Jareth that she will consent to wed him than a veritable platoon of officious under-justices and law clerks begins trooping about the palace, rushing from this meeting to that audience, carting piles of books and papers excavated from the law archives along with them. Documents are drafted, signatures and seals are sought, and both the Goblin King and the Queen of the Labyrinth are advised of the details included in the reams of scrolls produced by the seemingly endless line of bearded men and their bespectacled assistants. Sarah feels as though she is being buried beneath an avalanche of information, and it's difficult for her to follow at times.

It does not take long for the girl to lament what she has unleashed.

She knows her confusion is due partly to the fact that the laws of this land differ so vastly from those of her own world (the ones taught to her by her high school civics instructor—and honestly, she doesn't recall much about that ninth-grade class besides the way Mr. Guendel sometimes had flecks of egg from his breakfast trapped in his excessively bushy mustache. Sarah had spent as much time wondering if the portly man was just one or two eggs away from a massive coronary as she did actually focusing on the course material). But she also blames her confusion on Jareth.

Or, more precisely, on Jareth's reaction to her announcing that she would marry him.

_Ever since she'd told the king her decision, and he'd had his interesting response (hopeful; joyful, even, but somehow also... dangerous), she'd been too unnerved to concentrate properly._

(The state of Sarah's nerves has not proven conducive to furthering her grasp of the tangled laws and ancient customs of a land governed by an outlandish combination of goblin logic, fae tradition, and raw magic.)

The girl discovers there are three hefty volumes of ancient texts which outline the most minute details of the process of a royal betrothal (that there even is a process is shocking to her, and frankly, more than a little off-putting). A further pile of crumbling scrolls discovered in the dark and dusty depths of the judiciary's archives explains the procedure for binding _one-not-of-this-realm_ (in this case, Sarah) not only to the land itself, but to the _intended spouse_ as well (in this case, Jareth).

_Actually, there is only one scroll which dictates the procedure. The rest detail the historic arguments for the necessity of such a protocol and expound on the consequences of violating it. If given the choice, Sarah would rather skim these parts, but one particularly humorless under-justice insists on reading each scroll line for line and so she is obliged to listen, despite the excruciating boredom that descends upon her during the exercise._

As it turns out, there is also a surprisingly strict schedule of required fetes, feasts, and balls to celebrate the betrothal, a codified policy for officially announcing the news to the surrounding kingdoms, and what is described as a largely ceremonial (though absolutely compulsory) vote of the high council to endorse the match.

_Sarah has her doubts about the 'ceremonial' nature of the ballot, owing to the way one law clerk reassures her she has nothing to worry about in somewhat tenuous tones, all while glancing surreptitiously at Lord Draimen, who of course sits on the high council. She realizes it's entirely possible the clerk is simply nervous to be in such close proximity to the imposing wolf and his keen yellow gaze, but when Jareth remarks that he expects the result to be an enthusiastic confirmation of
her suitability for the role of Goblin Queen, and seems to direct his rather hard gaze at Lord Draimen while pronouncing his confidence, it only strengthens her suspicion.

By the end of the fourth day of this intensive tutorial, Sarah's head is spinning. She's tempted to simply run away from the justices and clerks and advisors, hiding in her chamber and burying her head under one of her many feather pillows until they all agree to just go away and leave her in peace. It's not just the impossible bulk of information she's expected to absorb that has her out of sorts, or even the foreign nature of the laws and traditions with which she will be bound to comply, but also an idea that no one has much concerned themselves with to this point (though she herself is exceedingly concerned with it).

It's the very idea of being a wife.

The Goblin King's wife.

It has not escaped her attention, no matter how divided, that all the information she is being presented regards the specifics of the betrothal and how adhering to them allows her to undergo this so-called 'binding ceremony' which will enable her to keep her place in the kingdom (and in the Labyrinth). All these requirements must be satisfied in order to proceed with the wedding.

But the wedding itself, well, that hasn't been mentioned, except as the end result of the rest of these serpentine obligations.

There has been no reference to a time frame in which she and Jareth are expected to marry, or consummate their union, or produce an heir. It's true that the king himself will sometimes inquire about an odd detail of the wedding ceremony here and there ("Precious, do you have any objection to chicory flower in your bouquet? Just a few, really, scattered among the larger blooms? I know it's not traditional, but it's the national flower of Lucidesa, and it will appease them for being seated behind Clan Hulluus in the Grand Cathedral. Besides, don't you humans need to have something blue when you marry?"), but none of the gaggle of royal law advisors has so much as remarked upon it.

She tells herself it's possible they just haven't gotten to it yet, and that there's another score of scrolls and a whole pile of aged tomes dictating how and when and where the wedding must take place, but by the fifth day, when it still hasn't come up, she begins to wonder if there might be some leeway here.

She wonders, and perhaps she even hopes.

And though she dreads it, Sarah knows she must address it with her intended.

Finally, on the sixth night since her return from her Labyrinth tour, Jareth invites her to sup in his private dining room, citing the need for some time away from the intensive duties and demands they've both endured over the last week (in truth, she suspects he does it for her sake, for the Goblin King never seems bothered by the continuous parade of secretaries and clerks and judges spouting lists of tasks he and Sarah must complete in order to fulfill their betrothal obligations, or the gallons of wax they seem to exhaust applying his official seal to newly-drafted documents, or the endless debates on the most appropriate way in which a newly recognized Goblin Queen should be installed into her royal offices).

It simultaneously pleases and irks her that the king seems to recognize her disorientation and her growing trepidation regarding what has come to be known as the great event, taking it upon himself to offer her some respite. She supposes she should be grateful, but it irritates her that she has been so transparent with her emotions, and that Jareth has not politely ignored that fact.
She dresses for the occasion as she always does: by donning the gown which simply appears on the
dress form in the corner of her bed chamber. This evening, it's a study in contrasts. The skirts are a
whimsical confection, made of layer upon layer of ivory tulle embellished with thousands of tiny
crystalline flecks. They catch the candle light and throw it back into the eye of anyone who gazes
upon her, like so many stars sparkling to life as the waning day gives way to twilight. The bodice is
the opposite of whimsy. Rather, it's a shining example of *structure*, somehow evoking the idea of
alabaster statuary, as smooth as freshly fallen snow. It features a deeply scooped neckline that leaves
Sarah's throat and collarbones bare, and the back dips so low that she shivers in the cool of the palace
air as she sweeps through the corridors en route to the king's chambers.

As she nears her destination, the girl's pulse begins to quicken. She has seen Jareth every day since
she agreed to the betrothal, but has had no occasion to spend any time alone with him. He has not
visited her chamber as he has done in the past, and though they've dined together numerous times,
they've also hosted their advisors during all their luncheons and dinners. She's seen Vergess
Trindlebark more in this past week than in the entire previous year combined. All their conversation
has centered around their duties as they pertain to the betrothal, with a smattering of Labyrinth
business or the business of the larger realm thrown in as necessary. Sarah squints as she thinks on it,
realizing the last time she'd had a private word with the king was when she'd returned from her tour
of the Labyrinth and told him she would wed him.

The Goblin King's reply plays in her head as she steps through the doors held open for her by two
dark, silent wolves wearing the golden uniform of elite guardsmen.

*Oh, Sarah, what fun we'll have. What fun, what fun, what fun.*

She would dwell on his words (she's apt to dwell, lately) and dissect them, and his tone, and his
expression when he spoke them. She would, but she doesn't. Because as she enters Jareth's dining
chamber, she is nearly robbed of breath. Gasping, her eyes widen and Sarah marvels at what she
sees. She isn't certain if it's the beauty of what she beholds that causes her heart to clench painfully in
her chest, or her lingering memory of how the king's voice pronouncing those words made them
seem more ominous than they ought, and perhaps more ominous than they were meant.

*Or, perhaps not.*

The room looks nothing like it did when last she was here. Gone are the white walls and soft, sheer
curtains dancing gently in the morning breeze through the open windows. Gone is the tinkling crystal
chandelier, with its prisms that would fracture the sunlight into ethereal, winking diamonds that could
flash in and out of bright existence faster than the eye could fathom. Gone is the scene that had made
her feel as though she drifted weightless through the pages of an Edith Wharton novel.

In its place is a shadowed fantasy, heavy with all the danger and mystery and beauty of midnight.
The room now glitters darkly, as though she is in an ancient mine with seams of gems crisscrossing
the walls, torches guttering and making the minerals writhe and flicker in the wavering light. But
that's not quite right, for the chamber is far more luxurious than some underground cave. The walls
and ceiling are the color of the early evening, and they twinkle in the low light of a score of candles,
as if they've somehow been embedded with flecks of crushed jet and gold. It reminds her of the night
sky with its array of scintillating stars. The arched windows are half hidden behind heavy velvet
drapes in the deepest blue. The floor is cool marble, black as coal with gray veins slithering through it,
marking it with careless patterns like frozen arms of lightning captured in one moment of
frightening perfection. It's dazzling, and extraordinary, and overwhelming, and her eyes fairly ache
as they drink in the magnificence of it all.

Sarah has to remind herself to breathe.
In her ivory evening gown and delicate tiara, Sarah seems nearly celestial amid all the dark gleam of the room, but she feels…

*Insubstantial.*

*As ephemeral as any ghost, fading in and out of existence in the Stygian spaces of the world.*

"My dear, you are resplendent," Jareth pronounces as the doors close behind her. He is standing opposite her, clad in a deep purple frock coat with the silken black folds of his cravat spilling forth from between his lapels. An excellent table is laid between them, covered in a costly brocade of navy and emerald. It is set with crystal, and silver, and the finest bone china edged in polished platinum. There are platters with the rarest of delicacies and more superb wine decanted than the two of them can possibly drink. The whole thing is breathtaking and it's far more sumptuous than any feast she's ever attended (and, this being the palace of the Goblin King, there have been feasts a-plenty for comparison during her time here). "Please," he intones, "have a seat."

Her chair moves at his direction, a gentle flick and twist at his wrist, fingers crooked just so. Sarah wonders at the absence of servants but moves toward her seat. As she does, she remembers her courtesies.

"Thank you, my king," the girl says, sinking into her chair.

Jareth smiles and grasps the neck of a wine carafe, intricately etched with the king's own seal, lifting it from the table. He carries it smoothly around to her side and pours her a glass. Sarah tries to remember if the Goblin King has ever deigned to serve her *anything*, and she cannot recall a single instance in all her time here. She nods in gracious appreciation but wonders at this deviation from their routine.

*At his uncommon hospitality.*

In truth, it makes her wary. Her skin prickles.

"Where are the footmen?" she asks, attempting a nonchalance she does not feel.

Jareth sets the carafe down and plucks a tiny puffed pastry from a platter just beyond Sarah's wine glass. It appears to be filled with a creamy sort of cheese and is drizzled with something dark and rich.

"I've dismissed them," he tells her, bringing the morsel to her mouth and offering it to her with long, elegant fingers. *Bare* fingers. "I wanted you all to myself tonight."

Sarah licks her lips nervously but opens her mouth to accept the bite. It's warm and delicious, with perfectly crisp layers giving way to the decadent creaminess of the cheese and the earthy sweetness of the drizzle as she chews. *Fig jam,* she thinks, savoring it, *with warm brie.* There's a hint of heat there as she swallows, the slow sting of a pepper. Just a touch, not too much. *Red chili?* she wonders. *Or, habanero?* She licks her lips again, but this time, it's to taste any stray smear of the drizzle which clings to them.

"Oh, goodness," she sighs. Sarah is certain the Goblin King employs the most talented chef not only in the realm, but in all the surrounding territories and kingdoms as well.

"Another?" The king's smile is almost wicked as he reaches for the platter once again.

She shakes her head. "I shouldn't. It will spoil my dinner."
"Pish-posh, precious," Jareth chides, grasping another of the tiny pastries between his thumb and forefinger and waving it temptingly in front of Sarah. "Let me indulge you."

Before accepting the bite, she asks him a question.

"What have I done to earn your indulgence?"

The king laughs, the sound of it silvery and round, like an enchanted tune from a piper's flute, and it lulls her somehow. He watches slyly as she accepts the small pastry, answering her as she chews.

"Why, you've agreed to marry me, my darling girl. Should a man not spoil his bride-to-be?"

Sarah swallows and Jareth reaches for her face, curling the fingers of one hand beneath her jaw and dragging his thumb across her bottom lip, slow and hard. They stare at each other in silence for a moment, then the king releases her face and inspects his thumb, a small smile forming as he notes the bit of fig jam he's collected from her flesh. He slips the thumb past his own lips then, licking the bit of sweet off of it, all while staring into the girl's wide, green eyes.

The queen clears her throat and flutters her eyelids a little and Jareth laughs again, not unkindly. He reclines against the table, facing her, and the line of his body is relaxed yet still regal as he crosses one boot casually over the other.

"Is there something you wish to say, my queen?" His tone is light; playful. Sarah's eyes flit down to where her fingers are wrapped tightly around the arms of her chair. She notes that she has only to stretch but a little, and she can brush her fingertips across his knee. She refrains and lets out a breath.

"We've not really spoken of the wedding," she begins.

The Goblin King's perfect brows arch in amusement. "We've spoken of nothing else for nigh on a week, Sarah. Have you not been paying attention?" He tsks teasingly. "Vergess will certainly be disappointed."

She looks at him and shakes her head. "No, we've talked of the betrothal."

"Ah," he replies, understanding now. "Yes, I suppose you're right, but then, that's because the one must come before the other."

"Of course."

"And though there are traditions which must be observed, there is much less of the law which concerns itself with the wedding. Barring a very few things, and the requisite political considerations, of course, the details are entirely up to us."

"Yes, I see." Sarah looks past her king, watching the shadow he casts upon the ceiling overhead, large and dark. "It was… some of those… details… I wished to discuss."

"Splendid!" The king claps his hands together in delight, rising from his reclined position and reaching for the girl's face once again. He gently clasps her chin in his fingers and gazes down at her with a smile, repeating himself as he does. "Splendid."

He moves away from her then, taking the carafe of wine with him back around the table and pouring himself a glass before he sits. He swirls the ruby drink around his goblet a bit before taking a sip, and after swallowing and humming his approval of the vintage, says, "I suppose there's something in particular you wish to discuss."
The queen's nerves feel raw and they seem to fire continuously, raising gooseflesh along her arms and neck, leaving her fingertips feeling icy even while her chest is strangely hot. It's fear, she realizes, which is odd, given how absolutely charming and forbearing the king has been thus far. But she can't help but to remember his words, and his tone when he'd spoken them.

*What fun we'll have.*

*What fun.*

*What fun.*

*What… fun.*

"I was thinking…" she tries, and the words seem to stick in her throat.

Jareth reaches across the table, finding the fig and brie pastries he'd been feeding Sarah earlier, and takes one for himself. He inspects it a moment, then bites into it with rather more force than is required to pierce the delicate layers of the amuse-bouche, or so it seems to the girl. In doing so, he reveals a row of perfect, sharp teeth.

"You were thinking?" he prompts, his seemingly blithe demeanor edged in something faintly biting.

The girl pushes on, breathlessly, and all at once, lest her conviction wane.

"About the date. A date for the wedding."

"Oh, is that all?" A certain tension leaves his shoulders and he indicates a tray of little serving cups. They each hold a layered dish garnished with a tiny violet. "Foie custard with blood orange and cognac," he tells her. "Savory, and a little sweet. Try it. You won't be disappointed."

Sarah leans forward and reaches for one, placing it on the charger before her and dipping her sterling parfait spoon into the custard. She lifts a bite to her mouth, and the flavors explode on her tongue, complex, and succulent to the point of being sinful. Momentarily, her nervousness abates, giving way to a sweeping sense of satisfaction and delight.

"That is very, very good," she almost moans, taking another bite, her face morphing into a nearly pained expression. "So good."

"Yes," the king agrees, ignoring his own parfait spoon in favor of his finger. He dips it into his custard and takes a taste. "I am exceedingly fond of foie gras."

"It's my first time having it, but I guess I am, too," the girl remarks, taking another bite, then another. It's as if these flavors are *exactly* what she's been missing her entire life, and she can't seem to get enough of them now. Only faint memories of a sense of decorum keep her from licking the custard cup clean.

"It's something we have in common, then." Jareth's voice is deep, the words slow, and there is a teasing quality about them.

"I suppose it is," she answers carefully after removing the spoon from her mouth. The heat of the subtle pepper in the jam has built and her tongue tingles as her neck flushes pleasantly.

"Sharing things in common is important, don't you think, precious?" He dips his finger again, scooping up a small bit of custard and bringing it to his mouth, adding, "If our union is to be a successful one." He swipes the finger against his tongue, depositing the dollop of custard there, and
Sarah thinks she has never seen the Goblin King eat without the benefit of cutlery before.

It seems to be a night of firsts.

She tries again to broach the topic she wishes to settle.

"And about that union," she interjects deftly, "I was wondering about the wedding date."

Jareth bites his lip and regards her a moment, eyes dancing. "My, my, pet, I had no idea you were so keen on the idea of matrimony. Tell me, though, is it me your heart desires, or is it the crown?"

His question catches Sarah off her guard for a few reasons, not the least of which is that he has taken the conversation in a direction she had not imagined it would go. Flustered, her response is impolitic, even if honest.

"I have a crown!" she snaps.

"Yes, you have a crown," Jareth concedes, leaning back in his chair and waving his hand vaguely in the direction of the queen's head, "but I asked if you wanted the crown."

Suddenly, the weight above Sarah's brow increases exponentially. She reaches up and grabs her tiara, pulling it free of her hair and placing it next to her untouched goblet. She stares at what she has set on the blue and green brocade covering the table. No longer is the headpiece a dainty band of tiny diamonds arranged in a simple looping pattern. It has become something altogether different. Before her sits a circlet of heavy gold, imbedded with rubies of the deepest red. Sharp points rise from the circle, six of them, arranged at regular intervals and standing three inches off the top of the band. Between each point, strings of smaller rubies are suspended from overlapping gold chains, festoons of gems dripping down like droplets of blood or pomegranate seeds. Sarah stares the thing, at its harsh beauty, and she is filled with a sense of dread.

The six points appear knife-like, sharp enough to draw blood.

She reaches for her goblet then, careful not to touch the heavy crown which seems to taunt her, and takes a long swallow of her wine, hoping to quell her disquiet.

"It's not the crown I want," she insists. "Titles mean nothing to me, except in that they allow me to keep peace in the Labyrinth."

"Then why the rush to set a date?" It is clear the king is suspicious.

"You misunderstand me. I'm not rushing to set a date," Sarah explains. "I'm… I… I want to be sure we don't set it too soon."

"Too soon?"

"I'm… I'm just…"

"You're just what, Sarah?"

She shrugs. "I'm not ready."

The king is unfazed. "Of course not. No one is. It's not as though a royal wedding can be thrown together overnight. You needn't worry, my dear. There's plenty of time to plan. I should think we couldn't have the ceremony before at least the spring."

"The spring?"
"Mountain travel in the winter is far too treacherous, and I don't think the clans would look kindly on a royal invitation that would require them to risk their necks to attend, no matter how their chiefs may wish to enjoy your charming company once again."

"Oh." Sarah murmurs distractedly as she realizes Jareth has mistaken her meaning again.

Jareth takes her tone for one of disappointment. "My dear Sarah, I know politics is not something you would've dreamed you'd have to consider when planning your wedding, and I'm sorry that it has to be this way, but there are so many other areas where you will have complete freedom to choose. Surely waiting for a less-dangerous time of year for our allies to travel is a small price to pay to keep the peace?"

The girl is seized with the desire to make herself understood.

"The politics don't bother me at all," she tells him. "I'm not ready for the wedding because I'm not ready to be married, Jareth. I'm not ready to be... queen of the entire realm! I'm just not." She's shaking her head and her heart is thumping wildly in her chest.

The King of the Goblins gives a bemused little snort, his brow wrinkling. "Nonsense! Not ready? You've managed the Labyrinth beautifully, my dear. At times, I believe you are better at it than I ever was."

Despite herself, Sarah smiles at that. "Because I never had the rest of the realm and more than a dozen allies to manage at the same time."

"You're very kind to say that, but I've had far longer than you to learn to rule these lands, the Labyrinth included. I was born to this, and groomed for it. And despite that, the denizens of the Labyrinth have never shown me even a fraction of the love they bear their queen. And who can blame them? I share that same love."

Something inside of her pinches at his words, at his off-hand admission, but then a question bubbles up inside of her and she sets considerations of love aside for the moment.

"Jareth, did you give me the Labyrinth so that I could... prove myself?" Her voice is nearly a whisper as she asks. The king laughs and shakes his head.

"No, my sweet, I didn't give you the Labyrinth so that you could prove yourself. I didn't give you the Labyrinth at all. If you'll recall, you took it from me."

"I... I never meant..."

He waves off her contrition. "You took it, and you dedicated yourself to it, and in doing so, you've proven you have a natural talent for ruling. I have no doubt you will succeed in your new role, just as you've succeeded in the old one."

His words are kindly meant, which makes it hard for her to continue pressing her case, but press she does.

"I just need time, Jareth. You can do that, can't you? For me?"

"Well, the spring is merely the earliest acceptable timeframe," he admits. "Were you thinking perhaps the summer, then?"

"I was thinking... not so soon as the summer," Sarah breathes. The king lifts his wine glass and sips, watching her over the top of the crystal goblet.
"Oh?" he asks once he has swallowed. To the girl, it seems that Jareth's expression has hardened a touch. "So, exactly how far into the future do you see this wedding occurring, precious?"

"I was thinking... after my twenty-first birthday."

The crystal in Jareth's hand shatters as he squeezes. The sound of snapping glass makes Sarah jump.

"Three years," the Goblin King seethes, all traces of charm and forbearance erased. He seems to recalculate and his expression darkens further. "More than!" He looks as if he wishes to say more, but he draws in one sharp breath instead and then blows it out through his nose, his mouth pinching in a look of utter disgust. He stands abruptly, glaring at her over the platters of delicacies and expensive wines; over the shards of his goblet which now litter his plate, the brocade cloth around it, and even the uneaten dishes laid out before them.

Without a word, Jareth stalks around the table, his eyes locked with hers. When he approaches Sarah, she sits straight and still, not daring to move even a hair's breadth. Stiffly, the king reaches out for her hand, and, taking it, he bows, pressing a hard kiss to the back of it.

"My queen," he says formally, and his voice carries all the warmth of a harsh winter's storm.

Jareth stands tall and gives Sarah one last glare before turning on his heel and leaving the room.

She does not lay eyes on him again for three whole days, and when she dreams of the lightning and the crib and the quiet, empty house, there is no one to wake her and tell her it isn't real. There is no one to comfort her and say she has nothing to fear. There is no one to promise to guard her against the bad things.

Even if the bad thing is herself.
The Tragedy of Anna Karenina

Sarah sits up on her bed, legs dangling over the edge, her hospital gown falling just below her knees. *Hospital gown.* She frowns at that. It’s not her preferred garb, but she supposes the staff of Brooksong have their protocol when it comes to the attire of restrained patients. It is clean and white and just a little too stiff, like everything else in this place.

Her toes barely graze the cold tiles of the floor as she slowly swings her feet back and forth. She is rubbing at her wrists where the restraints had gripped them until a few moments ago, when Dr. Prevarant finally unbuckled them and released her. The girl’s head is tilted downward. All her dark hair falls forward toward her lap, but she lifts her eyes to gaze at the doctor through the raven strands.

There is a flash of memory then, from when she was younger; another man; another lap. The girl wets her lips with her tongue, feeling the dry flesh there and fighting the desire to pick at it. Instead, she continues staring at the doctor, watching him as he watches her in the dim of the room. If she were suddenly asked to choose one word to describe him in that space of time, she would say ‘wary.’

After her brief observation, she stops her repetitive rubbing and drops her hands down to rest upon the mattress, on either side of her thighs.

No need to appear dramatic, she decides, or agitated. The restraints have left no marks and she doesn’t think Dr. Prevarant is fooled by her stalling tactic anyway.

“What about this?” Sarah asks, indicating the IV needle in her arm with a nod.

“What about it?”

“Can you take it out?”

The doctor is quiet a moment, then says, “Let’s just see how this goes, shall we?”

She knows he means she is on a short leash; that he does not wish to remove the line in case he must restrain her once more and she has need of it. *It will save the nurses the work of poking me again,* she thinks grimly, but she does not protest. She does not wish to give him reason to believe she requires restraining. She wills the stiffness from her shoulders, her spine, languidly rolling her neck and attempting to give the appearance of someone who is at ease.

“Alright, then,” she replies as agreeably as she can manage.

They are silent a while longer. It has always unnerved Sarah how her psychiatrist can rest comfortably in the silence, looking into her eyes with no hint of annoyance or impatience. He simply waits for her to speak, accommodating; solicitous. She doesn’t understand how he masks his petulance or his entitlement so effectively (for it must be there, under the surface). She doesn’t understand how he endures this bleak façade without complaint (for he must long to make one). She doesn’t understand how he refrains from taunting her (for it goes against his very nature). She can well-imagine what insults and threats broil in his head now; what harsh judgements; what contempt. But he reveals none of it, not in his words, not in his demeanor, and she finds it completely maddening. His calm is like an invisible blade pressed hard against her skin; against her soul.
It lacerates her.

Sarah huffs a little to herself, watching him. His gaze is as unflinching as ever, and though there is not enough light to see such detail, she knows his eyes are the color of the waters of Antigua, as entrancing as a picture in a calendar.

Blue and green and unfathomable.

“Have you read Anna Karenina, doctor?”

“You were going to tell me about the baby.” The admonishment is a soft thing, but it’s an admonishment nonetheless. Still, Sarah does not change her tack.

“Anna had a baby.” She looks away from him then, toward the door. The slender rectangular window set into it allows her a view of the world beyond her own room. All she sees is the bright white of the hallway wall. “A son.”

“As I recall, she had two. A son and a daughter.”

“So you have read it.”

“Mmm,” Dr. Prevarant nods.

“Did you read it for pleasure, or for a school assignment?”

He hesitates before answering her, likely calculating what risk there is in revealing something about himself, however benign the detail may be. He seems to decide there is little enough hazard and tells her he took a Russian literature course in college.

“A psychiatrist who studied Russian literature?” Sarah grins. “Weren’t you too busy with all those science classes you needed to get into med school?”

“It would seem not.”

She laughs at little at that, amused by his droll tone. He sounds just like Jareth, she thinks. Sarah squints, studying the doctor’s chest, gazing at the breast pocket of his white coat, just over his heart. She wonders if she can stare hard enough to see the tiny movement of his coat there that indicates his heart is beating. After a moment, she gives up, shaking her head.

“Dr. Prevarant, do you know what the tragedy of Anna Karenina is?”

He sighs. The psychiatrist resigns himself to the discussion. “I have my own opinions, but I’m more interested in hearing what you believe it is, Sarah.”

Tell me about your mother, she thinks bitterly, the voice in her head mocking her doctor, but then amends the thought. No. Tell me about the baby. She glares at him, searching his face (and his eyes, shadowed as they are) for judgement or impatience or scorn. All she finds is his ever-present, irksome composure.

His cruel serenity.

“It’s that Anna made the wrong sacrifice. Her love was one her society wouldn’t accept. When faced with that rejection—society’s rejection, not Vronsky’s—she chose to end her own life. It was stupid. Pointless.”

The doctor’s nod is noncommittal and he crosses one leg over the other, folding his hands atop his


knee. When Sarah does not elaborate, he prompts her.

“You said the wrong sacrifice.” He raises his eyebrows as he pronounces the words.

“I did.”

“Indicating you think there was a right sacrifice for her to make.”

Her small laugh is humorless and raspy. She clears her throat. “She had such guilt. Such guilt for pursuing what made her truly happy. She felt guilty for simply wanting what she wanted.”

“And for abandoning her son,” Dr. Prevarant adds, his voice gentle.

“Yes.” The girl is sneering as she says it. “That guilt drove her to despair, and ultimately, to her death.”

The doctor stares at his patient a long moment before speaking. When he does, his expression is neutral, his tone deceptively even, but even in the gray of her room, Sarah can tell there is an expectation behind his eyes; a sort of awful anticipation.

“Do you identify with her, Sarah?”

Oh, wouldn’t that just be perfectly pathetic?

Her snort is derisive. “Not hardly! I’m still alive. I haven’t thrown myself beneath the wheels of a train. I would never do something so… pointless.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“Is it?”

The doctor’s brow furrows. “Of course.” He leans forward slightly. “Sarah, your mood, your state of mind, these are my primary concerns. Of course I’m glad to hear you haven’t sunk to such depths of despair that you’d consider harming yourself.”

The girl shakes her head. “That’s nothing to do with it, Dr. Prevarant. Despair,” Sarah scoffs. “Suicide isn’t a consideration for me, regardless of the depths of my despair.” She looks slyly at him.

“Regardless of society’s approval.”

“Are you saying that decision is independent of mood?”

“That decision,” she jeers. “You mean my hypothetical decision to not leap in front of a moving train like a character in a novel?”

“That’s your example, not mine.”

“Well, then, yes. I choose not to off myself, despite my mood, or the depths of my despair.”

“Again, I’m pleased to hear it.” Dr. Prevarant sounds sincere in his pronouncement. “And to what do you attribute this resilience?”

“I’m not sure that it is resilience.”

“What, then?”

Sarah shrugs. “It would just be the wrong sacrifice.”
“And what would be the right one?”

Still trying to lead me down the primrose path, doctor?

He’s pushing her harder than usual. She doesn’t like it. She drops her eyes to the long fingers he rests on his knee, interlaced and unmoving, looking for any tremor; any sign he is taking delight in this exchange. She finds none. Twin creases form just above her nose as her brows draw together and she looks into his eyes once again, wondering if she imagines the furor and fire behind them.

“Oh, doctor,” she murmurs, and it’s obvious she’s chiding him, “you already know the answer to that, don’t you?”

“Indulge me.”

Sarah smirks. “What have you done to earn my indulgence?”

Dr. Prevarant’s expression does not change. It’s all reason and control. His words, however, are sharp. “I released you from your restraints. Perhaps that was a mistake.”

A frown forms on the girl’s face. She’s allowed him to play her into a corner. She has no choice but to capitulate. In doing so, she thinks she may live to fight another day.

“Seryozha,” she spits.

The doctor seems puzzled for a moment. “Anna’s son? He was the right sacrifice?”

“Of course.”

The psychiatrist leans back and seems to deflate a little. “So, you believe Anna should’ve willingly given up her son in order to remain with her lover?”

The way your mother gave you up so she could remain with hers, he does not have to add. Sarah can practically read his mind.

“It’s the only choice that makes sense.” And it’s not the same thing. My mother didn’t give me up. Not really.

And he wasn’t her lover. Not in the end.

“Don’t you think she would’ve lived out her days embittered and unhappy, had she done that?” He seems as though he wishes to say more. She can see it on his face, his carefully neutral expression somehow tighter. His jaw works a little as he considers how to proceed; deciding what he can say that will be appropriate. She knows what he’s thinking. She knows Dr. Prevarant believes that for Anna, death was preferable to any of the lives she might’ve chosen, either a life without her beloved son or a life without her lover (and both lives fraught with the judgement of her society), but he can’t say that. He can’t be seen as an advocate for suicide as a solution. Not here, in this place, wearing that coat and staring across a small space into the eyes of his patient.

Not even when she’s assured him she would never do something so stupid.

Tolstoy has proven a useful ally today. Sarah is careful to hide her satisfaction with the way the tables have turned.

Perhaps now it’s the doctor who is backed into a corner.

“Whose life is perfectly happy?” the girl asks innocently. “We all have regrets, don’t we? No one
gets to be free from pain.”

Dr. Prevarant is cautious here, choosing his words with care. “In her dire emotional state, I think Anna believed her choice would end her pain.”

“Her choice ended everything. Her pain was gone, sure, but if she’d remained alive, who knows what joys she might’ve experienced in her life? She had a child with Vronsky. You pointed that out yourself. Maybe she would’ve had more. At any rate, she would’ve been with the man she loved.”

The doctor edges forward in his seat, uncrossing his legs and planting his wingtips flat against the floor tiles. He is gripping his knees with his hands and his voice has become gravelly as he speaks.

“So, you believe that trading your child for your lover is the correct choice.”

Sarah’s smile is slow, and it’s all the answer she gives him.

“But there’s risk,” he presses. “If Vronsky rejects her, she’s lost both her son and her lover.”

“Anna didn’t take the risk, and she lost them both anyway, and herself besides.”

“So, in her place, you…”

“I would’ve chosen happiness.”

“Happiness.” Dr. Prevarant pronounces the word with a certain skepticism.

She gives a hum of affirmation, bobbing her head. “Mmm. Yes.”

“And is that what you did, Sarah?”

His question seems to pull her up short. “What?” She draws her lips back slightly, so that her mouth is set in a near-snarl.

“Did you choose happiness?”

“We were talking about a novel.”

“No, Sarah, I don’t think we were.”

“You’re asking me about happiness?” Her face pinches angrily. “Do I look happy, doctor?”

“But you took the risk, didn’t you? It didn’t work out the way you hoped, but you took the risk. Isn’t that how you see it? That you made the right choice?”

Sarah’s eyes widen with fury, emeralds blazing with the heat of her rage. “You’re trying to trap me,” she growls.

“No, Sarah. You’re already trapped. You did that yourself. It was nothing to do with me. I’m just trying to understand you.”

“How can you say that?” She is seething now. “Nothing to do with you? It’s everything to do with you!”

*How dare he blame her! How dare he deny his part in all this!*

“You’ll have to explain that to me, Sarah.” His voice is like honey, smooth and sweet. That alone
should serve as enough warning for her to shut up, but she doesn’t. She can’t. She’s too incensed.

“You want me to explain how you took the baby from me? How you tried to keep him from me? How you wanted to keep him for yourself?” Sarah flinches, momentarily confused, because somehow, this isn’t right. *He never wanted the baby*. *He wanted her, but he never wanted the baby.* She shakes her head, the motion almost violent, as if trying to dislodge something tangled in her hair. She bats at her head, scratching at her scalp and pulling at her roots as she hisses.

“Sarah, you need to calm down,” Dr. Prevarant warns, but it’s as if she can’t comprehend his words. She continues scratching and yanking, muttering to herself.

“He *did* want the baby. He was going to make him a goblin.” She squeezes her eyes shut with enough strength that she feels an ache in her forehead from it. Her head continues to shake but she drops her hands into her own lap then, fistng her hospital gown. “But… he really wanted me. *Me*, not her. Until the baby. And then…”

There are images behind her closed lids, and they play in rapid succession, jumbled and baffling. The castle of the Goblin King with its impossible staircases and lurking tenants. The stage with its bright lights and props and beautiful actors spilling forth all their emotion for the pleasure of an enthralled crowd. A girl with her head full of dreams, reciting lines from a treasured book on the bank of a lonely stream. A man with blonde hair and lips which whisper every compliment a girl would wish to hear. A crystal and a masqued ball and silvery white dress. A kiss behind a curtain with a murmured promise and a wicked grin. A maze, and a darkened hotel suite, and a crib, all containing their own untold dangers and unnumbered hardships. One image bleeds into the next and the next and the next and the next until Sarah isn’t sure what’s memory and what’s imagination and what’s reality and what’s sin and crime and love and hate and cruelty and lies and manipulation and sacrifice and rejection and revenge.

Her chest heaves uncontrollably. Her face is wet with tears and she’s not sure when she started crying, but she’s not crying, she’s *sobbing*, and she can barely breathe with it. It’s crushing her, the weight of it all. She’s *crushed*.

When she feels a warm hand on her arm, she almost jerks away, fearful, but then the touch is so longed for, she presses into it.

“Jeremy,” she whispers.

“There’s no Jeremy here, sweetie,” a gruff voice says. “It’s time to go back to your room now.”

“What? I’m already in my bed,” Sarah protests, blinking as she gazes up from her chair at the orderly looming over her. He wears blue scrubs, rumpled and stained. She startles, then glares at his bearded face and he laughs.

“Sorry, sweetie. You’re not in your bed. Now, be a good girl and come on with me.” The man turns his head and speaks to another man standing at his side. “Help me with her, Dave. She fights sometimes when she’s alert.”

Dave is dressed in the same blue scrubs as the bearded man, but his are neater and unstained. They seem new. He wears a name badge clipped to his shirt. The bottom quarter of badge is a red band with white lettering over it which reads *TRAINEE*.

“How did I get here?” Sarah demands, looking around wildly. She’s in a dayroom, it seems, but it’s not *her* dayroom. It’s not *Brooksong*. 
“The same way you got here the last time you asked me that,” replies the bearded orderly as he unwraps the cloth restraints which bind Sarah’s wrists to the arms of her chair. The trainee moves over to assist, squatting down to release the restraints holding her ankles in place. “Keep an eye on her, Dave,” the senior orderly warns. “She broke the last trainee’s nose when her foot was free. Kicked him square in the face.”

“I never kicked anybody…” Sarah blinks, wondering if this is some sort of dream. It has that feeling, abrupt and nonsensical.

“Sure, just like you never killed anybody. I know.” The orderly unwraps her other wrist and pulls her to her feet as the trainee finishes unbinding the ankle restraints. “Time for bed, now, Sarah.”

“Where’s Sam?” she demands. “Who are you?”

“I’ve told you a thousand times, there is no Sam that works on this ward. In fact, I don’t think there’s a Sam anywhere in St. Mary’s.”

“St. Mary’s?” Sarah gasps. “What are you talking about?”

“No, mostly it’s like she’s catatonic. She snaps out of it every so often, and you have to be careful, because you can get hurt if she gets the jump on you. She’s a small thing, but she’s violent.” He looks down at her then. “Isn’t that right, Sarah? You’d bite my nose off if I got close enough to you for you to do it, wouldn’t you?” He laughs. “That’s okay, sweetie. Doc will be along soon to order your meds, and then it’s back off to La La Land for you.”

“Dr. Prevarant?” The name feels strange on Sarah’s tongue.

“Who’s Dr. Prevarant?” the trainee wonders.

“There is no Dr. Prevarant,” the other man replies, “just like there’s no Sam.”

“Let me go!” she screeches as cold terror begins to claw its way up her chest and into her throat. She can’t understand how she got here, or what’s happening, or why this man is claiming there’s no Dr. Prevarant, and it’s triggered her fight-or-flight reflex.

“Shh, you’re fine,” the bearded orderly tells her in an annoyed voice as they continue down the hall.

A nurse calls to him as they pass. “Need any help, Donald?”

“Nah, we’re fine. I’m just showing Dave the ropes. First time he’s ever gotten to meet Sarah!” the bearded man (apparently named Donald) calls back. He seems untroubled by Sarah’s growing agitation. To the trainee, he says, “Usually, she’s docile as a kitten, barely even knows where she is. Half the time, she’s muttering about being royalty, like, ‘Oh, my faithful knight’ and ‘yes, my king.’ Stuff like that.”

Sarah tries to bite him, but he avoids her deftly.
“What about the other half of the time?” the trainee asks.

“The other half of the time, it’s like she thinks she’s in juvie or something,” Donald reveals. “Which is kinda sad, really. I mean, if I was gonna lose touch with reality, I’d hang out at a Giants game, or maybe The Gentlemen’s Cabaret,” he says, referencing the nicer of the two strip clubs in town. He grins down at Sarah. “Why didn’t you pick Willy Wonka’s Chocolate Factory, honey? Or the spa? Anything but being locked up. Don’t you get enough of that here?”

“What are you talking about?” she screams, jerking fruitlessly against the hold the men have on her.

“How’d she end up in here, anyway?” Dave wants to know.

“Sarah? Oh, she’s pretty famous around here. Probably our most famous resident, at least on the women’s ward.”

“Would I have heard of the case?”

“Only if you weren’t in a coma eight or nine years ago,” Donald laughs. “The Williams case? Upstate? It involved a couple of pretty well-known Broadway stars.”

Sarah screams and kicks at them but they ignore her and continue dragging her down the hallway.

“Oh, yeah!” Dave says, recognition flickering in his eyes. “That was big news at the time.”

“Yeah, it was. It still kinda is. I heard there’s gonna be a book, one of those true-crime novels.”

Sarah thrashes and screams as the orderlies drag her through a door and into a dark room. Donald hits a switch on the wall with his elbow, flipping it on. The room is flooded with harsh light.

“Here we are, Sarah. Home sweet home,” he says. “Now, we’re gonna let you go, and if you sit down and act nice, we won’t have to call the nurses to restrain you. Whaddya say, honey? You gonna be good?”

She’s breathing hard, her chest heaving, and she glares at the men, but weighs her options and nods.

“That’s a girl,” the bearded man says patronizingly. “Nice and easy now.” He looks at the trainee and they both slowly release their grips on her, backing away. “Sit down, Sarah,” Donald commands. “Until we’re out of the room.”

She tenses, snarling, and considers rushing at them, hoping to knock one or both of them over so she can slip out of the door. But she looks at the size of them, and thinks of the dingy hallway, knowing she has no idea which way is out, or if she could even get through any door she’d find. Her shoulders sag. She backs up slowly and drops onto the narrow bed in the corner, suddenly tired.

The men leave her, closing the door behind them, and she can tell by the way it sounds when the latch clicks that it locks from the outside. Sarah sighs, her eyes drifting to the small bedside table next to the head of her bed. On it sits a box of scratchy tissue, her dog-eared copy of *Anna Karenina*, and a hardback version of Shakespeare’s collected works. She shivers.

“Jareth,” she whispers, “what have you done to me?”

The only answer she gets is a faint scratching sound behind the walls and the distant laughter of goblins.
The Madness of Ophelia

Sarah has not been sleeping well. The way her eyes sink darkly into her pale face is testament to that fact. Her days are spent drifting around the palace, tending to her duties, meeting with those she must, but it's plain to see she is weary and distracted. That's because her nights are a whirling carousel of crashing dreams, one layered atop the other, disjointed and odd. The strange narratives crack as she wakes, leaving her with only a collection of sharp fragments for memories; bright images that persist in her mind even after her eyes have fluttered open and she has taken in the familiar grandeur of her chamber.

The detritus of her dreams lingers, making her feel as though she somehow exists between worlds.

A nursery under dimming lights, and in it, a man embraces his dead lover, weeping as the audience collectively inhales, then explodes into thunderous applause.

A backstage dressing room, not so vacant or lonely or safe as it had at first seemed.

A kiss behind a curtain with a murmured promise ('Oh, Sarah, what fun we'll have. What fun, what fun, what fun...') and wicked grin.

A party, continental and dizzy, the beautiful guests gesticulating with martinis and Manhattans grasped in their palms, laughing easily and telling her how she is so like her mother, until her lids are sinking and she cannot see who it is that murmurs, 'I'll take her back. You stay, darling. Have fun.'

A hotel lobby, grand and rich, so large it swallows the sound of hitching breaths and fluttering heartbeats and the tentative clicking of new, tall heels against the polished marble tile as a hand grasps her arm to guide her.

A hospital bed, or, several, really, with a dark-haired girl laid out on each narrow mattress, the anguish plain on her face.

A crib, rails ghostly gray in the dying light of a stormy evening, and in the crib, oh, in the crib... all the sins of the father.

A wall calendar, forever displaying the month of July, represented by the aquamarine splendor of one small paradise.

A familiar man, serious and impassive, seated at a desk of faux mahogany, scrawling endlessly on a pad of paper, the words capricious as she tries to read them, writhing and shifting so that post-traumatic stress disorder begins to look like postpartum psychosis.

She peers at them all through a fractured kaleidoscope, these images. Tinted lenses slide in and out of her view, coloring all she can remember, red and blue and gold and green, and it's as if she sees only segments, the pictures disrupted by the splayed fingers she peeks through; her own at first, and then his, slender and pressed over her eyes, dragging down her cheeks until they curl into her mouth. When she wakes, she can still feel them cool against her skin, the tips tracing her lips lightly. She can still hear his voice, weighted whispers breathed into her ear.

'Hush, pretty girl. Hush.'

When she rises each morning, she dreads what the day may bring, but not near so much as she dreads what she knows awaits her each night.
Each night, when she's alone, and there's no one to wake her and tell her it's all just a dream, and she has nothing to fear.

After their ill-fated supper in Jareth's chambers, Sarah is informed by Sir Didymus that the next few days of preparations for the binding and betrothal are specific to their roles as king and queen-consort. This means their meetings with various advisors and under-justices are to be undertaken separately. She doesn't know if this is coincidence or if the king has somehow arranged it this way so he does not have to bother with feigning a cordiality he so obviously does not feel.

The way they parted weighs heavily on her, and she's torn between feeling stung or frightened or enraged and the uncertainty has her off-balance. Well, that, and her nightmares. But she tries not to dwell on those, though she does not always succeed. It irritates her that she cannot know if the king is similarly troubled, since he has not seen fit to grace her with his presence.

Still, the queen recognizes the logic in time apart from Jareth when she is informed she must choose a gift to present to him as betrothal custom dictates. Traditionally, such gifts are crafted of gold by goblin artisans, she is told, with input from the giver in order to impart a certain personal and meaningful touch to them.

How am I to choose a meaningful gift for Jareth when I don't know if I should cower before him, or scratch his eyes out? the girl huffs inwardly. Still, she dutifully keeps her appointment with the goblin goldsmiths who listen to her ideas and offer suggestions. Finally, they all settle on a gift and a design. She feels pleased with the outcome of the consultation, and can't help wondering what Jareth has chosen for her.

"It will be a fine thing, your majesty. Truly, a gift fit for a king," the chief artisan assures her, and the goldsmiths all bow as she leaves them to their work.

It's obvious to Sarah that she and the king must make some sort of peace before the betrothal announcement and accompanying fetes and feasts. If they don't, she thinks she may go mad. She's sure it's the stress of their quarreling that drives her nightmares and disturbs her rest, and with each passing day, her exhaustion grows. It threatens to overwhelm her.

Besides that, they have no choice but to find a way to coexist. Whether he forces her to wed him immediately after the binding, or agrees to wait her requested three years, or they come to some sort of compromise that makes neither of them completely happy, marry they must. Sarah doesn't relish the prospect of their union being strained and unpleasant from the start due to harbored resentments.

But how to offer the proverbial olive branch?

And how to tempt him to see reason and accept it?

He's been deftly avoiding her for days, and when she finally does see him, he's not rude outrightly, but he manages to treat her with no more warmth than he would a scullery maid or a common foot soldier. What's even more unsettling is that he seems to go about the rest of his business with no hint their squabble has affected him at all, masking his innate petulance and penchant for dramatics so thoroughly, she almost wonders if he's an imposter wearing the king's clothes. Though she cannot fathom where he has obtained his calm, the Goblin King seems endowed with a sort of cruel serenity which Sarah herself has been unable to master.

It sets her teeth on edge.

As the queen arrives for the final day of legal tutelage and required signatures before she is allowed to consume the binding tincture, she is disgruntled to see the king has arrived before her and is even
now seated at the table with his closest advisor, Lord Draimen, to his right, as well as Vergess Trindlebark and a host of clerks and legal scholars. There is only one empty seat, hers, and the king wears a bored look painted across his fine features as if she has somehow put them all out with her carelessly late arrival.

*When she had made a particular point to be a quarter hour early.*

"Ah," Jareth says, his voice all strained indulgence meant for the benefit of the others at the table, "there are you. Welcome, my queen. Now we may finally proceed."

Sarah's back stiffens. She does not appreciate being called out in this manner, particularly when she knows she is not in the wrong.

"Was there a change in the time of the meeting of which I was not informed?" she asks icily, approaching her chair. The king rises, long and elegant, and moves swiftly to her side, pulling her chair out and bowing. "I would hate to think I kept you all waiting, especially since I made a point to arrive early."

"Think nothing of it, my queen," Jareth replies dismissively, as though he is generous with his forgiveness, when they both know he is not. "We are all here now, after all."

She grits her teeth, but takes her seat and watches him walk the length of the table to take his own. They are now facing each other, monarchs at opposite ends of the room. The queen tries to find for herself some small bit of the composure the king seems to possess in abundance.

*It's not fair*, Sarah thinks, but does not say. She knows what his answer to that would be.

The meeting proceeds smoothly, with Sarah applying her signature here and there, the king lending her his seal as required, and Jareth nodding along to various pronouncements as though this is all quite expected and routine. It lulls Sarah into a comfortable sort of disregard. She gazes past a droning clerk, her lids growing heavy, slivers of her dreams from the night before ebbing and flowing in her mind. She blinks slowly and nearly dozes, her fatigue pulling at her like the sea dragging a drowning man into its ponderous depths.

Until the talk of *heirs* begins, that is.

The girl squints, her pulse quickening, and a slight prickle along her arms and neck pulls her back from the edge of sleep. She thinks perhaps she has misheard. After all, the talk has been almost exclusively about the betrothal and the binding, and the legal minutiae surrounding those events, up to this point. No one has much concerned themselves with the wedding, or *what comes after*. Sarah swallows.

"Why are we talking of heirs now?" she demands, stopping the bearded under-justice mid-sentence. "We haven't even settled on a date for the wedding."

She knows Jareth sneers as she says it, but she doesn't turn toward him to see the look for herself. She doesn't need to. She *feels* it.

"Your majesty, the binding," the timid under-justice replies, sounding rather helpless as he does. He looks to the Honourable Vergess Trindlebark for aid. The king's chief law advisor clears his throat.

"Your majesty," Trindlebark begins, "I thought you understood. We've spoken of it endlessly."

"We've said nothing of heirs," the girl protests.
"You agreed, my queen," Lord Draimen interjects, yellow eyes sharp, "when you returned from your tour of the Labyrinth."

"I agreed to marry the king, yes," she retorts, "but there was no agreement about… anything else."

The Goblin King snorts softly, drawing Sarah's gaze. When their eyes meet, he shrugs and his look is one of pity, though she would not attest to the sincerity of that. "My queen," he begins, his tone heavy with cloying kindness, "you agreed to, and I quote, 'make a blood oath.' Surely you recall, precious. At least, I certainly hope you do. You've signed at least a dozen decrees and agreements over the last week pledging the same."

"The king speaks the truth, your majesty," Trindlebark says as he studies the queen's perplexed expression with confusion of his own. "I told you as much nearly a month past, when the… issue was first presented to you. Do you not recall? I explicitly stated that before you could be allowed to bind yourself to the land, you would be required to make an unbreakable pledge. Look, here…" He shuffles through a stack of parchment, then lifts two separate documents which bear Sarah's signature. "Here are the pledges, signed by you. This one," (here, he shakes the document in his left hand), "you signed a mere hour ago."

"Yes, of course I remember that," the girl snaps peevishly.

"A contract," the chief justice continues, "signed and sealed with an oath of blood."

"Yes, I was there." The queen's annoyance is nearly palpable. "But I recall no blood. And what has that to do with… heirs?"

The king bursts into laughter, loud and unrestrained, as if he is unable to curb his delight in her ignorance.

"Oh, Sarah," he says after a moment, wiping a tear of mirth from his eye with the back of his hand. "My darling girl, what did you suppose an oath of blood was?" He tries very hard to keep a straight face. When she makes him no answer, he presses her. "Did you think we'd have you prick your finger with a needle and press a bloody thumbprint to a parchment?" His laughter begins anew at the idea and he actually claps his hands together.

"Well, I… I thought…" The girl colors as she stumbles over her words; over her misconceptions. She realizes she rather had thought it would be something like that; something like a few drops of her blood smeared on a document or two, or perhaps collected in a small, silver vessel to be buried in the heart of the land, under the full moon. At worst, she'd imagined a sort of secretive, dark rite that would require her to make a sizable cut to her palm with a ceremonial dagger while a circle of monks chanted around her.

She feels exceedingly stupid now, naïve, and it's doing nothing to improve her mood. She is dangerously close to snapping. To his credit, the king senses it and dismisses the advisors.

"Gentlemen," he says, disguising his amusement passably well, "if you'll give us the room…"

When they are alone, Jareth rises from his chair and makes his way carefully toward Sarah. Before he can speak, though, she glares accusingly at him, stopping him in his tracks.

"You knew about this?"

"Of course I did," he scoffs.

"And when were you planning to tell me?"
"What do you think poor Mr. Windbill was doing?"

"Mr. Windbill…"

"The under-justice you interrupted with your rant about heirs and wedding dates," the king explains. "Really, Sarah, did you have to dispirit him so? I fear he may never recover." His lips twitch as he says it but he manages to keep the smile from his face. The Goblin King seems far too diverted by the turn their meeting had taken for the queen's taste.

Sarah groans and buries her face in her hands.

"Jareth," she says after a moment, looking up at him, "why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"Well, for one, it hadn't occurred to me that you didn't understand," he says, taking the seat to her left. He narrows his eyes and stares back at her. "What did you suppose would happen when we married?"

The girl frowns. "I hadn't thought much beyond saving the Labyrinth," she admits. The king's expression sours at her words.

He mutters, "No. Of course you didn't."

Sarah bites back the scathing replies that edge their way to her lips. She reminds herself that she is meant to be offering an olive branch, not recriminations. Still, she is unsettled by the thought of being a mother, when she hasn't even reconciled herself to the idea that she will be a wife.

"I don't understand how this works," she says. "If I must bear an heir to satisfy a blood oath so that I may bind myself to the land, but I can't marry you until after I'm bound…"

Some of the king's consternation seems to melt away. He cocks his head slightly and regards the girl. Understanding dawns on his face.

"Ah, I see the cause of your confusion now. It's not bearing the heir that seals the contract. Well, no, that's not quite right. When you have our child, the terms of the contract will be fulfilled, but it's merely your pledge to carry out this blood oath that will enable us to offer you the tincture which will bind you. Do you see?"

"I…" Sarah's brow furrows as she plays Jareth's words over in her head. "So, I will sign the contract pledging to…" She wrinkles her nose a moment, trying to force the awkward words to leave her mouth. "…produce heirs for the Goblin realm, and in return, the contract is sealed and I'll be allowed to stay?"

"Mmm," the king hums agreeably, "though, strictly speaking, you've already signed the required contracts, and though they will enable you to receive the tincture you'll consume—the same tincture that will prevent you from being expelled and allow our betrothal to be announced and celebrated officially—it's not until you've…" Here, he looks at her somewhat apologetically, and says in soft tones, "forgive me, my dear, but it's not until you've… satisfied the terms of the contract that you'll be fully bound."

The girl feels a blush creeping into her cheeks, but tries to push her discomfort aside to ask a question.

"What does that mean? What happens if I'm not fully bound?"

"Nothing good, precious."
"Jareth!"

"You must understand, ours is an uncharted course, Sarah," the king tells her gently. "We have no recorded history detailing a human marrying a ruler of this realm. Our only guidance comes from a few ancient legends and the laws we've been poring over endlessly in recent days."

"But you must have some idea of what would happen if…"

"If you renege?" Jareth's voice is low, and tinged with threat.

"No, not renege. I wouldn't… But, what if… what if I can't?"

It is the king's turn to be confused. "If you can't," he repeats hesitantly.

"If I can't have children," Sarah whispers.

*It happens. She knows it does. She's seen it up close, hasn't she?*

"That would never happen, precious," he assures her. "There are measures, things perhaps not known in your world, but quite common here. Be easy. The only way you will leave your contract unfulfilled is if you choose for it to be so." The king pauses, then adds gravely, "Though I certainly wouldn't recommend that."

Sarah's mouth is dry. It astounds her that not so long ago, it had made her nervous to think the king might be merely watching her walk away from the dinner table, and yet here she is, discussing her *fertility* with him. She puts aside her own embarrassment to pose another question.

"What if… we choose to wait? What if we… put it off? Just for a while?"

Jareth snorts lightly and his lips curl into a half-smile, the meaning of which the girl has difficulty deciphering.

"Sometimes, my dear, I forget just how very young you are," he says, and he reaches out for her hand. The gesture surprises her and she is too flustered to protest when he pulls her palm to his lips and places a kiss there. "It must be hard for you."

And when he says it, his words are so tender, and so absurd, all at once. Hard for *her*. A palace. Gowns and jewels and so many fawning servants, she nearly trips over them when she gets out of bed each morning. She now attends state dinners and balls with the same frequency she once attended PTA-funded movie nights and school basketball games. She enjoys the adoration of her subjects and the respect of her advisors. She boasts a land to rule, one entirely hers, small and temperamental though it may be.

*It must be hard for you.*

Sarah nearly laughs, but doesn't, lest she cry.

"I never thought much about marriage, Jareth. Not really. And motherhood…"

"Yes. I know."

*Red and blue and gold and green.*

*No. He does not know.*

"And now, you say I must resign myself to both, and quickly, or else…"
"Resign yourself, Sarah?" There is censure in his voice and his manner is decidedly chillier as he parrots her words back to her. He releases her hand.

"I'm not yet eighteen!" she cries. "If I'd never come here, if I were back in New York right now, I'd be shopping for a homecoming dress, not designing a betrothal gift! I'd be looking forward to prom in the spring, and packing my things for college, not getting married and rushing to... to..."

"To bear my child?"

"To have a baby just to satisfy some ancient magical blood oath!"

Sarah seems to be edging toward panic. Her voice is pitched higher and her breaths are coming quicker; shallower. She feels cold all over. When she closes her eyes and tries to picture her future, her marriage and her children, she can't.

All she sees is a crib momentarily bathed in the flickering electric blaze of a bolt of lightning.

The queen jumps up from her seat so quickly, her chair is knocked to the floor with an echoing crack.

"Sarah," the king says carefully, rising and placing his hands out before him, a gesture of pacification; of de-escalation.

She stares at him, her eyes wild, and backs away from the table; from him. She's not looking where she's going and her hem catches one leg of her overturned chair, tangling and upsetting her balance. Down she goes, landing with a soft thud on the floor.

Jareth is there in an instant, on his knees at her side, grasping her hem to yank it away from the offending chair leg and surveying her anxiously.

"Are you hurt?" he asks more urgently than is strictly called for.

In answer, Sarah begins to weep. She's not hurt, of course. Not really. She's just confused, and worried, and frightened. She's... disoriented. She looks around, the walls and furniture and tapestries and Jareth all blurred by her tears. It's hard for her to even tell where she is.


She doesn't know what's real, and what's not.

Sarah sucks in her breath and blinks her tears away, scrambling backwards, trying to gain purchase on the slick stone of the floors with her hands, her grasping fingers, and the toes of her glittering slippers.

"Sarah!" the king calls, alarmed at her behavior. The girl simply shakes her head, back and forth, hard enough that the jeweled combs which hold her hair off her neck come loose and her locks tumble down. The combs fall then, crashing against the stone and bouncing, knocking several pearls loose from their settings and sending them shooting off in all directions. She doesn't seem to notice. Instead, Sarah pushes back into a heavy floor candelabra near the wall, one as tall as a man, and grabs at it, using it to pull herself up. She turns to go, but the king is on her before she can take that first unsteady step. He pulls her against him, her back to his front, and one of his hands presses softly against her throat, the other resting over her belly. Her head drops back against his chest and she closes her eyes against the tears that have started anew.
"Oh, Jer..." she starts, then shudders and whispers, "Jareth."

The Goblin King shushes the girl in his grasp, swaying slightly with her, as if beginning a delicate dance. "Hush, pretty girl," he tells her. "Hush."

Her heart freezes in her chest as he speaks and she wrenches away from him. Sarah does not look back at the king, but begins to run, bursting through the doors and into the corridor, ignoring him as he calls after her, ignoring Sir Didymus as she flies past him, and Lord Draimen, and a multitude of guards and servants who implore her to stop. She leaves them all behind, running through the main gallery, through the ballroom, through the small blue salon, through the glass garden, running without slowing until she finds the doors to the little-used side courtyard and from there, she stumbles through a back gate into Jareth's private, walled garden.

They find her there, hours and hours later, after the sun has sunk below the horizon and it has begun to rain. She's lost her shoes and her hair clings to her neck and back. Her white dress ruined, caked in grass and mud. She's on her knees, digging; clawing at the earth with her fingers, and she's muttering to herself.

"If you want him so badly, he's here. He's here, he's here, he's here!"

She doesn't seem hear the king when he speaks to her. She continues to dig. Jareth removes his cloak and throws it over her, barking orders at the guards who have accompanied him on his search. He lifts her easily into his arms, despite her kicking and pushing, despite her insensible ravings ('Goblin King, Goblin King, wherever you may be, take this child of mine far away from me!'), and carries her back into the palace. He brings Sarah to her chamber where a veritable army of servants and the court surgeon await and immediately begin tending her. Lord Draimen arrives on the king's heels and after listening to the queen's continued hoarse, hysterical chattering, the black wolf wastes no time in attempting to advance the course of action he believes is in the kingdom's best interests.

"Surely, sire, you must now see that this is all quite impossible."

The Goblin King's perfect brows raise haughtily and he fixes the wolf in his gaze. "What is it you find impossible, my lord?"

"This," Draimen hisses, one paw flung out toward the queen who now writhes in her bed, crying out angrily about someone named Lancelot. "You can't present her as your betrothed, not in this state."

"No, not in this state," Jareth agrees quietly. "The queen is not well."

"Yes." The king nods once, sober; earnest. "We will simply wait until she is."

The relief that radiates from the wolf is an almost tangible thing. "No, sire. She is not well."

"Majesty," the goblin croaks, bowing respectfully before departing the room and pulling the door closed behind her.

Jareth takes his seat, a cushioned stool near the head of Sarah's bed, and gazes down at the girl. She's fitful still, obviously dreaming. Almost without thought, the king's fingers curl around empty air which becomes a smooth crystal orb in his grasp. As he has so many times before, he pulls the
crystal to his eyes and peers inside, curious to see what it is the queen is dreaming. Unlike the other times, however, he is disquieted enough by what he sees that he steps in himself.

'Come away, Sarah,' he says as he watches her peer over the edge of the crib rail.

'You're him, aren't you?' she says shakily. 'You're the Goblin King.'

'Sarah, let's leave this place. There's nothing for you here.'

'I want my brother back. Please, if it's all the same.'

'This is a dream, precious. Deep down, you know that. Don't...' Jareth takes a step closer to her. 'Don't do this to yourself. You can choose...'

'But... I didn't mean it!'

'Sarah...'

'Please! Where is he?'

The king shakes his head sadly. 'You know very well where he is.'

'Please bring him back. Please!'

Jareth sighs. It pains him to deny her, but she asks the impossible. He tries one last time to convince her.

'Forget about the baby.'

'I can't.'

Of course she can't, not with all their talk of heirs and blood oaths. Surely that's dredged all this up. He does not understand human guilt, not fully, but he pities her for hers, even if she must cast him as the villain in order to cope with it. And he cannot fathom why she resists the one thing which will give her a reprieve.

If she would only love him. If she would only do as she says...

'Sarah,' he says, 'wake up.'

Glittering glass dust is all that remains of the crystal in his gloved hand, and it slips through his fingers and drifts to the floor as he calls out the queen's name again.

"Sarah, wake up, precious."

Her eyelids flutter and she blinks away the blur of sleep.

"Jareth," she rasps. "What are you doing here?"

"You were having a nightmare."

She drags a hand over her face, groaning. "I was." Her eyes narrow a bit as she looks up at him. "You were there."

"Was I?"

"And now you're here."
"Yes."

Sarah turns her head to the side so that she faces away from him. "You haven't been, though. Not for days. You were angry with me."

"I was," he agrees. "I was very angry."

"There was no one to wake me from my nightmares."

"I know. I'm sorry."

Sarah turns back toward him then, finding his eyes with her own and whispers, "I think that's why."

"That's why what, darling girl?"

"That's why I haven't been able to escape them."

"Your nightmares?"

"They follow me." She closes her eyes and sighs. "It's hard sometimes, to know the difference."

"The difference between what?"

She opens her eyes. "Between what's real, and what's a nightmare."

It is Jareth's turn to sigh, but he says nothing, merely nods. After a moment, he reaches into a pocket hidden inside his waistcoat. He pulls out a crystal phial closed with an ornate silver stopper carved with strange runes.

"What is that?" Sarah whispers, staring at the king's prize. The phial seems to reflect light despite the fact that the room is very dim. It glows from within, as though the contents are phosphorescent. She is charmed, and nearly hypnotized.

"The tincture," the king replies simply.

The girl's eyes grow wide and she pushes herself up on her elbows. "How do you… why are… Can you even have that?"

Jareth smirks, and the sight of it is comfortingly familiar to Sarah. "I'm the bloody king. I can have anything I want."

"Am I… supposed to drink that now?" She sounds unsure.

"Why not? You've signed every document they've pushed under your nose, you've pledged your oath, and your birthday is nearly upon us."

"But… I mean… here?"

He laughs lightly. "Is there somewhere else you'd rather do it?"

"No, I just thought… I don't know, I thought it would be a bigger deal, somehow."

Jareth grins wickedly at her. "We can make it as big a deal as you like, my queen. Shall I summon the madrigals to sing your praises as you sip? Do you wish me to rouse Lord Draimen and Trindlebark and Didymus to witness? I can have Cook whip up some of those raspberry tarts you're so fond of and the kingsguard can form a sword arch for you to promenade beneath, if you'd like."
He pauses as if considering matters of the utmost importance. "What sort of gown should you wear? I am exceedingly fond of your shoulders, so, perhaps something sleeveless…"

"Stop it," she giggles weakly. "You don't have to tease me. You can hardly blame me for not knowing. Everything around here is usually such an elaborate production, why would this, of all things, be any different?"

The king's expression becomes serious and he stares at the small phial cradled in his palm for a moment.

"Sarah, when you do this, the Goblin Realm will become your true home. It will have a claim on you that can never be fully severed. No one may send you away, not for any reason, at least not permanently, but you'll be a creature of two lands until you fulfill the contract."

"Until… until I have your baby, you mean."

"You'll be torn between the realms, and I don't know if… That is, I'm not sure how long you'll be able to withstand that sort of strain."

The queen is unable to completely mask the fear in her voice as she asks, "What will that do to me? That… strain?"

"No one knows," he says truthfully, shaking his head. "We've no choice but to allow you to drink the tincture before your birthday. Not to do so would…"

"Would lead to me being exiled, and to the destruction of the Labyrinth. I know."

Jareth's expression is grim. "You've asked me to delay our wedding until your twenty-first birthday. I hope you can understand my reluctance to grant your request now. I hope… I hope that you can understand my anger."

Sarah sits all the way up then, sliding her legs over the edge of her bed so that she may face the king. Their knees nearly touch. "You're worried for me."

"I don't wish to see you in pain. I never wish for you to hurt. I would do anything to stop it happening. Anything."

His eyes are dark and unblinking as his words become a growl. His look pulls at something deep inside of the girl. She gasps, biting her lip, and tears spring to her eyes.

"It's too much," Sarah chokes out, and it feels as though her throat contracts with her effort not to let her half-formed sobs escape. "You're promising me too much!"

"No," Jareth counters. "It's not too much, or too little. It just is."

It takes a moment for his words to sink in; for his vow to make sense.

When it finally does, Sarah is indescribably moved.

"Oh," she says, and flings her arms around his neck, pressing her lips hard against his. A small sound of surprise escapes the Goblin King at the girl's unexpected reaction, but then his hands are pressing into her back, and he moves her into his lap, breaking their kiss to stare down at her.

"The phial," he says breathlessly, and then the ornate stopper is flung against the floor and he's lifting the crystal to her mouth and she's drinking greedily. The last drop escapes the phial and clings to her
bottom lip, threatening to fall. Jareth's eyes narrow and he licks at her lip, saving the drop and plunging his tongue deep into her mouth to offer it to her.

Sarah is overwhelmed then, her skin burns, and her heart hammers away inside her chest. She's light-headed, weightless, and she does not know if it's Jareth's tongue in her mouth, or his hands sliding along either side of her spine, or the effects of the tincture which make her feel as though she is slipping into a dream.

"You love me," she murmurs, gripping the lapels of his waistcoat with her fingers. "You love me." He cannot tell if her words are a joyful declaration, or a request for reassurance, or triumphant recognition that long desired vengeance has been won. Truth be told, she cannot tell herself.

"Utterly," he snarls, plunging his hands into her hair, freshly cleaned and still damp. It smells faintly of gardenia. "As you do me." He grasps her roots, pulling her head back and baring her neck. He dips his head so that he may kiss her there. "Mmm," he moans as his lips move along her throat and he whispers to her as he reaches the space where her collarbones nearly meet. "That's why I don't understand your wish to make me wait."

Sarah finds it difficult to concentrate, but she knows she must. She knows Jareth needs an answer; some justification. She presses her fingertips to his lips, stopping his words; his kisses. When she looks down at him, his eyes flick up to meet hers. Free from the narcotic of his touch and the lull of his murmurs, her thoughts begin to clear and organize themselves.

"I don't wish to make you wait," she explains. "I simply want to… find my bearings first."

"Are you lost, sweetest one?" he teases. "What would ground you more than marriage? Than family?"

"This is no joke to me, Jareth." She sits straighter in his lap and then eases off after a moment, so that she's standing. She begins to pace about her chamber.

"Precious," he says, his tone almost scolding. His posture is relaxed as he watches her. "Tell me what's troubling you. Perhaps I might be of service."

The queen blows out a great breath. "It's just a lot, Jareth. I'll turn eighteen, and be your wife, and the queen of the realm, and… and a mother. And… it's just a lot!"

The Goblin King stands then, shoulders thrown back, and he peers at Sarah.

"I've told you of the danger if you wait…"

"A danger you can't even explain, because you don't really know!" she seethes. "No one does!"

"I'm only trying to protect you," he reminds her.

"But it's my risk to take."

The king bows his head in defeat.

"You're right. It's your risk to take. Your choice," Jareth says quietly. "No matter how great the mistake, it is yours to make."

Sarah presses her curled fist to her mouth, then strides across her chamber toward the king, taking his hands in her own.
"I'm bound now, and I've made the pledge you required of me."

"The pledge the realm required," he corrects her. She closes her eyes a moment, and seems to gather her strength before continuing.

"My point is, I'm not going anywhere. I'll marry you. I'll give you your heir. For God's sake, I love you. I just need this time now. I just do, Jareth." She squeezes his hands and leans into him, pressing her forehead over his heart.

The king sighs, releasing her hands so that he may wrap his arms around her. He leans his head down, propping his chin against the top of her head. In that posture, she can feel his words rumble up from his throat as he speaks.

"I can't deny you, precious, no matter the folly of it all, but you cannot ask me to watch while you tear yourself in two."

"You'll give me my three years?"

Jareth is silent for a long while. When he finally answers her, his voice is hoarse. "You may have them, if you'll grant me the same."

She doesn't understand, but she doesn't wish to press him and risk him changing his mind.

"Thank you," Sarah whispers, pushing up on her toes to kiss his jaw. He allows the kiss, soft and meek as it is, but when it's over, he stares down at her.

"Don't thank me, precious. Always remember, this was your doing."

He releases her and steps backwards, stiff and solemn. He bows, the movement crisp, then turns to leave.

The girl watches him go, her expression one of bemusement. After a time, she simply shakes her head and climbs back beneath her covers, suddenly weary. It's at least four more hours until the sunrise. She thinks to sleep on it all and talk more with Jareth in the morning.

When the morning does arrive, Sarah sits up in her bed and stretches, rubbing her eyes and thinking pleasant thoughts of kisses and arduous words and promises to wait. She smiles and glances over at the table near the head of her bed. When she spies it, her smile slowly dies and her fingers begin to tingle unpleasantly. She stands, clutching at her own throat with one shaking hand to stop her heart from leaping out of her mouth.

It's a plain thing, this table, and small, made of some sort of pressed board surfaced in laminate made to look as though it is wood. The fake grain is unrealistic. It tries to be oak but simply evokes cheap and utilitarian. Upon it rests a plastic cup with a bent straw, a battered copy of Anna Karenina, a small box of tissue, and a hardback book whose spine reads The Collected Works of Shakespeare.

Sarah approaches the table, shaking her head slowly, not understanding. She reaches out and brushes her fingers over the cover of the hardback book. The texture of it registers, all too real, and she realizes this is no dream; no nightmare. It's not too much, or too little.

It just is.

She screams.

The girl drops to sit on the bed, slapping her hands over her ears as she continues to scream. She
screams and screams until blue-clad orderlies and nurses unlock her door and rush in. She screams and kicks as they try to restrain her before she hurts herself, or anyone else, and her foot catches the small table, knocking it over and sending her few things skittering across the floor. The book of Shakespeare's works falls and opens to the spot where she has left a bookmark. No one notices. They are too busy fastening restraints and paging the on-call physician for orders. As the staff of St. Mary's works to protect Sarah from herself, the third act of Hamlet stares up at them from the floor.
Amanda Lewis stood on the porch of the tidy Dutch Colonial cottage waiting for someone to answer her knock. She had just enough time to begin second-guessing her choice of attire. The olive utility jacket with its snapping pocket flaps and carefully rumpled appearance had seemed unassuming to her despite its price tag, but now, it felt a little inauthentic.

*Like I'm trying to come off as an embedded reporter in Kabul or something.*

She snorted at the thought, tugging on the hem, shifting her weight back and forth in her riding boots. As the door opened, she froze.

"Mrs. Williams," Amanda said, clearing her throat. "Thank you so much for agreeing to meet with…"

"It's Miller now," the lean strawberry blonde at the threshold said, not waiting for the younger woman to finish. *She's grown her hair out,* her visitor noted.

"Hmm? Pardon?"

"I'm sure you can understand why I might wish to use my maiden name," the woman replied. "Here, I'm known as Irene Miller."

"Irene?"

"My middle name," she explained, moving aside to allow her visitor to enter.

*If Karen Williams wants to be Irene Miller, so be it,* Amanda thought. *As long as she gives me the interview, what do I care?*

"Well, Ms. Miller," she recovered smoothly, stepping through the doorway, "I really appreciate you allowing me into your home."

"Yes, well…" Her hostess closed the door and turned, leaving the foyer and passing under a wide archway to move into the adjacent room. Amanda hesitated only a moment, and then followed. "Please," Irene said, holding out a hand to indicate an expensively-covered wingback chair, "have a seat."

The younger woman nodded, doing as she was directed, slipping her messenger bag from her shoulder and setting it in her lap.

"Let me just get my note pad and recorder," she said, smiling apologetically as she dug through the bag and pulled out the necessary items. Looking up through the fringe of her chestnut bangs as she laid the bag on the ground next to her chair, she continued, "You have a lovely home, by the way."

The older woman settled herself on a small Chippendale sofa situated across an oval coffee table from Amanda. She dipped her head once at her guest's compliment but said nothing. Instead, she scrutinized her, watching as the young woman laid the recorder on the table between them.

"You don't mind, do you?" Amanda asked. At Irene's lack of protest, her guest began recording. "It's October thirteenth and I'm interviewing Kar… Irene Miller in her home."

"You won't include that name in anything you write?" It might've sounded like a question, but it was
clear the point was non-negotiable. "It's taken years to find any… peace. I guard what little I have carefully now."

Amanda shook her head, reassuring the older woman. "I understand."

Irene laughed, making it apparent she felt her guest couldn't possibly understand, but said nothing further about it. The younger woman took a breath and continued.

"Ms. Miller, what are your earliest memories of your stepdaughter? What sort of child was she?"

Irene folded her hands in her lap, the small movement somehow graceful and steely, all at once. Her lips pressed together for a moment, making a thin, tight line, and then she spoke.

"Before I answer, I'd like to know exactly what it is you hope to accomplish here, Mandy."

Amanda's brow furrowed at her hostess' words, and she tucked a lock of her wavy hair behind her ear. The movement was a sort of tell. Her voice was quiet as she spoke. "No one has called me that in a long time." She smiled a little, then attempted to address the woman's suspicions, "Mrs. Wil… Ms. Miller, as I told you on the phone, I'm researching the… case… for a book, and I want to be sure I give you and your family the opportunity to have your side of the story heard and…"

Irene cut her off in an icy voice. "I don't have a family anymore, dear."

"Well, but that's not strictly true, is it, Ms. Miller? Sarah…"

"That girl is not my family." The words were pronounced with an edge sharp enough to cut but the younger woman ignored the warning in them and leaned forward in her seat, bracing her elbows against her knees and resting her chin on her interlaced fingers.

"Then why are you still listed as her next-of-kin on her paperwork at St. Mary's?"

Irene's eyes narrowed.

"You've been to St. Mary's." The words were spoken with more resignation than surprise. Irene folded her arms across her chest and turned to gaze out of a window to her right. She sighed, her eyes tracing the trunks of twin maple trees on her front lawn as she did. After a moment, she continued. "After her father died, there wasn't anyone else."

"Is that really the only reason?"

The woman frowned. She was quiet long enough that Amanda began to wonder if she'd even heard the question. Finally, Irene spoke. "Aside from the authorities, I'm the first call they'll make if they were ever to decide to release her. Or, if she escapes. Or if she dies."

The younger woman nodded, understanding. "Ms. Miller," she said softly, "I'm not trying to cause you any discomfort…"

"Discomfort!" Irene scoffed, snapping her head to stare at Amanda. "Oh, my God." The derision in her tone was thick and unmistakable.

The younger woman drew in a slow breath, telling herself it would do her no good to get heated. She needed this interview. There were things the old news stories and court transcripts didn't include. She enjoyed her job at the paper, but she'd never viewed it as more than a stepping stone. The idea for this book had been rattling around in her head for years, coming to her while she was still an undergrad (coming to her after she'd read yet another sensationalized article about the case).
Without Karen (Irene, she mentally corrected), she'd have nothing to set her book apart; nothing to make it worth publishing. Well, nothing besides her own connection to the case, but that was tenuous enough not to matter. It got her foot in the door, but her assurance that she could use that connection to get this interview was the only thing that had sparked more than a passing interest in her pitch.

"True crime is a hard sell," her agent had told her. "You need an angle, and you have to be able to tell the story with the sort of detail the newspaper and magazine articles lacked."

"I can have it ready by the tenth anniversary," Amanda had promised. "Sarah Williams and I were best friends from kindergarten until we started high school. I had sleepovers at her house. I knew the family."

Her agent's eyebrows had risen at that. "So, you think you can get Karen Williams to talk? Because that would be quite a coup. She's never spoken publicly about the case."

"I ate chocolate chip cookies in the woman's kitchen. I'm pretty sure I'm the only one who can get her to talk."

Amanda rearranged her expression into one of compassion. "I remember him," she said softly, dropping her eyes to the table. "Sarah and I had sort of fallen out before Toby was born, but I came over once, when he was a few months old, to drop off some assignments for a class we had together. The teacher asked me to, since I knew where she lived." She bit her lip and flicked her eyes up. Irene stared intently back at her, hardly breathing. "You opened the door, holding him on your hip. He was all smiles, cooing and squealing. He just seemed… happy. Maybe the happiest baby I've ever seen."

The older woman swallowed, her blue eyes becoming shiny with unshed tears. Amanda leaned forward, just a little further, and her voice was hushed as she continued.

"I've read every article ever published about this case, watched every TV news report I could find, and read all the transcripts of the hearings. I've spoken to as many of Linda Williams' friends as I could track down, and the one thing I realized is that in all of those encounters and reports, in all the telling of the story of what happened, there's no Toby. Nothing beyond 'victim,' and I don't think that's right. Toby is worth more than that." Her eyes narrowed. "I think Toby is worth remembering as more than that. Don't you?"

Irene stood and left the room quickly, calling back to her guest as she did. "I'm going to make some tea. Would you like some, dear?" She controlled the shaking in her voice admirably well.

"Uh, sure," Amanda answered, straightening. "I'd love some tea."

By the time Irene returned carrying a silver tray loaded with tea things, the younger woman noted her hostess had managed to gain control over her emotions, though the red rimming of her eyes indicated at least some tears had been shed first.

As Irene offered a delicate china cup filled with steaming chamomile tea to her guest, she said, "So, you want to tell Toby's story?"

Amanda accepted the cup, spooning a generous portion of sugar into it and stirring as she answered. "I want to tell the story. The whole story. The truth of it all, not some highly sensationalized portion about a murder-suicide in the theater world, or a polarizing version that insists a teenage girl must either be a helpless victim of abuse or a Lolita-type temptress. There's no room for Toby or a grieving family in all that."
"Why should the world care about Toby?" It clearly pained Irene to pose the question, and Amanda sensed the woman's defenses weakening.

"Isn't he worth caring about?" she asked softly. "Shouldn't the world know what was really lost here?" When Irene didn't answer, the younger woman pressed her gently. "Your story, Toby's story, is what's most compelling. Just because it's not as salacious as a Svengali character betraying his lover and manipulating her daughter, or an enraged woman shooting her daughter's alleged abuser…"

Irene laughed bitterly. "Alleged? Oh, my dear…" She sneered and changed course. "And Linda Williams, lifting a finger to defend her daughter? Hardly! Didn't you read the suicide note?" The woman studied her guest over the rim of her tea cup as she sipped. Amanda gave her a small nod. "Of course you did."

"And what do you think I should've learned from it?" the young woman asked, jotting a quick note in her pad.

"That for Linda, it was never about Sarah, at least not about protecting or… avenging her." She shook her head, and her eyes became shiny again. "I'll never forgive that girl for what she did, but even I can't deny she was cursed with the most narcissistic, shameful, brutally selfish excuse for a mother that ever did live."

"Several glossy magazines ran stories that painted her as a woman driven mad by what happened to her daughter. She comes off pretty sympathetically."

"There were several grocery store tabloids that ran stories about her as well. Some even involved alien body snatchers, as I recall. Just because it was printed doesn't make it true," Irene scoffed. "Linda was driven mad, alright, but by a twisted sort of jealousy. She wasn't so bothered by what happened to Sarah, just that it meant Jeremy betrayed her. To Linda, it was a rejection. She was enraged that she'd been replaced." The woman took another sip of her tea, then added, "If Sarah had been with her mother that night, I'm not entirely certain which of them Linda would've shot. Maybe she would've killed them both."

Amanda was stunned by the callousness of the idea. "That can't be right…"

"You didn't know Linda Williams. There was no tragedy on earth she couldn't make about herself. It was her greatest gift."

The younger woman was silent for a few moments, thinking. "Surely you see, then," she began.

"What do I see?"

"That your side of things needs to be told!"

"My side isn't a side, Mandy. It's not something that can be debated or refuted or agreed upon. It's what happened, and how it…" Irene took a slow, deep breath, giving herself a moment. "How it changed my life, how it changed so many lives, into something… altogether different. Something unrecognizable."

"Of course. And I should've said sooner, but I am so sorry for your loss."

"Thank you." The response was automatic. Irene placed her teacup in its saucer on the low table before her. She stared down at it a moment, and then began to speak quietly. "What you need to understand is that for you, and for the rest of the world, what happened is a fascinating story. Or a horrifying one. It's a tragic event in the past made more interesting by celebrity involvement. But for
me, it's something else entirely." She looked up at the young woman who sat in perfect stillness, her attention rapt. "For me, it's the worst moment of my life, and it's as if... as if my life is forever stuck in that moment, frozen there, and I can never move past it, or have other, better moments. For me, there is nothing else. Only this aching, crushing emptiness that I live with every single day, stretching out endlessly, without any hope of relief."

Amanda nodded slowly. She paused, then asked, "And what is it for Sarah?"

The answer was spoken tonelessly, as if Irene were too tired to put any emotion behind her words.

"I don't care."

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*For a few minutes, Sarah's world is reduced to specific sensations: Fear and confusion making her heart throb painfully behind her ribs. The grip on her arms. A cacophony of voices, some directed at her, some at each other. A flash of blue before her eyes, the scrub top of an orderly, she thinks. Then something bites her hip, and it stings."

'A snake!' she thinks wildly, but that can't be right. The snake wasn't real. It was just an old scarf; a trick of the cruel thief-king who had stolen something precious.

*It is that image, Jareth in black, menacing and enticing and commanding as he stands before her in her parents' bedroom, that stays with her as her lids drift closed.*

Sarah tumbles for a while in darkness, then in light almost searing in its brightness. Finally, she her mind settles, stills, and her eyes are still closed, but she can feel what's beneath her. A mattress. Soft, then hard, her head pressing first into a fat pillow filled with feathers, then into a flatter one, made of an unforgiving sort of foam, the case scratchy against her cheek. As she moves between worlds, her nostrils fill alternately with the scent of freshly baked raspberry tarts and a harsh chemical odor, like a mixture of bleach and cheap soap. She wrinkles her nose, the need to sneeze irritating her with prickling insistence.

She opens her eyes, and she's not in her chamber in the Goblin King's palace or in her locked room at Brooksong. She's not even in St. Mary's. Instead, she's sitting at the vanity table in her childhood bedroom, staring into a mirror with edges decorated haphazardly, lined with newspaper clippings and playbills and photos (pictures of her mother; pictures of Jeremy). (Pictures of Sarah, sandwiched between the two of them, three faces squeezed in close together, all wearing such curated, dazzling smiles.)

"But... I just thought it was a stomach bug!"

Sarah turns away from her reflection and the counterfeit sanguinity which surrounds it to see who's speaking. It's Karen. She's not in Sarah's bedroom, but then, neither is Sarah. They're in the doctor's office. Sarah's pediatrician, Dr. Ingalls, sits in a chair, his arm resting on the small desk he uses to write in his patient's charts as they chat. Karen is standing, though, right in front of her stepdaughter. The doctor's face is somber. He has just delivered some news. Karen's face, though... 'Shock' is the most apt description the girl can conjure for what's on Karen's face.

"Sarah, who is it?"

The girl's mouth drops open but no sound emerges. Tears begin to roll down her cheeks.

"Who, Sarah?" her stepmother demands again, her patience waning. Sarah can't answer. She's too busy choking back sobs.
"Mrs. Williams," the doctor tries, "I know this is a bit of a shock, but perhaps…"

"Is it that Lewis boy? Luke?" the woman seethes, ignoring the pediatrician. "Did he do this?"

"No!" Sarah wails. "We're just friends!" She swipes at her nose which has begun to run in earnest. "We... were friends. I haven't even seen him since..."

"Then who, Sarah?"

"Mrs. Williams..."

"Thank you, Dr. Ingalls," Karen snaps. "Sarah, get your things. We're going home."

"If you'd like, I can refer you to..."

"No, thank you, doctor. We'll... we'll call you if... if we need any... referrals."

Sarah slides off the exam table, the butterfly decals on the walls distracting her momentarily, making her wish she had wings, too, so she could fly far away from the doctor's office and her stepmother's distress and disapproval.

"Sarah!" Karen says, commanding the girl's attention. "Push!"

Sarah is staring up at a white ceiling, no butterflies in sight, and the only things she has to distract her from her pain are the seams between the square acoustic tiles overhead. She wonders how many she can count before the next...

"Push!" Karen urges again, "he's almost here!"

She's burning, she's burning, she's in Hell and she's burning. Her armpits are hot and prickly and her hair itches against her neck where it sticks to her skin and she growls and grunts, deep and long, the edges of her vision crowding in brightly as she does. The fire is intense and concentrated, reducing the whole world to a single point of pain and despair. She can't believe how much it hurts until something gives and then it's over. She collapses backwards, gasping, and the light that had seeped into her eyes drains away, leaving her motionless and exhausted in a dim, cold room. She begins to shiver violently.

There are people all around, nearly faceless people, masks and eye shields and flimsy, blue caps obscuring their features. She can't tell if they smile or frown at her; at him (at his angry, rasping cries); at the whole laughably unoriginal tableau. Karen is weeping and squeezing her hand and murmuring to her but Sarah doesn't really hear any of it.

That evening, her father kisses her forehead and calls her "kiddo" and tells her not to worry. The expression on his face seems permanently caught between sadness and disbelief. Sarah is certain that's the only way he'll ever look at her again.

Her mother comes on the second day, by herself, after Karen and her dad have left. She couldn't get away sooner, she says, and she doesn't look at him, or ask to hold him. Not once. Deep down, Sarah knows it's because Linda is afraid of what she'll see, who she'll see, if she does. Her mother has always been good at pretending, she'd made a career of it, after all, and she pretends for an hour and a half before she leaves. The first act, and the second.

Later, Sarah's stepmother and father return. There are papers, and she signs them because they tell her how much easier it will make things for everyone, and with a few strokes of a pen, she changes from a mother to a sister. And she realizes then that Linda isn't the only one who's good at
"Mono," Amanda said, sipping her tea distractedly. It had long-since cooled, but that didn't to matter to her. Her eyes narrowed and her gaze drifted as she pulled at the memory. "That's what we were told. A bad case of mono."

Irene shrugged. "It seemed better to tell a little lie and leave the door open for her to return to school without the… stigma."

"Her brother," the young woman continued. "All the reports; all the transcripts. They all refer to him that way."

"And he was. Legally."

Amanda leaned back in her chair, her expression one of dawning comprehension. "Jeremy didn't just… molest her. He..." Her eyes flicked up to Irene's. "Toby was his son. Jeremy's and Sarah's..."

"He was my son!" Irene snapped. "From the first minute he was born! Mine."

"How... how did you keep it out of the papers?"

"Sarah was a minor. And a rape victim."

"But... with all the reporters nosing around, the police investigation... how has this remained secret for so long?"

"The adoption was sealed, and no one who knew had any motivation to reveal Toby's parentage."

"Sarah's lawyer?"

"He understood that nothing was going to keep her from a long-term commitment to a mental asylum. Once the plea deal was hammered out, and Jeremy was gone, the case was closed. There wasn't much call to publicize those details."

Amanda shook her head. "I'm such an idiot. Mono." She looked at Irene. "Before she stopped going to school, I knew something wasn't right. She was out of it; treating me differently, avoiding me. And my brother. I was so angry with her over it! And she never told me..." Her face fell. "I wrote her a nasty note. Luke was so hurt. He'd had a crush on her for as long as I can remember. I thought she was snubbing him for some sophisticated city boyfriend she'd met when she was visiting her mother." She laughed at the irony of that.

"You couldn't have known. None of us knew, until well after it was too late."

"I should've pushed it, though. I should've forced her to tell me. Instead, I made assumptions."

Amanda swallowed. "I was awful to her." She shook her head. "I wish..."

"She wouldn't have told you," Irene said softly. "She'd become so withdrawn, so moody. She retreated more and more into her fantasy books, playing pretend like a young child. Robert and I thought it was a moody teenage phase. Hormones. And after Toby was born, it got worse."

"When did you... when did you know? About..."

"About Jeremy?" Irene breathed in then laughed darkly, shaking her head. "Not until the police told
us, well after the funeral. They'd done DNA testing as part of their investigation. When we found out, Robert nearly lost his mind. He called Linda, screaming, accusing her of all sorts of horrid things. Not that they weren't true, mind you. She was negligent. She had allowed it to happen. If she'd been paying attention, if she'd just been more of a mother to that girl…"

"Then there would've been no Toby," the younger woman murmured.

Irene nodded, a sad smile shaping her lips. It was clear she had struggled with the idea herself. She blinked away tears before she spoke again.

"That night, Linda shot Jeremy. Afterwards, she swallowed everything in her medicine cabinet. Two days after that, Robert was gone. Heart attack." Irene's voice cracked. "In the space of a month, I lost everything in the world that mattered to me."

"I'm so sorry." Amanda wasn't sure what else to say.

"Every day, I wonder how we didn't see it. Every day, I think of how I might've stopped it; of how different my life would be right now if I had."

"Why do you think Sarah did it?"

Irene shrugged. "Maybe she couldn't face what happened to her. Or, maybe she wanted to punish Jeremy. Maybe she wanted to punish her father, me, for not protecting her." She sighed. "The doctors said she didn't really know what she was doing; that she was in a deep psychosis and thought she was saving Toby, somehow."

"Saving him? From what?"

"From whatever wild hallucinations she was having at the time. Goblins. Fairies. Angels and demons? Who knows? She was babbling incoherently when we came home that night. She said she'd been running for hours, through a maze, and there were talking animals, and talking stones. A king, she said. He'd stolen Toby away. And creatures in the mirror. The mirror, and oh, God, the crib…" Irene buried her face in her hands.

Amanda had seen the crime scene photos. She'd spent a lot of time scrutinizing them, trying to decide what she could actually publish in the photo-insert in her book, and what would be too gruesome for the average reader. The still photos were terrible, but they were just photos. She'd never really given much thought to the reality of it; how it must have been to be there and actually see it.

"Maybe we should take a break," the young woman suggested softly. Irene seemed not to hear.

"At first, I didn't see him. She'd wrapped him up in his little crib quilt." The woman's shoulders shook as she cried. "She'd gone with me when I bought it. I thought she might like to help choose the crib set and the layette, but it was like she wasn't even there. She just stared through everything I showed her."

"Cartoon whales," Amanda said.

Irene scrubbed at her face, wiping her eyes and nodding. "Green and gold whales with silly smiles, bobbing on blue waves. It felt so… oh, happy, I guess. It just looked like something made for a sweet little boy, and it felt happy."

The crime scene photo Amanda had seen was anything but happy. A tiny body, wrapped in the baby quilt with its smiling whales obscured by the blood soaking through it. Shards of mirror littered the surrounding sheet and one long piece, its sharp edge coated in sticky red, had been laid carefully
where little toes peeked out from the edge of the ruined quilt. The coroner's report and the fingerprints left so carefully on that bloodstained shard had confirmed it as the murder weapon, though why a piece of broken mirror rather than any of the multiple sharp kitchen knives available in the home had been less certain.

*Of course, tackling the 'whys' of the case was one of the main points of writing this book,* Amanda told herself. With Irene's revelation about Sarah's pregnancy, the *why* had become infinitely more complex.

*Rape. Statutory, at least.* Amanda wondered how Sarah would characterize her relationship with Jeremy, if she were sane enough to even discuss it. *Then, living the lie of her relationship to her own child. Her mother, not protecting her. Or, her father, for that matter. The isolation. Then some sort of psychotic break.*

*Creatures in the mirror…*

There were a dozen sordid little checkpoints on Sarah's tragic road, it seemed, each one drawing her further and further along her dark path.

"I loved her like my own daughter," Irene said softly. "She didn't make it easy, God knows, but I did. And then she… she gave me the greatest gift imaginable. She gave me my son." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Can you imagine it? She gave me the person I loved most in this world, and then she took him away. I can't hate her, not truly, because without her, there would be no Toby. But I can't forgive her either. Not ever."

Amanda thought of it all, and wilted. Sarah was as much a victim as she was a villain in this story, and she wasn't sure how she should feel about it. The mind, ever delicate, could only stand so much pain before it began to unravel. How much blame should Sarah bear for the tragic outcome of her story? Even if she thought she loved Jeremy, if she was enamored with his glamorous and romantic image, she couldn't know how her relationship with him would shape and define her; how it would distort her life. And if she didn't love him… if, indeed, he preyed upon her, using his position of authority in her life to exploit her, and if those charged with her protection failed her so utterly, how much fault should be laid at her feet?

*The police reports written by the officers at the scene had described the perpetrator's ravings. Most of it was nonsense, things like the crib was empty because the baby had been stolen away by goblins and a snake had been thrown at her by a mythical prince or something equally unlikely. She said an owl had shattered the glass of the window panes in the French doors leading to her parents' balcony, turning it into a shower of glitter. Of course, it was the mirror of her own vanity which had been shattered, and her hands were noted to be covered in scratches and cuts from where she'd carried the pieces down the hallway and scattered them in Toby's crib. She talked about falling down a hole, grabbed by thousands of hands, and being left in a dark pit. Now, Amanda wondered if that weren't her way of describing how helpless and alone she felt leading up to that night.*

"Do you think she understands?" the younger woman asked. "Does she realize what she's done?"

Irene shook her head. "I have no idea. God help her if she does."

"You really haven't spoken with her? Not in all these years?"

"Even if she could string three coherent words together, what could she say that would make a difference now?"

Amanda sighed heavily and nodded. After a few moments, she leaned over and turned off the
recorder, thanking Irene for her time. She packed her messenger bag and left the little white house, driving back to the city while old memories played in her mind. Sarah skipping rope in the Lewis' driveway while Mandy chanted. *Cinderella dressed in yella went downtown to see her fella.* Luke dressed as Chewbacca while she and Sarah wore matching Princess Leia costumes for trick-or-treating at Halloween. Their first scary movie (it wasn't that scary, most of the characters were puppets, after all, but it seemed like it at the time). Staying up late at a sleepover, painting each other's toenails.

When had it all started to sour?

When had the dark turn started in her friend's mind?

How had she not seen it?

"We were just kids," Amanda muttered, turning up the volume on her car radio. "I couldn't have done anything."

By the time she arrived home, her mood had improved and her thoughts turned toward typing of her notes.
The crying is driving her crazy. It's like nothing she's ever heard before. Loud, high-pitched wails bounce down the hallway with chaotic force and assault her ear, even though she has shut her door with a vow not to hear. She's seated at her vanity table, staring into the mirror. The noise causes her lips to press themselves into an angry pucker. The muscles she uses to form the expression actually ache with her intensity. She glares at herself, then through herself, the reflection of her eyes flashing back at her, urging her to put an end to this.

The reflection, and the overlapping laughter that doesn't sound quite human. Then, she hears a whisper, soft and seductive.

'Are you an ordinary girl who takes care of a screaming baby?'

She jerks her head to look at the photo taped to the bottom corner of her mirror: Sarah with her mother and Jeremy. She would swear that was where the voice had come from, but the picture is just a picture, flat and silent, showing the impish smile forever frozen on her lips while Jeremy and her mother gaze down at her with loving looks.

Loving.

Now, there's a laugh.

Frustrated, she rises and paces, then notices something is amiss. Lancelot. His cubby is empty.

(She thinks about the first time she ever saw Lancelot. As her mother was introducing her to Jeremy, he'd brought a gift out from behind his back with a smile, saying, 'I'm told little girls are fond of teddies.')

Her rage is blinding and she grabs the nearest object, a music box topped by a figurine dressed in a shimmering ball gown. The white-clad lady will twirl in time with tinkling music when the key is wound, but she is still and quiet now.

As quiet as the grave.

The music box had been a gift as well; a recent birthday present from her mother, arriving in the mail nearly three weeks late with a small note ('Sorry I can't be there, darling. We're in Italy another month at least. Jeremy sends his love'). It's a thing for a younger child, really, with its spinning doll and tinny tune; something Sarah is too old for, though she often thinks her mother only remembers her as the little girl she left behind rather than the teenager she is. With a shriek, Sarah hurls the box against the mirror, shattering her own snarling reflection and causing the figurine to snap off its heavy base. The white lady comes to rest atop a bed of ruined shards and stares up at Sarah.

"You have no power over me," the girl whispers. Only that faint, inhuman laughter answers her.

The next thing she knows, she's gawping at the empty crib, unsure how she even got to her parents' room, or when. Toby is gone but the laughter remains. A stranger stands before her, tall and imposing amid a shower of glittering glass which has burst from the panes of the French doors and turned to sparkling dust. Lightning flashes behind him and Sarah gasps.
"You're him, aren't you?" she asks in tremoring tones.

Sarah bolts upright, panting, patting wildly at the bed around her. "Toby!" she calls, breathless. She whips her head back and forth, searching, but she's alone. Dreams that feel more like memories begin to dim in her head and she remembers where she is.

"Just a dream," she murmurs to herself, over and over. "Just a dream. Just a dream."

Her heart thuds dully in her chest as she reaches toward her bedside table, running her fingers over the top until she feels them graze what she wants: her locket. Clasping it, she drops back down to her mattress, her head cushioned by her goose down pillow. She holds the locket before her and opens it. It is lit from within, part of the enchantment it bears, so that she has no trouble seeing Toby's face as he smiles back at her, all ruddy-cheeked and tow-headed.

*His eyes are changeable, alternately blue, then green, just like the waters of Antigua.*

*Like July.*

*Like his father.*

"Tobias," she whispers, and smiles sadly to herself.

The queen stares at the picture until the sunrise through her window lightens her room and her goblin servants arrive to dress her for the day. She insists on wearing the locket, though altogether different jewels have been set out to complement her gown. She waves them away and fastens the necklace herself.

"Where is the king this morning?" she asks Sir Didymus later, as he is escorting her to the throne room where her petitioners await. The fox-terrier seems perplexed at first.

"My queen, he is still on his tour of the border fortresses in the south. He is not due back for at least another fortnight."

Sarah squints. "How long has he been gone?"

"Nigh on a month now, your majesty. Are you… do you feel quite well?" His tone is touched with worry. "You have only to command me, and I shall be happy to dismiss the petitioners and…"

"No, I'm fine," she assures her faithful knight, and the locket feels heavy against her breastbone where it rests. *A month?* Her brows draw together as she tries to recall it, but all she seems to remember is a strange, narrow bed in a plain room. *(That's not all, that's not all, you liar. The mirror and the crib…)* Sarah shakes her head. It makes no sense at all. She tells herself it's only her strange nightmares which have her out of sorts.

"As you say, my queen," the knight replies and though Sarah can practically feel the skepticism radiating from his body, he bows as she ascends the thirteen steps to her throne.

That afternoon, Sarah walks through the gardens with a pair of Jareth's wolf-guards trailing a respectful distance behind her. Her mind dwells on her latest dream. When she closes her eyes and pictures herself sitting at her small vanity, it's almost as if she's really there, staring into that mirror again, her reflection surrounded by the two-dimensional testaments to a glamorous life, mementos taped around the edges of what her eyes can see.

*Smiling, smiling. Perfect white teeth, eyes like July rendered in shades of gray. Printed praise and accolades. 'Opening Night Triumph for Broadway's Brightest Stars.'*
The queen opens her eyes and continues to drift, fingers absently grazing petals, thorns, moss, her eyes on the path ahead. She moves through a little-used iron gate set in a high stone wall, the east entrance to his majesty's private garden. She wishes to see what wonders it holds today (this garden is as inconstant as the king himself, sometimes almost frighteningly beautiful, and at other times, as bleak and forlorn as the blackest of Jareth's moods). When she pushes through, it appears as if smooth stones are all that grow there now. Gone are the colorful blooms that spring from the ground and cascade down the walls, wafting their sweet fragrance through the air. Instead, gray granite slabs in neat rows fill the garden and as she draws nearer, she realizes what they are.

Gravestones.

Her heart skips and flutters, and she halts, one tingling hand reaching up and clutching at her locket. She doesn't understand.

"My queen..." a guard calls from behind her, but she ignores him and walks on, her pace quickening to keep ahead of her escort because she must see. She has to, and she does not wish to be stopped before she can. The guard shouts at her once again, imploring her to turn back, and she begins to run, entering the field of stone and plunging toward its center, the hem of her gown whipping the identical markers as she passes them.

The headstones' appearance and arrangement remind her of a military burial ground, all sharp lines and order, each stone precisely placed; each a carbon copy of the next. All save one. There, at the center of the yard, stands a unique monument, one that dwarfs all the others. Rather than a plain, flat slab, this one has shape, and bulk, and art. The uniform headstones climb only to the height of Sarah's knees, but this one, well, its white marble base alone reaches her waist. Rising from the base is a sort of low lectern or altar. Draped over the altar is an angel, her head bowed in grief, her arm thrown across her eyes.

She has seen something like this before, in another life. On a school field trip, perhaps, to an historic cemetery. The memory is fleeting, and when she tries to grasp at it, it dissolves and she can't be sure it's even a memory at all.

Sarah rounds the monument; she has approached it from behind. When she faces it head-on, she sees there is an engraving on the base.

Tread carefully, it reads, for here lies one loved beyond measure, a most cherished son. Tobias.

She gasps and stumbles backwards until her heels strike one of the smaller stones and then she falls to her knees, staring up at the angel whose face is hidden from her.

"Oh!" Sarah cries. "Oh!" Her hands fly to her mouth as if to stop her from saying something she will regret. She sees the earth near the base of the monument is disturbed, like it has been recently dug up. And then she remembers it has been; that she had clawed at this very ground with her fingers not so long ago. Only then, she had been digging at the base of a cluster of bowing peonies, not this marble statue.

"My queen," one of the wolf-guards says, extending a paw to her, "let me be of service."

She swallows and accepts the paw, allowing the guard to pull her to her feet. As he leads her around the monument and back toward the iron gate, she glances at the statue only to see the angel's head is
no longer bowed with her face hidden, but has turned so that her cheek rests against the cold marble of the altar. She is looking at the queen, her face plainly visible now.

And the face which stares back at Sarah is her own.

Sarah trembles, and the gravestones begin to swirl slowly about the garden as the ground shifts beneath her feet. She has time to wonder if this is perhaps an earthquake, or if some sort of whirlpool is forming around her, and then her world goes black.

"Don't tell your mother I let you have champagne," Jeremy says, winking at Sarah. He's slipped her a glass, one of those narrow, crystal stems used for bubbly wines.

"Oh, she won't mind," the girl replies, taking a sip and giggling. "It's Dad you have to worry about."

"Then definitely don't tell your father," Jeremy laughs.

They are at a party, held in one of those old New York homes that have been in the same family for generations. It's a producer's house, or an investor's. Sarah has never really been sure what the difference is. The play has been a smashing success and everyone whose anyone in the theater world has turned out to toast Linda and Jeremy and the director and anyone else remotely connected to the show. Sarah is along for the ride.

She'd wandered through seemingly endless connected drawing rooms and parlors, admiring the art on display and exchanging pleasantries with the various guests who recognized her as Linda Williams' daughter. At last, Sarah had found herself quite lost, and so she remains, until Jeremy discovers her and gives her the champagne. She doesn't tell him that she's already had a glass. Or, two. Her cheeks feel quite warm and her toes are numb.

"I'm very good at keeping secrets," she tells him in a stage whisper, then cocks an eyebrow as she grins at him.

Sarah feels bold tonight. Perhaps it's the champagne, or perhaps it's the way her borrowed silver cocktail dress clings to her and makes her feel so grown up. Perhaps it's the heels she's wearing, strappy and glittering. She'd only bought them that morning after Linda had pressed a credit card into her hand and sent her on her way, telling her that under no circumstances was she to wear those ratty ballet flats she'd brought in her overnight case.

"Are you indeed?" Jeremy asks, and steps closer, using a finger to sweep a lock of hair from her forehead. Sarah's pulse quickens at the touch. She swallows.

"Yes," she replies, but it comes out more like a question. He's looking down at her with his changeable eyes and she cannot tell if he's annoyed or amused or… intrigued. His hand drifts down to her shoulder and his warm palm rests there as his thumb softly traces the path of her silver spaghetti strap. It's slightly loose because she's a size smaller than her mother, and a bit shorter, even in her new heels.

"Perhaps we'll see," he murmurs. "Later."

Sarah turns her head away and finishes her champagne.

"I've sent word," a familiar voice says. It sounds as if it drifts in from another room and it catches Sarah's attention. She leaves Jeremy and tries to follow the voice. "He must come."

"I don't know if that's a wise idea, he needs to…"
"He must come."

"Yes, well, no doubt he will, and duty be damned."

"She is his duty."

"But not, I think, his only one."

Sarah has wandered into a dark corridor, following the voices, but whoever is speaking seems to drift ahead of her, just out of sight. A pinprick of light appears in the distance and she aims for it. It grows larger as she approaches and soon, she sees it is a door. It is open into a well-lit space. She steps through.

She emerges into Dr. Prevarant's office. Squinting, she looks down at her feet but instead of her new silver shoes, she sees white cotton socks peering out from open-toed slides.

"Sarah," her psychiatrist greets, "right on time."

She looks at him, but it's not him. Or, rather, it is, but he's not disguised any longer. Gone is the neat blonde ponytail. Gone is the starched white coat. The Goblin King sits in the executive office chair, clad in his blue velvet frock coat with the almost comically high collar. His hair defies gravity as it sprouts off his crown like the starburst halo around a saint's head in a religious painting.

Saint Jareth, patron saint of goblins and girls who waste their days dreaming of romantic nonsense.

"Why are you here?" Sarah demands sharply.

"Well, you tell me, precious. You brought me here."

"Me? I didn't..."

"Oh, but you did, Sarah."

She moves forward, her footfalls silent on the commercial carpeting. When she reaches the desk, she drops into one of the chairs set before it, as she has done a thousand times before. As she does, she notices Jareth has been reading something. A book lays open on the desk before him.

It's her old journal! The one the doctor had kept locked in his desk drawer!

"You have no right to read that!" she cries. He answers her with an infuriating smirk.

"Don't I? It seems it's almost entirely about me."

"That's not even true," she hisses, snatching for the notebook. Jareth sweeps it out of her reach with one gloved hand, making that annoying 'tsk' sound as he does.

"Sarah, where are your manners?" He raises one perfectly-sculpted eyebrow in admonishment, then holds the book out before his face in dramatic fashion. "And you should know, you can't lie to me, darling. Look, just here, you write, 'I thought he was going to kiss me then and there, but he didn't. Part of me was relieved, but another part of me was disappointed.' And then, further down the page, you write..."

"That's not about you!"

"Isn't it?"
She glares up at him, but he's not him anymore. He's Dr. Prevarant. In place of Jareth's cruel smirk, the doctor wears a look of concern.

"Sarah," the psychiatrist says in a soothing tone, "it's only natural for you to be angry. You don't have to be afraid to express it. Not here. What your mother did..."

"What my mother did?" the girl echoes, incredulous. "What are you talking about?"

"The way she treated you. The way she made you feel. It's no wonder you sought approval elsewhere. But what happened to you wasn't right or fair. It's okay to acknowledge that."

"My mother loved me!" Sarah shrieks, but even she can hear the desperation in her voice.

"What's not to love?" Jeremy whispers. "My bright, pretty girl."

He's close, so close it's hard to tell where he ends and she begins. She's crying a little; she doesn't know why. He's so warm, and he holds her tight. It feels good to be wanted. It feels good to be held. But a part of her is ashamed. And a part of her is afraid. She sniffs, her breath hitching.

Won't her mother be angry?

"Hush, pretty girl," he murmurs, his lips pressing against hers. His fingers slide into her hair and he pulls her head back, exposing her neck. His lips trail there, and he whispers again, "Hush."

"You were angry, Sarah. You were angry with her, and with him, too," Dr. Prevarant is saying. "And you had every right to be."

Sarah shakes her head and sits up straight, grasping the edge of the doctor's desk. "How can I be angry with her? I'm just like her. Everyone says so."

"No, Sarah. You are nothing like her. If you were, you wouldn't have needed her so badly."

She bites her lip, staring down at her lap as she considers the doctor's words. When she looks back up, she's staring into Jareth's face once again.

"But what I did..." she starts.

The king smiles indulgently and shrugs. "What did you do, precious? What could you ever have done that would've compared to her sins?"

"Her sins?"

"She sacrificed her only child on the altar of fame."

"And what did I do?" Sarah whispers hoarsely.

"What you did was mercy."

"I'm the bad thing," she continues as though she hasn't heard him, staring down at her hands. Her palms and fingers are crisscrossed with cuts, some deep, some shallow. The blood has long since dried.

"No!" Jareth roars.

Sarah jumps, but she cannot stand. She's tethered, somehow, and she cannot rise from the chair.
She blinks away the bleariness and stares at her wrists, fastened to the wooden arms of a chair. She feels as though she is emerging from a deep sleep, like some enchanted princess in a fairytale. Soft restraints hold her in place. With effort, she lifts her head and looks around.

"Ah, good morning, Miss Williams!" a chipper voice calls. "It's nice to see you awake." The voice belongs to a nurse in scrubs. She's holding a clipboard and jotting notes on it. Sarah can hear the way the ball point scratches over the paper with every stroke. The nurse reaches out and places two cool fingertips over the girl's radial pulse and looks at her watch.

"No," Sarah groans. "Why?"

"It's just vitals, Miss Williams. No reason to work yourself up over it." The nurse smiles.

"I mean, why am I back here?" Her words are slurred and raspy but the nurse has already left and there is no one to answer her. Or, so she thinks.

"That's a very good question, precious."

Sarah turns and there he is, the Goblin King, in all his over-done finery. He's leaning against a drab wall, arms crossed over his chest, ornate cuffs dripping lace from beneath the sleeves of his red satin waistcoat. He looks so incredibly out of place beneath the flickering and buzzing fluorescent lights of the St. Mary's dayroom, it takes the girl a moment to make sense of him.

"You're supposed to be touring the fortresses on the southern border," she hisses.

"And so I was, until I was summoned back. You needed me, according to Sir Didymus."

Her head feels heavy and she has trouble holding it up. "Why am I back here, Jareth?" She jerks futilely against the ties which secure her wrists to the chair.

"Misplaced guilt would be my guess."

She scoffs. "You don't even make sense."

He laughs, the sound of it rich and reverberating. "I make no sense? Well, then, my dear, let's hear your reasoning! Why do you choose to come to this place?"

"I don't… choose."

"Of course you do." He looks at her as though she is the most stubborn child he's ever met, his expression part amusement, part consternation.

"No," she says, drawing the word out, "if I could choose, I wouldn't be bound like this and I…" As she says it, the restraints fall away, and Jareth chuckles. "Wait… how did… Did you do that?" She glares suspiciously at him and rubs her wrists before rising from the chair.

"That was you, Sarah. Now, can we please leave this dreary place behind and continue our conversation in a more comfortable setting?"

"I…" Her eyes narrow. "Are we in one of your crystals?"

"Hardly." He glances around, taking in the details of the dayroom. "I would never waste magic on any place as depressing as this."

"No? Then how about this?" And then they are in Jareth's garden, standing before the weeping angel monument. "How much magic did you expend on this boneyard?"
"Again, this is you," the king says as he studies the inscription on the base of the monument, "though I would guess the inspiration is the same."

"Misplaced guilt?"

"Mmm," he hums, nodding.

"But it's your garden!"

"Which changes whenever you enter it," he points out.

"You're saying I do that."

He nods again.

"You're saying… I created this graveyard?"

"You willed it into existence. Just look at the markers, you'll see."

And she does. She moves along the rows, reading the inscriptions. Her father's name, and her mother's. Jeremy's. The friends from her childhood that she'd left behind, Mandy and her brother Luke. Things she'd once valued that fell by the wayside, like drama club and soccer and school work. Cherished books she'd given up reading, *Anna Karenina* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Shakespeare's plays, *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Her relationship with Karen. Her painting and drawing. Everything she'd sacrificed, or ignored, or discarded when she'd made Jeremy the focus of her world. And everything she'd lost in the process.

Her freedom.

Her hope.

Her innocence.

She circles back around to join Jareth in front of the weeping angel.

"What about this?" she says, nodding at the engraving on its base. *Tread carefully, for here lies one loved beyond measure, a most cherished son.*

"More misplaced guilt."

"How can you say that?"

Jareth nudges at the small mound of disturbed dirt with the toe of his boot. "You can dig and dig, but you won't find him."

"Because he's buried back home," she seethes. *She hadn't been allowed to attend the funeral, of course. She'd been in custody by then, locked away and medicated.*

"Oh, no, my dear. No."

"What do you mean, no?" Sarah demands, grabbing the Goblin King's wrist.

"You have to choose, Sarah. I warned you about this, years ago, when you told me you wished to wait. But you've had your three years, and I've had mine, and now, you must choose."

"Years ago…" The queen grunts in frustration. "You make no sense at all, Jareth." She releases his
wrist and storms off toward the gate, wanting to leave this place far behind her.

"Sarah, enough of this damnable obstinace!" he calls after her. In a few strides, he has caught her and he grabs her shoulder, whipping her around to face him. "Enough of this self-indulgent guilt and self-imposed exile!"

"I don't know what you want from me!" she cries.

His face softens. "You know perfectly well, darling." He slips his gloved hand against her cheek, his touch gentle and his eyes imploring. "You have only to reach for the truth. You can choose…"

"She sacrificed her only child on the altar of fame," Dr. Prevarant insists.

"And what did I do?" Sarah glances at the doctor, but he's not the doctor, not really.

"What you did was mercy. That wasn't your child."

"It was, it was." She's crying. "Oh, Toby..."

"That wasn't Toby. You know it wasn't. You could sense it, couldn't you? That night. Something was wrong. You knew it. Toby was already gone."

"He was, he was gone." She's nodding now, slowly. She remembers. "The crib was empty. At first, it was empty."

"You'd wished him away. To me."

"Yes. I remember. And the goblins were hiding in the shadows, laughing at me. I remember. I wanted him back!"

"Of course you did, of course you wanted him. Our son. Why wouldn't you?"

"Our son?" Sarah looks up at him then, expecting to see Jeremy, but it's Jareth whose speaking.

"But I couldn't leave my son in that world, to be raised by those people. And neither could you, or else why would you wish for me to take him away?"

She's shaking her head. Something doesn't seem right. "The shrieking... he was screaming and it was making me so angry..."

"That wasn't him, though, was it? Think, Sarah. Toby was gone, and that thing that appeared in his place, you knew it wasn't right. Sickly and old, disguised but not well enough. His shrieks weren't like anything you'd ever heard before, and the eyes were wrong. The eyes. Don't you remember?"

She remembers the jagged shard in her hand. And the little whales, and that thing grinning up at her from the crib while the goblins laughed and danced all around. There was no July in his eyes. They were like obsidian, hard and glittering and black.

"A... changeling," she whispers, looking at Jareth, and then they are no longer in the garden, but in the great hall. It's filled with orchids and snow drops and banners of white satin hung from the ceiling. The king smiles at her, the pride in his look unmistakable.

"You don't think I'd let you harm my son, do you?" He bends and places a kiss on her temple. "You don't really think you'd even be capable of such a thing?"

She looks around. There are people everywhere, dressed in their finery, and candles burn brightly
all around, casting a glow over the whole scene. The music swells and the king sweeps her away in his arms. A waltz. The floor is empty, save for them, and everyone looks on as they murmur to one another.

"No. I... couldn't. He had your eyes."

"Have you chosen, sweet Sarah?"

"It was a dying thing, it was mercy." Her voice becomes surer, more steady as she pronounces the words.

"Yes."

"And I didn't harm Toby."

"No. You never would."

They spin and spin, and the flowers and banners and people and music are dizzying and beautiful.

Sarah groans. Her head is pounding. Her eyes flutter open and she's staring at the ceiling of her chamber in the Goblin King's palace.

"Oh, your majesty," Sir Didymus says with palpable relief. "You had us so worried."

"What?" she croaks and props herself up a little with her elbows. A goblin servant presses a cup of cool water to her lips. She drinks deeply, then coughs and drops back down to rest her head on her pillow.

"She's stronger than you know, Didymus," the king says, his tone filled with an easy confidence that does not quite reach his eyes. His gaze tells the queen that he has been worried as well.

"Jareth?" She's confused. "Oh, I've had such strange dreams. And such nightmares... Weren't you away? On a tour?"

"I was," he agrees amiably, "though it seems you were determined to have me back here in time for your birthday." The king chuckles. "You could've just asked, you know. I would've been happy to oblige. As it is, you've given Sir Didymus several new gray hairs and Lord Draimen is fit to be tied since he has to complete the tour of our border fortresses on his own."

"My... birthday?"

"Yes, my sweet. Happy birthday." He leans over and kisses her forehead. "Well, it's not for a few days, and I had planned a quick trip home for it, as a surprise, but I suppose I'm just as happy to be here a little early. Especially now that I see you are indeed well."

"Am I?"

"Oh, yes. Very well."

The pounding in her head abates some and she notes that she actually does feel well. It's as though there has been a dense fog in her mind, and it clears, all at once. She sits all the way up then, and tells the assembled crowd that she wishes to dress.

"Perhaps your majesty should rest a bit longer," Sir Didymus suggests. "You had quite a nasty turn, and..."
"Nonsense!" Jareth says. "The queen has been in her sick bed near a week and if she desires to leave it, then she shall!"

"A week!" Sarah wails. "So long?" It's no wonder her limbs feel uncommonly stiff.

"It's no matter," the king replies, cupping her chin in his hand. "You're fit enough now, and we have all the time in the world."

Her brow wrinkles, but she nods, and her knight and king leave her so her servants may set about making her ready. When she is, she finds Jareth waiting in the corridor just beyond her door, set on escorting her.

"Until you get your sea legs," he teases, offering his arm. She takes it gratefully. She wants his company. She has many questions and thinks only he can answer them. He leads her to his private dining room, and tea has been laid out on the table for them with platters of sandwiches and little cakes and fruit.

"Jareth, I'm not entirely certain I understand what's…"

"Yes?"

She sighs and glances around. The room is charming white place where she has dined before, with dazzling crystal and a soft breeze rustling the sheer curtains which hang across the tall windows. Her throat itches as though a soft sob tries to form there. She swallows it down.

"I want this to be real."

He smiles. "Then, it is."

She shakes her head. "That's not how it works."

Jareth laughs, but the sound of it is not unkind. "What is real, precious? What makes something real? Only your belief that it is so. I've tried to tell you that for years. It's your choice, love. Why not choose to be happy?"

Sarah sips at her tea, lost in thought.

_Sometimes, she feels as though she is walking a tightrope and if she leans too far to one side or the other, she will plunge to her death._

_Sometimes, she feels as though she forces Jareth onto that tightrope, and though he traverses it skillfully, there is a fear behind his grace that speaks of her cruelty._

'… and I will be your slave.'

"You must try the lemon curd, my dear. It's the perfect balance of sweet and sour."

"Jareth… When I was… asleep, I dreamed of you."

He laughs. "I'm not surprised."

"I dreamed you told me that Toby was our son."

The king stills for a long moment, scrutinizing her face. He licks his lips. "And so he is."

"But... how can that be?"
"You know very well how it can be," he chides, "my bright, pretty girl."

"He's my brother!" she insists.

'I want my brother back, please, if it's all the same.'

"Not this again," the king grumbles. "You were doing so well, Sarah."

"I… came to the Labyrinth, that first time, looking for him."

"You did. You came looking for your son. For our son. His presence here was the only thing that allowed you to come. His blood could bind you to the Labyrinth, because it's also my blood."

"Jeremy…"

"A wretched disguise, just like that boring doctor." He shrugs. "But, I do live to serve you, however tedious it may be at times."

"You said it was my childish beliefs that allowed me to stay; that when I became an adult, I'd be expelled, unless I bound myself to the realm. Unless I agreed to marry you."

"You would've been expelled eventually, Toby or no. You had to be bound by more than our child. That child. He's part human, after all. His blood isn't strong enough to hold you forever."

"So, the whole belief of children thing, that's a lie?"

"No, not a lie, precisely. Those beliefs do have a certain power. And it was what you needed to hear at the time. It was the only way to explain it to you without…"

"Without telling me the truth!" she screams, knocking her chair over as she stands.

"You weren't ready!" he shouts back, rising himself and staring at her across the table. The crystals of the chandelier seem to tremble with their combined rage and bright prisms of light shoot haphazardly around the room, causing Sarah to squint.

"I wasn't ready?" she barks, holding her hand before her eyes to shield them from the blinding light.

"More like you weren't ready to face what you'd done!"

The room grows very quiet and the light dies down.

"All I did, Sarah, was love you, and cherish you, and grant your every desire, no matter how foolish or cruel or mad."

"I was just a girl," she sniffs.

"You were. Just a girl. And I made you a queen."

"That's not what I mean."

"I know what you mean," Jareth snaps, placing his hands flat on the table and leaning down to look into her eyes. "But you called me, Sarah. You commanded me. I have only ever been your slave, but you judge me for your own sins." He shakes his head, his look bitter. "And still, despite it all, I have loved you and cared for you and obeyed your every whim."

Sarah doesn't know what to say; what to feel. The truth falls into place all around her, trapping her in its grip, and she cannot deny what the king is saying to her. Tears form in her eyes and she gulps in a
breath in an attempt to keep them from falling.

"Where is he now?" she whispers. "Where's Toby?"

The Goblin King straightens, tugging at the hem of his waistcoat and smoothing his hands over his lapels. He glances down at Sarah and works his jaw as though he is considering what he can say to her. There seems to be some mistrust in his air, and it stings.

"Do you think I'd harm my own son?" she asks him sadly.

The king clears his throat. "He's with Draimen, in the south. He's being fostered by the Prince of Selkeys and he joined us for part of our tour."

"The Prince of Selkeys? You sent him to live with strangers?"

"Not strangers. Allies. And that is the way things are done here, as you well know. The boy is nine, and it's high time..."

"Nine!"

The queen looks stricken.

"Sarah, sit down." When she does not obey him, Jareth rounds the table and grabs hold of her arms. "Sit down before you faint." He rights her chair and guides her gently into it.

"Toby is nine." She says it as if to convince herself.

"I know it's a lot to comprehend all at once, my dear." The king sighs. "This is what comes of binding yourself to the realm and not fulfilling the contract. I warned you about this."

"You warned me..."

"Sarah, when we're married, everything will right itself. Believe me, we'll all be the better for it. Especially you."

"If Toby is nine, then I'm..."

"You'll be twenty-four in two days, yes. You've spent six years in this state, and it's time it ended."

"Six years..." Her voice trails off. She looks at him, and cocks her head. "I asked for three."

"As did I. And you agreed."

Understanding dawns on her. "Have I been a raving lunatic for the last six years? Oh, God, did Toby see?"

"Never, darling. I protected him, you needn't worry. And you weren't a raving lunatic. Not the entire time, anyway."

"When can I see him?"

"He'll travel as part of the Selkeysian delegation for the wedding."

"And when is that to be?"

"I'm not surprised you don't remember. The wedding was set for the day after I was to return from
the border tour. Now that I'm here early, I suppose I can see to the last-minute details since you don't seem to be up to it."

"A week from now, then?"

Jareth nods, and then drops to one knee in front of Sarah, taking her hands in his.

"You see now, don't you? Why it's so important? The choice, as ever, is yours, darling one, but you see now."

She does. She sees. She sees as she's never seen before.

"I choose you, Jareth. I choose you, and our son."

He smiles and lowers his head, kissing her hands, and when she looks down at him, all she sees is the back of his bowed head, and not the row of glittering, sharp teeth that are bared with his grin.

Later, when the queen sleeps again, Jareth slips into her bedchamber on silent feet and pulls a crystal from the air just over her lips. He stares into it, his brow drawn in concentration. There, inside the glass bubble, sits a girl with dark, disheveled hair, her jaw slack and her wrists bound by soft restraints to an ugly wooden chair with a vinyl cushion. She stares blankly at a dingy wall with strange, dark eyes that are somehow wrong.

Chapter End Notes

A year in the making! This was supposed to be a quick little story. Thanks to everyone who stuck with me through it, even though it was meant to be a novella-length and grew to more of a novel-length. Though this is the end of the story, there will be a chapter 26 which will list some of the hints and symbols sprinkled throughout, as well as a list of the different ways the ending can be interpreted, if you’re interested in that sort of thing.
Notes

Chapter Summary

Long, unedited ramble about the story, my interpretations of things, themes, symbols, and hints that are dropped throughout. I really just jotted this off very quickly after a cursory look at the chapters, so I’m bound to have missed things and it’s likely there are typos galore. As I re-read, I will edit for mistakes I find.

Edited 4/14/19

Here is the promised supplemental information for the story. Enjoy!

Overall, the “big” ideas for this story are: exploring what it means to be sane (how do we know what is real, and what isn’t?), how the mind will protect itself from trauma (and how the mind is shaped by it), how capable is a young woman of consenting to a relationship with an older man (fantasizing is one thing, but the reality is quite another—and when the man has been an authority figure in her life and had a hand in shaping her, is the choice ever really hers?), and the responsibilities of parenthood.

I think most people picked up on Dr. Prevarant’s name being a clue. It translates into “liar” or “conman.” Either he really is Jareth in disguise and his name is a nod to that, or Sarah’s mind recognizes Brooksong is a hallucination and the little bit of intact reason she has is trying to warn her. I liked the name because it was close enough to an English word, “prevaricate”, to make it obvious to a reader what this doctor is all about.

There is a lot of description of things being bright/white/blinding throughout the story, as well as descriptions of things being dim/dark. At some points, things become so bright that they are hard to look at for Sarah. The push and pull between the dark and the light is representative of the struggles of mental illness, the light being sanity/wellness and the dark being the delusions. The chapter titles for ch 12 and 13 are literal references to this: ch 12 “Between Cocktails and Chess” refers to the “cocktail” of medicines used for floridly psychotic patients (to subdue and hopefully rapidly induce stability or “sanity”) and the “chess” game Sarah thinks of herself as playing with the doctor (or the disguised Goblin King), which is testament to her “insanity” (that she even believes in something as fanciful as a Goblin King, and that she’s his equal and can play his game. Even believing such a “game” exists could be construed as paranoia). Ch 13 “Between Kingdoms and Clans” is a more obscure reference, but the names of all the kingdoms are foreign words that translate into “sanity” or “clarity” and the names of all the clans translate into “insanity” or “obscurity.” Sarah is physically trapped between the light and the dark/sanity and insanity by virtue of her location, the Goblin Realm, which is bordered to the south by the coastal kingdoms (sanity/clarity) and to the north by the mountain clans (insanity/obscurity/mystery).

The other recurring theme is “red and blue and gold and green.” I think that becomes fairly obvious by the end—Toby’s baby quilt, the one a little body (maybe his, maybe a changeling’s) was found wrapped in. It’s a blue quilt with gold and green whales on it, but it becomes soaked through with red blood. That Sarah sees those colors in both the hospital and the Goblin Realm is meant to highlight her feelings of guilt that never quite leave her even if she’s in the deepest of her delusions (I say “if” because even I’m not sure if the time Sarah spends underground is a delusion or if it’s real).
My idea was that Jeremy was such a big part of this struggle of Sarah’s—she has a crush, or an attraction, or a dark desire, or an obsession involving him (how much came from her side and how much from his is left obscure). Whatever exactly happened between them (and whether Jeremy was really Jeremy or Jareth in disguise when it did) is left up to the reader to decide. But, Toby happened, so there was definitely something improper. The two worlds we see have a portion of the Jeremy character to them. Dr. Prevarant is the authority figure/father-figure/practical side of Jeremy and Jareth is the dangerous/romantic/cruel side of him. I think this fits in with the source material, because we see the Jeremy character plastered all over Sarah’s mirror and the statue of the Goblin King before she goes into the Labyrinth. Her mind has obviously blended those two together to create her nemesis as she runs the maze.

Chapter by chapter notes:

Ch 1 Comedy, Tragedy, Normalcy

Sarah in Brooksong obviously remembers her time in the Labyrinth and believes it to be reality, even though she’s in a bright, white, clean setting (which suggests reality/sanity). Sarah in the Goblin King’s palace feels guilt, alluding to the fact that she lives in splendor as a reward for something she did that was cruel or wrong. Also, she stares into a vanity mirror (which comes up throughout the story, leading back to her vanity in her bedroom at her father’s house) and it the mirror turns black (which suggests insanity/mystery).

Ch 2 The Fox in the Pen

The title refers to the unease Sarah feels about being trapped in this locked up place with her adversary (so there’s no escape). There’s also a mention of military time, where one o’clock is referred to as thirteen hundred or written 13:00, which is a nod to the 13 hour clock from the movie (obvious, I know). Sarah also thinks about the key-card that the doctor wears, one of those badges common in hospital settings where waving the badge over a lock pad will unlock a door. He holds the key to her escape. A skeleton key or universal key is a theme that gets repeated later (when one of the gifts Sarah receives from a visiting dignitary is a key that can unlock any door, and her thoughts about it in the Labyrinth chapter are exactly the same as they are here, when she thinks: The power to come and go as you please. What must that be like?). Escape and freedom seem to be things on Sarah’s mind a lot.

This chapter also introduces the visual of the calendar with pictures of a tropical paradise representing the month of July. That comes up a few times as well. I had a thought that July was either when Toby was born or when “Toby” died (or, maybe when he was conceived). Beyond just the pretty picture, the month of July has some sort of significance for Sarah, or she wouldn’t dwell on it so much.

Ch 3 The Thirteen Steps

The references to the red portions of Sarah’s dress/jewels (the ruby choker) are just meant to evoke blood. Sarah has blood on her hands and when the ‘Goblin King’ is feeling cruel, he likes to remind her of it. The reason I put his name in quotes is because it’s really Sarah’s choice to feel these things (as he likes to tell her throughout). The reason his behavior alternates between doting and cruel is because he reflects whatever Sarah is feeling at the moment. When she’s unsure, he may shower her with compliments. When she feels guilty, he may punish her. He practically admits this later when he tells her he’s only as scary as she makes him. That can come off as something a gaslighting, controlling abuser might say (and if he is a reflection of a part of Jeremy, then a gaslighting, controlling abuser might be exactly what he is), but it can also be taken quite literally. Sarah’s psyche is what creates Jareth, day to day, moods and all.
Ch 4 L’Enfant

This chapter introduces the idea that something happened involving a baby. Sarah’s reaction to the baby that visits Brooksong is more understandable after finding out about Toby at the end of the story. But I think she also is screaming because she sees a loving mother behaving in a motherly capacity with her child. Sarah feels cheated out of that, both because her mother abandoned her, and because she doesn’t have her own baby in her arms to show her love. Sarah also recognizes her own guilt a bit more in this chapter, referring to the “real monster that lives inside of her.”

Ch 5 The Noble Savage

The title refers to Ludo, of course, but also to the whole idea of the “noble savage”—which can be Jareth as well. Not that he’s the traditional idea of “savage” but it just refers to the fact that you can't reasonably apply the idea of our modern/Western morality to someone who is not: modern, human, western, or even Earthly! So, we see Jareth making a romantic overture to Sarah (and get hints of Sarah’s own desires) and while it would be easy to say, “Ew, she’s not an adult and that makes him a predator”, it’s hard to apply that standard to someone who may simply be a manifestation of a teen girl’s own desires, but even if he’s more solid than that, he’s from a land of magic and fairies, not her world. Also, the room is very dark/dim and there’s a mirror again, and it only shows her some things, not everything she’s trying to see.

Ch 6 The Stairs of Dr. Penrose

The title refers to two things: the doctor with the Escher tattoo who predated Dr. Prevarant at Brooksong (the character named ‘Dr. Penrose’ in the story), but also the actual device of creating the infinity stairs upon which some of these Escher drawings are based. They are called “Penrose Stairs” after their creator, and I just wanted to nod to that for anyone who geeks out on that kind of stuff like I do. Also, Sarah has a memory of Dr. Penrose telling her that fantasizing is an immature coping mechanism and it’s fruitless. One way to take this story is that almost all of it (save the St. Mary’s scenes) is a complete fantasy, taking place only in Sarah’s head, so she obviously doesn’t take Dr. Penrose’s advice! Of course, there are several other ways to take it as well (it’s all real, it’s partly real, it’s all a dream which is different than a fantasy, etc). Luke is introduced here. Later, we learn Luke is a real person from Sarah’s past. So, either her mind is creating these different worlds and populating them with things and people familiar to Sarah, or she’s dreaming, or it’s all a big coincidence.

Ch 7 The Gold Standard

This chapter is mostly for comedic relief, but there’s a good bit of blinding brightness happening, as well as evidence that Sarah yearns for both Toby and Jareth (Jeremy?) based off whose face appears in her locket. It also introduces Lord Draimen, the large, imposing, midnight-black wolf who Sarah fears a little. So, even when things are easy and light, there’s still something sinister lurking to make Sarah uncomfortable.

Ch 8 Forevermore

Here, thanks to Mandy (the OCD patient with borderline personality disorder), we learn that Sarah isn’t just in Brooksong because of her mental status. She did something *bad*. There’s also a question of Sarah’s feelings for Dr. Prevarant (Jareth? Jeremy?) but also his feelings for her. Of course, it’s all from Sarah’s point of view, but she wonders if when she brushes past him/touches him, that was by his design. Is there a hint he may have inappropriate feelings for her developing (or, is he allowing his feelings to show in some small way?) or is this all a product her Sarah’s delusions?
Ch 9 Fever Dream

Sarah’s perspective shifts a lot in this chapter. In the beginning of the story, Jareth seems almost like a jailer, torturing her in small ways. Here, she rethinks his behaviors and comes to regard them in a positive light. It’s hard to know if it’s because she’s maturing and stops seeing things from a childish perspective, or if she’s developing Stockholm Syndrome. There’s a small callback to a previous hospital chapter here. At one point, Sarah talks about how Luke would follow her footsteps as if he was afraid the floors might give way under him if he didn’t (Sarah understands the impulse, thinking about how it would metaphorically be nice to not have to walk on shifting sand). Here, in this chapter, she talks about how one small misstep in the Labyrinth could lead to disaster. There’s a lot of small ideas like this that are mirrored in each reality of Sarah’s, which is meant to show either that they are products of one consciousness OR that parallel worlds will still have common threads.

Ch 10 Gone with the Wind

When Sarah sings “With or Without You” she isn’t trying to be a pain in the butt (like she is with her other song suggestions), she just likes the song. And, the song reflects a sentiment she feels about Jareth (she obviously has an attraction/desire for him, but she’s set up as his adversary in this world).

Ch 11 The Prisoner of Zenda

Oh, how I love this old Technicolor movie! With James Mason as the villain… I loved the book as well, but I digress…

Red and Blue and Gold and Green make an appearance here. We also see that basically everyone but Sarah understands the implication of her impending birthday. Jareth had tried to warn her at their interrupted breakfast, but things got really busy and they haven’t had time for that discussion at this point. This chapter also ends with the exact same line as the last chapter, once again tying the two worlds together. “Let the games begin.”

Ch 12 Between Cocktails and Chess

This has already been discussed a bit. Here, “chess” is the game Sarah refers to at the end of the last hospital chapter. Of course, it’s not literal chess, but the idea of using strategy to outmaneuver her adversary (Dr. Prevarant/Jareth). The doctor refers to Sarah using her words as a weapon, cautioning her that she can “lacerate” people with them. This echoes something Sarah remembers Jareth saying to her in the Labyrinth.

In this chapter we also see how Sarah’s awareness/recognition of what Dr. Prevarant is trying to accomplish can be viewed simply as the side effects of her different medication regimens (that happens throughout the hospital chapters). It makes it easy to dismiss her anger—‘she’s not really mad, it’s just her meds.’ But, is it? She also looks at everything that’s happening and likens it to a chess game, only realizing at the end that he’s been two steps ahead of her the whole time. And that might be true. Or, it might be how her paranoid mind justifies that she isn’t getting her way (something that happens with delusional people—their mind takes bits of reality and uses those bits as evidence to justify their disordered thinking).

Ch 13 Between Kingdoms and Clans

This has also been discussed a bit (the kingdoms and clans representing wellness/sanity and disordered thinking (madness)/obscurity). The gift of the chessboard from Clan Norost is a nod to the “chess” Sarah was playing with Dr. Prevarant in the last chapter (and "Norost" itself literally translates to "madness"). And, here is the nod to the idea of “freedom” and a desire to have dominion over one’s own life I referred to earlier (when Sarah covets the doctor’s badge for it’s ability to open
all the locked doors): The kingdom of Lucidesa has gifted them with a silver key, rumored to open any lock (The power to come and go as you please, Sarah thinks. What must that be like? This exactly mirrors her thoughts in ch 2). It’s important the gift of the key comes from a kingdom rather than a clan.

There’s also this in the chapter: The brilliance of the banquet hall has mesmerized her, the whole thing luminous and twinkling, even her own gown. She hadn’t seen it in the dim light of her chamber, but here, exposed to the blaze of a thousand candles, ten thousand, she realizes that the fabric is somehow reflective. It becomes incandescent and she feels as though she exists in the very center of a star (and her, the iron ash at its core; the pinpoint of darkness within the explosion of searing radiance). So, again, there’s all this light that dazzles her, but despite that, she still feels as though she is dark (the iron ash at the center of a star). She’s still unwell/insane/having dark thoughts even when surrounded by so much light/clarity.

Archduke Valo—his name translates to “light.” Tamsos Neviltis—his name translates to “darkness despair.” Okay, yes, I was hitting that particular nail with a sledgehammer, but the idea just tickled me.

At the end of the chapter, Sarah actually voices the words “my love” to Jareth. She is moving further away from her initial opinion of him. Or, she’s growing more open about her true feelings (which perhaps scared her too much to be open about initially).

**Ch 14—The Dragon and the Knight**

Here there’s more red and blue and gold and green. Then, Luke makes Sarah a gift—a box with her initial topped by a crown. So, there’s recognition in this world that Sarah is royalty in another world. But, when she thinks of herself, she doesn’t think of being a princess or queen, she thinks of being a dragon (the villain, or the monster). The gift is a set of cardboard nesting boxing, decorated to look like jeweled boxes. This echoes one of the gifts Sarah received from a visiting dignitary in the Labyrinth, a set of jewel encrusted boxes, one inside the other. The biggest nesting box, the one with the Crowned "S" is noted to have the "S" made of plastic rubies. Sarah herself thinks in this chapter that the "S" reminds her of a snake (which is more reference to Sarah as a "monster" or the "bad thing") and the rubies are meant to evoke blood (once again pointing out that Sarah has blood on her hands).

**Ch 15—The Tyrant and the Peacemaker**

The title refers to Sarah and Jareth, and in this instance, she is the tyrant (making demands of the clans and kingdoms, forcing their hand with a drunken royal proclamation) and Jareth is the peacemaker, smoothing things over for her. This is also the chapter where Jareth explains that he is exactly as terrifying as she wishes him to be. Then there a reference to some of the named characters that are visiting, including the Vice Admiral of Klarhet (another reference to light/clarity/sanity). In this chapter, we learn Sarah kissed Jareth (while under the influence, which, incidentally, mirrors how her behavior changes while on various psychotropic meds. This is also echoed in the final chapters, when we see glimpses of Sarah and Jeremy’s interactions while she is drunk on champagne).

**Ch 16—Pennyroyal Tea**

This chapter references a Nirvana song about a substance rumored to be an abortifacient, which has meaning for a previously pregnant teenager, especially in light of the fact that the chapter opens with Sarah being exhorted to talk about “the baby.” Not only that, but this chapter holds the faint hint of Sarah’s prior pregnancy (she has a memory of crying in the doctor’s office with Karen. We see that
memory laid out at the end of the story when Sarah's pediatrician tells them she's pregnant and Sarah cries while Karen demands to know who the father is). Dr. Prevarant also makes a note about Sarah “prevaricating” in this chapter (that sly dog). Sarah calls the doctor “Jareth” in this chapter and accuses him of “preying on young girls.” That might give some insight into at least part of Sarah’s belief about what happened with Jeremy (or it may simply be her “oh, poor me!” attitude about how Jareth treated her in the Labyrinth).

Ch 17—The Lesson of Opium

I took this title from a quote by Andre Malraux, “Opium only teaches one thing, which is that aside from physical suffering, there is nothing real.”

There is a nightmare of what happened to Toby, coupled with some red/blue/gold/green, and then again, Sarah wonders if she is the thing from which others need protection. Jareth assures her she isn’t and vows to “eat the liver” of anyone who says otherwise. This could be Jareth loving Sarah for who she is and brooking no ill will toward her, or it could be Sarah’s mind trying to protect her from the reality of what she’s done.

Ch 18—Fairy Tales

Sarah experiences SSRI withdrawals and the onset of psychosis because she no longer has meds in her system (alternatively, it could be viewed that she finally sees what is real—Jareth/Goblins—now that the meds are out of her system. It depends on which reality you are buying off on…) Jareth tells her that nothing about Brooksong has to do with “magic” (so, either it’s reality—one of them, anyway—or it’s all in her head. If you trust Jareth here…)

There is more of Sarah accusing herself of being “bad” and having the “bad thing” inside of her, but of course, she decides that means the meds she is taking and then takes pains to get them out of her system. Her meds are also the colors which keep recurring—red, blue, gold and green. That could be coincidental, or evidence that Brooksong is indeed a delusion/dream rather than reality. Sarah also sees a glow behind the doctor’s head (which could be a med withdrawal effect) and she thinks it makes him look like a saint with a light halo. She thinks this a few times throughout the story—Jareth/Dr. Prevarant as a “saint.”

Ch 19—Lullabies

Sarah and Jareth talk about the choice she must make. She sees it as choosing between sustaining the Labyrinth or returning to her family. They had previously talked about this choice when Sarah learns she has to either agree to marry Jareth or be expelled from the realm by her 18th birthday. This choice between one world or another can also be looked at as a choice to accept her delusions as reality and give up all attempts to regain her sanity (and return to her ‘real’ life) or continue struggling to return to wellness despite the fact that will mean facing some potentially awful things she’s done (again, that’s one interpretation. There are others).

A false alarm references the baby in this chapter (or, at least Sarah thinks that’s what she hears) so now we have guilt about the baby crowding into her waking time, not just her dreams. At the end of the chapter, Jareth, who has become softer throughout the story, reminds us that he is no tame thing (could be a metaphor for Sarah’s descent into darkness/insanity. She can give up her guilt and just live in this delusion, but while that has an appeal, it’s not without dangers).

Ch 20—The Difference Between Pashmina and Tweed

We get more concrete hints about the relationship between Sarah and Jeremy here. Sarah reveals
Toby’s name comes from one of Jeremy’s characters (and why would Sarah, a teenaged half-sister, get any say in what Karen’s child was named?) There’s some indication of Sarah’s admiration for Jeremy here, and also a hint that no one was paying close enough attention to Sarah at the time to know what she was really up to (that she had a ‘relationship’ with Jeremy). There are vague hints here that Sarah is Toby’s mother and Dr. Prevarant knows (either because he’s part of her consciousness, which knows it all, or because he has read her journal). Sarah is ranting about Karen using her as a “babysitter” and wanting her to do things for Toby which Sarah thinks is unfair. The doctor comments on it, making it seem as though he doesn’t find these things unreasonable (because Sarah’s not just a babysitter, she’s Toby’s mother, and should want to do these things for him).

Sarah also feels the tweed of the doctor’s pants (the second incidence of very minor yet somewhat inappropriate touching between them in this chapter) and thinks how different it feels than the cashmere of Jeremy’s suits (this is supposed to cause the reader to wonder how Sarah knows what Jeremy’s clothes felt like).

When Sarah talks about “wishing the baby away” she means in the way the movie shows, wishing the Goblin King would take him, but the doctor obviously thinks it’s a way for her to avoid taking responsibility for killing Toby.

**Ch 21—How Silk and Sackcloth are the Same**

Jareth is attentive but in an almost predatory way here. I imagine how it sort of tantalizes and worries Sarah would be akin to some of her feelings about receiving the attentions of Jeremy. Sarah wants to take it a bit slower, and Jareth becomes almost threatening over the idea. Here, Sarah stands her ground despite her fear. How would “real world” Sarah have fared against similar pressures from Jeremy? Of course, later in the story, we see that Jareth had legitimate reasons for wanting Sarah to give into him sooner rather than later—unless that’s just a way to justify controlling behavior, claiming it’s for her own good… (more exploration of the idea of the issues with “relationships” between partners with significant age differences).

The title refers to the fact that though Sarah is dressed in finery, it’s no different than being in mourning dress when it comes to her experiences while wearing the clothes. Or, the idea that a wedding dress might as well be made of sackcloth when you are being forced to wed.

The chapter ends with more dwelling on how she is the “bad thing” in the story (that can be taken literally—she’s a murderer who committed infanticide, but can also be a young, impressionable girl being manipulated to think poorly of herself by someone with an interest in controlling her).

**Ch 22—The Tragedy of Anna Karenina**

This is the most direct Sarah has been about her feelings about Toby. She says Anna should have given up her son to keep her love. She also realizes she could easily sit in Dr. Prevarant’s lap and it makes her think of “another man, and another lap,” more reference to Jeremy. Later in the chapter, she references the fact that Jeremy wasn’t “with” her mother anymore (‘not really’—meaning, probably, in appearance only, but his heart belonged to another). We also get a glimpse of Sarah’s perception of Jeremy’s feelings about Toby. We’re left with the impression that Jeremy rejected Sarah over the pregnancy (or at least she felt he did—which might explain even more the resentment she felt toward Toby. Of course, if their relationship is problematic anyway, and Sarah might have been upset by Toby simply because of his resemblance to his father).

She’s been irritated by how calm and “in character” the doctor has been throughout the story and in this chapter, she is so bothered by it, she says it “lacerates” her, which echoes some previous mentions, though in those, it was Sarah who was doing the lacerating.
And then we find out Sarah is in St. Mary’s (and why). Or, at least she dreams she’s there…

Ch 23—The Madness of Ophelia

There are many interpretations about what led to Ophelia’s madness, but one is that it’s because she was rejected by the man she loved…

Small glimpses of Sarah’s dreams help fill in the blanks a bit about what happened with her and Jeremy (courtship vs grooming, flirtation vs abuse) and even some hints as to what is wrong with Sarah now (post-partum psychosis has led to some high profile infanticide cases).

There is also discussion of a “blood oath” in this chapter, which isn’t too far from a “blood sacrifice.” I had this vague idea while writing this that one possible explanation for the whole Labyrinth adventure could be that you had to make a blood sacrifice to gain entrance, and that’s what Sarah did by killing Toby (her mind invents the “kidnap” plot to protect herself from the idea of her own depravity) but that felt a little too dark, so I ended up with the notion that Toby is of Jareth’s blood and that was her ticket to the Underground (still kind of dark). Still, at this point, Sarah wavers between the (mistaken?) realization that she killed her son (she doesn’t know about the changeling yet) and the idea that he’s her brother and she had to leave him behind in the real world to come here. But when Jareth finds her toward the end of the chapter, she’s raving madly (like Ophelia) while trying to dig Toby up in Jareth’s garden (suffering from a delusion that he’s buried there). And she starts to call Jareth “Jeremy” before she corrects herself.

At the end, she wakes up in a nightmarish “reality”—St. Mary’s. This could actually be the reality, or it could be a terrible manifestation of her mind being torn in two as Jareth has warned.

Ch 24—Eventide

This is the most “real” reality we’ve seen thus far, and so the name of the chapter is a little ironic since it invokes darkness (insanity). But maybe that’s because it lays out the reasons for Sarah’s descent into madness (if you buy that version of events).

I also had Karen become “Irene” as a nod to the two accepted names for her in the fandom.

We also get to see that although Sarah’s father and stepmother were the more responsible of her parent-figures, in a way, they used her, too. There doesn’t seem to be discussion of Sarah’s wishes surrounding her child, just the adults telling her what is best for them all (and possibly considering their own interests above hers, without much thought of what it would be like for Sarah to pretend her child was her brother, or to be confronted with the issue of her relationship with Jeremy—not that Robert and Karen knew about that relationship consciously).

There are hints that Sarah was devolving into psychosis during her pregnancy and after, but the symptoms were dismissed as her being a “hormonal teenager” and being a dreamer who wanted to spend time in her fantasy books (rather than recognizing that she was losing touch with reality and considered the fantasy a reality). This is another way Sarah was failed by those who should have taken care of her. Even her friends wrote her off.

Ch 25—The Dawn of Days

The title should indicate sanity/enlightenment but it’s an ironic title because though Sarah does gain a sort of clarity by the end, she’s doing it by allowing herself to accept the madness as the truth (so, this fantasy realm is not her reality, or, you could look at it like her giving in completely to the mental illness, with no more intention to struggle against it. This is her choice).
This chapter changes settings/scenes without any explanation. Sarah’s thoughts jump from one world to the next, memories are mixed with dreams, and it’s a bit hard to follow. This is meant to mimic the way disordered thinking flows in mental illness. It makes perfect sense to the person afflicted with it (the same way a very changeable dream will make sense to the dreamer as she is dreaming), even though to an impartial observer, it will seem like nonsense.

Earlier in the story, despite some occasionally sinister undertones, the Goblin Realm has seemed to make the most sense for Sarah. She’s been her sanest here. But now, we see that slips. She loses track of time, seems to have trouble remembering things (Jareth has been gone a month and it catches her off guard when she learns it), and her nightmares have increased. This is either because Sarah really is insane and her dream of this world is being affected by it, or Jareth was right and her mind is being affected by the fact that she has taken an oath but not fulfilled its requirements yet. Or, it could be that she is just being slowly driven insane in this world as her actions in the other world (regarding Jeremy, Toby, etc) are coming to the surface.

There are clearer memories about her interactions with Jeremy (he at least plied her with alcohol when she was far too young to have it, and touched her in a suggestive way, if nothing else). Her behavior seems to suggest this wasn’t unwelcome on her part (I don’t mean to suggest that makes what he did acceptable, this isn’t an examination of what’s moral for an adult to engage in with a teenage girl, just the way such a girl might view those events).

In her dream of the party with Jeremy, the voices of Sir Didymus and Vergess Trindlebark (likely arguing by her sick bed as she lay asleep) pull her away from that memory and toward Dr. Prevarant’s office. Of course, Dr. Prevarant is revealed to definitively be Jareth here (and you can believe that as much as you believe any dream-revelation equates to the truth), and Jareth is reading her journal (we know the journal refers to the baby and giving up her dreams for him from discussions she had with her doctor earlier in the story). Jareth states that the entire thing is about him. Sarah denies it, because she wrote much of it about Jeremy, but if Jareth is just a manifestation of part of Jeremy’s personality, then what he says is true. And if Jareth is actually a real entity (the Goblin King) who masqueraded as Jeremy because he thought that was something Sarah wanted (as he later claims), it’s still true.

Next, Jareth, Dr. Prevarant, and Jeremy are all blended together, as first Sarah speaks to one, then the other seems to take over, and then the memory is of the third. That’s meant to show that they really are all parts of the same person, at least in Sarah’s mind. If that’s true, then you are left with two choices at this point: either Sarah’s mind fractured Jeremy into three so she could compartmentalize and deal with what happened between them more easily, or what Jareth says later is true: He was disguised as Dr. Prevarant (maybe in some sort of dream world while her mind was dealing with the consequences of her blood oath) and Jeremy all in a bid to give Sarah her desires.

Conveniently, Jareth introduces the idea that Sarah is not as selfish and cold as her mother, that Sarah’s sins were justified (as mercy). He also shows her that she has put herself in St. Mary’s as a punishment for her misplaced guilt, and if she makes the choice to leave, she can. And she does. He then shows her that the garden graveyard is where she lays all her perceived sins and mourns over the innocence she’s lost (rather than it being a literal graveyard where her murdered child is buried, as she has assumed). Jareth may be right, or this may be a way for Sarah’s subconscious to absolve her of her sins. He suggests the baby Sarah killed was a changeling, an old, dying fairy that had taken Toby’s place and needed to be put out of its misery.

In her weakened state, Sarah is pretty easy to convince that this is the case, and Toby is alive, and all will be well if she’ll just complete the requirements of her oath. And all that might very well be true. Or, Sarah finally “choosing” Jareth and Toby may be just the last step of her giving in to her mental illness and deciding to live out her life in her delusions, because they are more pleasant than the truth.
At the end, Jareth looks into the crystal to see someone who looks like Sarah with “wrong” eyes restrained at St. Mary’s. This could simply be one of Sarah’s nightmares (which will likely continue until she marries Jareth and throws that blood-oath monkey off her back) or it’s a reflection of the truth (Sarah really is in St. Mary’s, and the Goblin Realm is her dream—this has been the question since the beginning, which world is real?) or Sarah has been rescued from St. Mary’s by Jareth, and he has left a changeling in her place.

The choice is yours, really. I am not even 100% sure which story I believe. When I’m feeling more practical, I think Sarah is dreaming Brooksong and the Labyrinth while she’s heavily medicated at St. Mary’s as one of the criminally insane who murdered her own child. When I’m feeling more whimsical, I think all the hospital stuff is a nightmare due to her mind being torn by the unfulfilled oath, and her reality is her life with Jareth, and she’s destined to marry Jareth and be the Goblin Queen and raise Toby and his soon-to-be brothers and sisters in the palace. I think you can also consider both stories reality, like alternate universes, where in one, Sarah is a mental patient, and in another, she’s a queen. Or, the entire thing until the very end could be a great, complex dream, induced by Jareth who has kept her prisoner in his realm after she initially ran the labyrinth, trying to convince her to stay since she declared he had no power over her.

I’m happy to answer any further questions!

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