The Goblin Market

by ViciouslyWitty

Summary

Nine years after defeating the Labyrinth, Sarah is in Ireland - a land of old magic, where legend suggests her victory comes with a price and her story is far from finished. Something ancient has been set in motion and Sarah finds herself at the centre of a very old, very Goblin, tradition.

As time passes, fruit ripens. Let the feast begin at the Goblin Market...

Notes

Disclaimer: I don't own any rights to Labyrinth, so I don't think I rate suing. I do, however, own a much loved copy of the movie and a talking Jareth action figure for inspiration. Any of the original characters or plot devices - love them or hate them - are my creation. I licked them so you wouldn't want them anyway.

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This story was first published on www.fanfiction.net originally Published: 10-14-08 - Completed: 03-22-13
This was my first foray into fanfic. I drew heavily on Celtic myth and legend and took my inspiration from many things - including my time spent studying in Ireland, various songs by brilliant artists, the book The Hollow Kingdom by Clare B. Dunkle (read it) and, naturally, the poem The Goblin Market by Christina Rossetti. I always give credit where credit is due throughout the story.

The chapters in this story start getting much long around chapter 10 on (as I gained confidence, etc). This chapter is less than a 1000 words. By comparison chapter 35 is well over 8000 words.

It's the most reviewed Labyrinth story on fanfiction.net and the second most faved. I'm humbled and blessed by all of the love.
https://www.fanfiction.net/s/4596100/1/The-Goblin-Market

I've kept the chapters, content and chapter breaks the same (as annoying as they are in the beginning) but have removed notes, etc that are no longer pertinent.
Part I

"The dreams of youth are the regrets of maturity"

Lord of Darkness, Legend, 1985

She stared at herself in the mirror, mouth slightly open in a strange mixture of awe and fear. She was once again in the silver ball gown; once again a lamb in the lion’s den. The dancers and revelers all looked the same. Their goblin-esque faces leered from her many reflections. But this time their eyes were cold, seeming to size her up and find her lacking. Unable to look away, she nervously pulled at her sleeves and tried to disentangle the silvery vines from her hair; she was not supposed to be dressed like this again – this had already happened. It was a sad mockery after so many years, like a grown woman trying to don the guise of youth again.

But you can never go back and wearing this dress drowned her in unwanted memories of adolescent fantasy. Filled with an overwhelming hate for the girl who looked back at her, she began violently yanking the crystals and embellishments from her bodice, sending a flood of beads and jewels scattering across the floor.

"Isn’t this what you wanted?” suggested a bodiless voice behind her. "Didn't YOU want to look beautiful for me?"

"Miss Williams? Er… Are you alright?"

Sarah blinked in confusion and stared bleary-eyed at the faces before her.

Oh God, she had fallen asleep in front of her students. She wiped her mouth absently.

And she had drooled.
Clearing her throat in embarrassment, she rose on stiff legs. "Yes, yes… perfectly fine. I apologize. I stayed up too late working on some research. Guess I should have had more coffee this morning." A nervous laugh. "So where were we?"

Flipping through the professor's papers and notes, she mentally composed herself. She really should have come more prepared. Having accepted the position of teacher's assistant, Sarah had hoped to further her work towards her Master's degree, while also gaining the respect and credentials of the prestigious Dublin academia.

Every time one door closes, another door opens.

Falling asleep during her very first class was an inauspicious step towards realizing her dreams.

Dreams… no, focus, Sarah.

The students were now looking at one another with raised eyebrows and half smiles. Sarah squared her shoulders and defiantly stared back, forcing authority into her tone.

"This class will cover the theme of temptation in period literature. In particular, we'll focus on the classic literary theme of temptation: knowledge, desire and chaos used as a foil to innocence and youth. We'll touch on a few reoccurring devices, such as the use of food and drink - often a parallel to sex - as enticement. At the end of this course, we'll hopefully arrive at a better understanding of why this theme is so prevalent throughout western literature and is so often revisited by authors, historical and contemporary."

Sarah paused, letting the students jot down the course outline.

"For this term you'll need to pick up the following texts by next class: The biblical creation myth – we'll stick to the King James Version, if you please. The Greek myth of Persephone – I'd recommend Robert Graves' text for consistency. Homer's Odyssey – you should all be able to find Richard Lattimore's version with relative ease. Spencer's The Faerie Queen and finally…” Sarah frowned. What was the last one? Furtively scanning through the professor's notes, her eyes locked on the hastily scrawled title at the bottom of a page.

She looked up, her voice barely audible above the pen scratches, "… and the final work is Christina Rossetti's Goblin Market."
Sarah sulked while she walked, her coat pulled tightly against the early October chill. What an unmitigated friggin’ disaster! Her chance to start the year with a brilliant performance and she blew it. To add insult to injury, she had drooled. She grimaced as she glanced up at the impressive stonework of the University. Getting the position at Trinity College had been hard enough, moving her life, even temporarily, to Dublin had been a feat of red tape-traversing to rival any and all.

And how had she proven herself?

Lacking.

A little girl playing at being a woman… or a woman playing at being a little girl. And at 24 she was hardly a girl anymore.

Grow up, Sarah.

Her grey thoughts drifted to her dream as she navigated her way to the Dart station.

The ballroom. That bloody ballroom. She hadn’t had… one of those dreams in years. Why now? And why it?

Stress. Stress and over-stimulation. That had to be it. She was on edge trying to make a good impression and she was mired in literature that so closely mirrored her own experience she swore she smelled peaches every time she opened a dusty tome in the library.

But that final text – she hadn’t been expecting it. Sarah frowned. Even that seemed like a testament to her incompetence. Naturally it would be part of the syllabus. Any self-respecting academic could see how it so perfectly fit with the themes and symbols. It was the poster child.

She had nearly choked when she’d first read it shortly after her return from the Labyrinth. And then again when she’d studied it in school and delved into all the latent sexual imagery that so perfectly illustrated the classic temptation of the young girl. Sarah had tried so hard to identify with Lizzie – the stalwart heroine who resisted temptation and ultimately beat the Goblins to save her sister. After all, wasn’t she the victor of the Labyrinth? Hadn’t she resisted His temptation and taken back the child which He had stolen?

No…

At her core she was not the sage and steadfast Lizzie. She had been so much more little Laura, fallen
from grace. She had tasted the Goblin juices…

She had liked them.

Nervously, Sarah licked her lips. She couldn't travel down this road, not again. She had been on the verge of budding womanhood then, vulnerable to temptation. Hadn't she learned from her study of Celtic lore that that's when a young girl was most at risk from the Fey world? Now she was a woman grown and that door, if it had ever really existed, was closed.

So why did she feel like she was once again on the cusp of something?

Every time one door closes, another door opens.

Banishing the thought immediately, Sarah rode the Dart back to Dun Laoghaire with her music on and skimmed through the rest of her notes with determination.

She was going to make sure tomorrow's class went just peachy. Shit. Stop that, Sarah!

Exiting the crowded train, she made her way to the bus. It was only a short ride to her rented flat in Dalkey. Although it would have been more convenient to live in Dublin, it was much more economical to live outside of the metropolitan city centre. And besides, Dalkey was picturesque and quaint, affording her more time for reflection and study. The crumbling ancient castle keep in its centre enchanted her in many ways the grandeur of Trinity College didn't. She banked on seeing more of Ireland this way too. Dublin was too conveniently self-contained. Knowing her blood had stemmed from this land of myth and legend had made the prospect of coming here nearly impossible to resist.

Nodding a quick hello to her landlady before escaping upstairs to avoid Mrs. Whelan's incessant chattering, she unlocked the door to her small flat. The space was clean and simple with whitewashed walls and rough hewn floor boards. The furniture in the sitting area was outdated but fit the charm and ambiance of the place to perfection. And the window afforded an unhindered view of the rolling hills beyond the small village. On clear days she could even smell the sea.

Sarah had also added her own touch to the space in the week or so that she had already been there. Pictures of Toby, her father and even her once-dreaded stepmother lined one wall. A few pictures of friends at various parties and graduations lined another. The two oak bookcases in the room were full of texts, mostly on loan from the university, but interspersed with some staples of Sarah's own vast collection. The small dining table was piled with papers and half-finished cups of stale coffee. Somewhere there was a laptop in the mix as well. The small kitchenette was only in slightly better shape.

She turned to throw her leather satchel on the bed and stopped short. The wrought iron bed, which this morning had been left a tangle of blankets and sheets, was now neatly made, the linens crisp and firmly tucked.

"Someone's been in my room again!" she muttered and then froze at the thought.
"Mrs. Whelan!" Sarah called, striving to keep the annoyance from her voice even as she stomped down the stairs.

"Yes dear?" replied a tiny woman, poking her head around the landing’s corner.

"Mrs. Whelan, were you in my room today? I noticed that my bed is made."

"Why yes, I made it up this morn after you left for school," the older woman admitted calmly. Sarah exhaled the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. Relief mingled with the annoyance. "Thank you for your consideration, but I'd really appreciate it if you wouldn't do that. I'm rather particular about my things."

"Mmmm…I could see that," replied the older woman dryly, her tone tinged with a hint of censure. Sarah felt herself redden involuntarily. For a moment she was an errant teenager all over again, scolded by Karen for not doing her chores.

A woman playing at being a little girl.

The moment passed and she choked the feeling back, reminding herself that she was an adult who paid rent and could bloody well leave her bed unmade if she wanted. Maybe she preferred it that way, she thought petulantly. She took a calming breath. "Look, I don't mean to offend you. I just like my space to be a… sort of sanctuary where I can study in peace. I hope you understand."

"Of course, m'dear. Now how about a nice cup o' tea?" offered Mrs. Whelan. Without waiting for a reply, she headed to the antiquated stove and lit the burner.

Sarah wasn't sure who'd won the round, but she shrugged and sat down at the worn wooden table. She still felt slightly like an admonished child, but her day was already a mess and she had learned long ago that life was rarely fair.

After the tea had been properly steeped, poured and sweetened, and Sarah had once again been treated to the 'Americans just don't know how to make a proper cup of tea' lecture, the two women sat back companionably to enjoy the fruits of the elder's labours.

"You know, you have the Irish look 'bout you," mused Mrs. Whelan over the rim of her china cup, "what with the dark hair and green eyes."

"I thought the Irish were known more for their ginger… er, red hair?" Sarah asked, surprised at the sudden direction in conversation.
"Oh no!" Mrs. Whelan shook her head emphatically. "Ye'd be much mistaken. The red hair in the Irish comes from marriages to the Scots o'er the years. 'Tis the dark and light that makes up the Irish. Dark hair and light eyes. Just like our natures - light and dark – a little o' both," she added with a chuckle. "Always liked the look m'self, but I was blonde." She fingered a peppered lock with a small titter. "But that was a long while ago."

"I always wanted to be blonde when I was younger," offered Sarah politely. "The best heroines were always blonde."

Seeming not to hear Sarah's comment, Mrs. Whelan continued with her musings, "My da used to call me his little changeling child." Her eyes took on a faraway glint. "Said the goblins had taken his real daughter away and left me in her place."

Sarah choked on her tea. "Sorry, what did you say?" she managed between coughs.

"Because of me hair, dear. Our family was all dark save me, so he said I was a faery's child. Faeries being light o' hair, you understand. The Fae folk much admire the dark hair because 'tis so unlike their own. 'Tis said they steal pretty little babes with dark hair and leave their own kin in their place."

"But you said Goblins Mrs. Whelan," Sarah persisted.

"Did I? Silly me." Mrs. Whelan sipped her tea placidly and continued after a pause, "They used to say that when a beautiful babe was born, especially a girl child with lovely dark hair like yours, she'd be in right danger o' being taken."

An unnatural silence settled in the air.

"But I'd say you're safe on that score m'dear. You're far too old to be traded for a changeling," chuckled Mrs. Whelan with a throaty, almost inhuman laugh.

The moment passed again.

"That seems a very pagan belief for such a Catholic country," said Sarah, trying to inject some levity into her wavering voice.

"Oh yes, yes. We're still good Catholics, praise the baby Jesus," replied Mrs. Whelan, absently kissing the gold crucifix hanging from her neck, "but Ireland has never forgotten her first ways."

Sarah looked out the window thoughtfully. "It really has such a rich and almost… contradictory culture and history - full of all that light and dark mix you mentioned earlier."

"Indeed m'dear, but that sounds like thoughts beyond me simple schooling. I just know what they say, luvvy," Mrs. Whelan replied, raising her cup to her mouth and locking eyes with Sarah. "And what's said is said," she finished, before draining it with a goblin-like slurp.

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Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: As per usual, I own nothing save a penchant for procrastination.

This chapter contains some mild sexual content… and most unfortunately, it does not involve our favourite Goblin King. If anything might offend you, please skip to the next chapter – you won't be lost.

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Part IV

While gripping my innocence – thief
Whenever you steal
My punishment's real
You gave me sorrow

Enchanted, Delirium featuring Sarah McLachlan

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Sarah had escaped the kitchen shortly after on the pretence of getting some work done. As she quietly padded upstairs she kept a wary eye on the landing below. Was it just her imagination or was Mrs. Whelan more than what she seemed? She shook her head ruefully. Apparently Ireland was more stimulation than she could handle.

Her first few days had been spent in a whirlwind of activity – unpacking, organizing her student visa, meeting her thesis professor, collecting texts and purchasing necessary supplies – so that she had barely spoken to her landlady, let alone had a moment to think.

But then thinking was often dangerous. The mind, like dreams, would not be restrained.

Locking her door behind her, she hesitated and then grabbed a chair to jam under the knob for good measure. It was a childish act she knew, but that had pretty much been the tone of the day so why fight what you couldn't change?

Seated at her small vanity she looked in the mirror. Flushed cheeks and wide green eyes stared back, lending her an almost girlish look. Slowly, she ran her hands through her dark locks, reflecting on the evening's conversation.

"So the Fae folk would fancy me, hmmm?" Sarah mimicked Mrs. Whelan's Irish lilt. She shook her head ruefully. "Utter nonsense."

But a small twisted thrill shivered through her anyway. It was nice to be wanted, wasn't it? Sarah
thought of all the times she'd been aware of male gazes and had caught murmurs of male appreciation. It had made her feel delicious and wicked and powerful. And yet despite this, she was laughably still… innocent?

Well, mostly.

Initial youthful trepidation had been replaced by eager but fumbled relationships that never seemed to go quite right. She could never make them last long enough to reach fruition. Either she realized by the first or second date that she didn't actually want the man or the ones she did find desirable never seemed to reciprocate the feeling. She was clearly cursed.

A few years back, deciding that enough was enough, she followed a fellow student home from a pub party. She had had enough to drink to remove whatever inhibitions or reservations she would have had and she found his boyish arrogance both oddly familiar and enticing. When things had become awkward, he'd challenged her to a game to break the ice. The stake was, predictably, a kiss to be given by the loser. They both knew the real reason they were there. She'd resoundingly lost much to her chagrin, for she was looking to be seduced, not the other way around. He'd slowly leaned away from her as she'd tried to kiss him, forcing her to match his movements, until they were both reclined on the bed.

When their mouths finally met, it quickly degraded into a tangle of limbs and lips. His hands on her thinly-covered breasts sent shivers straight to her core. He didn't know that she was imagining someone else's hands. He may not have cared anyway.

Unfortunately, he was aroused and drunk past the point of taking care and quickly divested her of her skirt and underwear, not bothering to remove the rest of either of their clothing. Without further ado he tried to shove into her with a sharp thrust. Pain blossomed immediately. Biting her lip Sarah tried to ignore it and shifted to accommodate him, trying to relax against the pressure. But it was too late. Desire fled and only the sensation of being torn remained. Smothering beneath his weight, she called out for him to stop and rolled herself away. To give the young guy his due, he didn't pursue the matter. She lied out of pure embarrassment when he asked if she was a virgin and blamed the spots of blood on her period. He calmly got her a damp cloth, pulled the blanket over her, lay down and silently finished himself off in the dark.

Thankfully the alcohol carried her into uninterrupted sleep. She woke early the next morning and childishly snuck out of the apartment, leaving behind a note she hoped he'd never find and bloodied sheets. Though sore and slightly shaken, she made it home and examined herself thoroughly in the privacy of her room. She was slightly torn, but fine… save for her pride. She'd laughed brokenly, so did that make her partly a virgin, teetering on the precipice between innocence and experience? Who would have thought it possible to balance on so fine a point? Sarah deemed the experience a complete failure and chose to forget it, like so many other things.

The guy had found her note and called several times. She ignored every one. She didn't want him to try and fix things and she was too embarrassed by the prospect that he wouldn't want to.
Unfortunately, it had left its mark and coloured her subsequent dates accordingly. It didn't mean that she didn't still want.

Sarah viewed this academic sojourn to Ireland as a clean slate and a fresh opportunity. Though here for school, the possibility of romance abroad had not gone unconsidered. Perhaps someone with dark hair and Irish eyes… certainly not ones that were mismatched and mocking.

Now where had that unbidden thought come from?

This little green island was getting to her. She had spent years forgetting about the Labyrinth.
And she had come so far. Maybe she was moving backwards, or was she moving towards something? She was moving towards getting sacked if she didn't get some work done. She spent the rest of the evening flipping through texts, making notes and devising a lesson plan based on the outline the professor had left her. Concentrating on the rest of the course texts, Sarah ostensibly ignored Goblin Market and its abundance of overripe fruit.
Part V

I disappeared in you, you disappeared from me.
I gave you everything you ever wanted.
It wasn't what you wanted.
I'm only hanging on to watch you go down. My Love.

So Cruel, U2

"Is she going to say it again?" asked one voice.
"Say what?" asked another.
"Shut up!" intoned a third.
"You shut up!" replied the second.
"Haven't we said this all before?" quipped a fourth.
"SHUT UP! SHUT UP!" cried the other gravelly voices in unison.
"I was only saying that this seems really familiar," whined the fourth with a huff.
"Of course we've said it before, idiot. It's THE girl," barked yet another voice.
"What girl?" asked the last, scratching his horned head.
"The girl who ate the peach..." the rest whispered in awe.
"Will all of you kindly shut up?" interrupted a velvety soft voice, the threat latent. "Her time draws short." A gloved hand tapped a riding crop against a boot, while mismatched eyes calmly watched a clock with thirteen numbers. "Fruit must not be allowed to rot on the tree after all..."

The laugh that followed was cruel and mocking.

The voices giggled nervously.

"Well... laugh."

Their guffaws echoed throughout the throne room, broken only by the sounds of the ticking clock and of a crystal bouncing along the stones into darkness.
Porter and Prose

Part VI

Thou hast by moonlight at her window sung.
With feigning voice verses of feigning love,
And stolen the impression of her fantasy.

A Midsummer Night's Dream,
William Shakespeare, 1594.

The next few days passed without event for Sarah. She arrived at her classes prepared and poised, despite feeling anything but. She had a natural flair for the dramatic and her absentee mother had, at the very least, imparted her with the ability to wear a mask well. Her students proved to be above par and very engaging for first years. Their willingness to provide fresh insight in the class discussions was inspiring. Sarah quickly found herself blissfully enmeshed in the work and the students, in turn, were enchanted with her ability to become lost in the literature. Her love of the written word ran so deep it was infectious.

But then Sarah had never had any trouble with the written words, the danger lay within the spoken ones.

Even when she reluctantly turned to the Goblin Market, she found studying it in the group setting seemed to render it innocuous. She pragmatically reminded herself that it was simply a piece of well-crafted fiction bent on challenging staid Victorian mores, nothing more.

Even her landlady seemed charming again. More cheery than usual (a feat in itself), she blessedly refrained from further mention of changelings or Fae. In return, Sarah took the pre-cautionary measure of making her bed daily, and they both seemed satisfied with the arrangement. If Sarah noticed that Mrs. Whelan seemed to watch her with an odd glitter in her eyes she chose to ignore it. Ireland, as she herself had noted, was a land of eccentricity.

On Friday, after her last class of the week wrapped up, Sarah decided a saunter down Grafton St was in order. Having taken particular care with her wardrobe that morning she felt up to the cosmopolitan pedestrian mall. Her wool pencil skirt and fitted blouse were stylish and lent her an air of polished sophistication beyond her years, while her long and lustrous hair gave her a youthful bloom by contrast.

After window shopping for a few hours and picking up a trinket toy to send to Toby, she stopped at a pub to have some cheap supper and write some postcards home. Feeling relaxed after a Guinness and a bowl of rich stew, Sarah took a moment to marvel at the intricacies of the wood carvings all over the pub. It seemed like every archway and doorframe was covered in some shape or scene. Following a particularly detailed sweep of knot work, she stopped dead. The apex of the heavy arch depicted what looked like the face of a young woman drowning in a sea of startlingly familiar goblin faces. Two hands framed the girl's face and seemed to be drawing her down into the wood. Sarah rose slowly and moved closer to the carving, her eyes widening. Considering the haunting realism of the rest of the carving, the hands seemed remarkably un-detailed. There was no definition of knuckle or nail. And then she noticed the stitching. The hands were wearing gloves.
Tentatively reaching up to touch them she heard a throat clear politely. "I see you like the carving miss."

Startled, Sarah glanced down into a wizened old face. Stepping back a pace or two she regarded her new companion warily. He looked ever the stereotypical Irishman with his tweed jacket and weather-worn cap. His face was a mass of wrinkles and creases, no doubt formed by years of grins and laughter. Two remarkably clear brown eyes smiled reassuringly at her.

"Erm… yes, I was just admiring the detail."

The man continued to smile beatifically at her.

"And so unusual… the faces and the girl…" she faltered.

"Yes, indeed. May I join ye?" he asked, a strong rural lilt to his voice.

"Please do," Sarah replied politely, trying to mask her earlier discomfort. She sat and motioned to the chair before her. The old man settled himself and his glass of porter at the table.

"So ye like the carving do ye? "'Tis pleased, am I, to hear ye say such. For I carved it meself some thirty odd year ago."

"Really?" remarked Sarah, feigning polite surprise. The Irish were known for their tall tales, just as tourists were known to be gullible.

"Aye, aye…" he waved it away, "but ye mentioned ye were intrigued by the subject."

Sarah nodded slowly.

"Well 'tis a grand tale, 'tis indeed." He bobbed his head to punctuate his point. "Ye've heard of the Fae folk and the changeling children afore, no?"

Again Sarah nodded, suppressing a faint feeling of nausea.

"'tis but a similar tale. The Fae have powerful likin' fer human wee ones, but they also have powerful likin' fer lovely womenfolk too, not that I blame 'em," he winked. "As the stories go, the Fae folk have trouble bearing children… 'Tis why they steal the babes – to raise as their own, feeding 'em Fae fruit and the like to make 'em strong and magicked like them." The elder gentleman paused to examine his pocket watch, politely letting Sarah digest what she'd heard so far.

"But then why would they leave their own babies if they have such trouble conceiving? I thought they just switched them to cause trouble?"

He chuckled, "I've nary a doubt a bit o' mischief is involved too. But ye see the changelings aren't really children, so to speak, they're sprites and that lot breed like rabbits," he added with a grimace. "'They stay in our world to help others being stolen. They blend in with us, so as ye can't tell 'em apart."

Sarah put a hand to her throbbing brow. She was beginning to feel that she was in some kind of Gothic novel where all of the characters somehow warn the heroine of the events to come and when the action plays out it is revealed that they have all had a role to play.

Or maybe it was jet lag that just wouldn't go away.

The old man sipped his porter in expecntant silence. Suddenly in need of a drink, Sarah ordered
another pint from a passing bar maid.

"So Mr…uh, Mr?" She began.

"Ah me, where are me manners? Just call me Declan," replied the gentleman. "It's not everyday I get to share a glass with a wee colleen like yerself."

Sarah blushed automatically. "Thank you. I'm Sarah."

Declan smiled and sipped again. "Now that carving in particular m'dear," he pointed to the archway, "shows the taking o' a young girl down to the lower realm – the land of the magic ye ken." His voice had dropped to a whisper.

"If you don't mind me saying, the faces look more like…well…goblins," Sarah interjected in an equally hushed tone.

"Why they are m'dear!" A wide toothy grin. "Ye didn't think Fae meant only pretty wee faeries, now did ye?" The amusement was evident in his voice.

"I see," replied Sarah, her own tone laconic.

"It shows the taking of the Goblin Bride," Declan continued undeterred. "The girl is to be the wife of a goblin lord. Ye see the Goblin King has fallen in love with the wee mortal and means to steal her to be his bride. To be his companion, bear his children and be a queen in her own right. He would never choose anyone unworthy after all."

Declan paused, seemingly to wait for her reaction. Sarah kept her face carefully blank and he continued after a moment.

"It's tradition that all the Fae kings steal their brides. They do like a good chase, ye know. And it proves them worthy of more power, not to mention it secures their line by ensuring fresh stock. Mortals have powers in their own rights. Then once the king has his bride good n' caught, and if he passes a test o' sorts, he's crowned High King. But that's another wee yarn."

Sarah absorbed this information slowly, her mind torn behind mild hysteria and patent disbelief.

"I must say," she began, trying to sound matter-of-fact, "that I've never come across mention of that 'story' in any book before."

Declan stopped and seem to mull over her statement. "Well I suppose 'tis a local legend mostly. And where I'm from, we like to keep the ol' stories oral – like the First ways. The spoken word has so much more power, wouldn't ye say, Sarah?"

She stared glassily at Declan, her expression non-committal.

Somewhere in the pub a clock ticked.

Finally clearing her throat to break the awkward silence, Sarah tried to redirect the conversation to more neutral territory. "They are… impressive carvings, sir," she said formally, trying to re-establish a distance. "They must have taken you a long time."

"Well, after all me years o' practice, Miss Williams," drawled the older man enigmatically, "you could say t'wer but a piece o' cake."
Part VII

I find it easy to distract
and just as soon as you turn your back,
I'll be gone again.

True, The Frames.

Sarah mumbled a weak excuse and dashed from the pub, nearly forgetting to pay her tab and knocking over a fellow patron in the process. When she'd gone several blocks, she slowed. It felt like she was always running - running from something or running towards something. Running the Labyrinth. She was tired of it all. When would it be someone else's turn to run?

Pulling her wrap tightly around herself by habit, or with a measure of apprehension, she fumed silently. These coincidences were becoming difficult to ignore and grated on her already frazzled nerves. Ireland was supposed to be a retreat and so far it had been everything but relaxing.

That old carver had been harmless enough she reasoned. Her mind was no doubt projecting warning signs where none existed; she had always had an overactive imagination. Just as it was plausible that it was merely a legend she had never stumbled across before. After all, her academic focus had always been literature, not folk tales. And if, as the man said, this particular tale was isolated to a rural part of Ireland that prized oral tradition it would be natural that she'd never heard it.

Moreover, if you looked at the story objectively it was nothing new. Pretty young women were always tempted away in stories – hell, she was teaching a course on that very subject. The young girl always represented order and innocence tempted by chaos and knowledge, usually knowledge that the Church deemed either carnal or outright heretical. The stories simply served as a warning, admonishing women to remain pious, woefully ignorant and above all virginal - knees safely locked. It was a romantic notion to make the heroine young and beautiful, just as it was thrilling to have the villain fall in love with the girl - made it easier to justify the lengths he'd go to get her. The Greeks and Romans had their Persephone, the Christians had their Eve, Spenser had even given the Brits their Britomart – though she supposed the latter had successfully resisted. It was pure fantasy that made Sarah believe the fallen Persephone had been the happiest one. Because wasn't being loved, no worshipped, not worth the crown of Hell?

Sarah shook her head ruefully at the thought. She had paused in front of a shop during her musings, the nearby lamplight illuminating her lost reflection in the glass. Her own experience even mirrored this classic parable. She had been been young and innocent. She had been pursued by a villain fallen in love with her. A sad mockery of love, but a love all the same. And He had tempted her…

"Everything that you wanted I have done. You asked that the child be taken. I took him. You cowered before me, I was frightening. I have re-ordered time. I have turned the world upside-down. And I have done it all for you!"
Look Sarah. Look what I'm offering you— your dreams.

I ask for so little. Just let me rule you, and you can have… everything… that you want. Just fear me, love me, do as I say, and I will be your slave."

But she had resisted. She'd been so close to failing, so close to falling. She had tasted the goblin's fruit and been enraptured… for a time. But every story had to have its proper ending and every heroine her victory. She had delivered her lines with the ease of a consummate actress. And she'd been happy… no elated with her triumph. She had vanquished no less than a king. It was only afterwards that…

Sarah shook her head again. Declan's tale was really nothing new. It was simply imbued with the Celts' warrior spirit, viewing the most powerful as the most fit to rule. Fairness had nothing to do with it. Love in Ancient Eire was never sweet. It was often brutal, always passionate and mostly tragic. She had probably looked like a fool to the man, running away like a scared little girl. If she'd been a true academic instead of a child playing at being an adult, she would have taken notes to use in her class.

And really, piece of cake was a common enough expression after all.

Still, something just didn't sit right…

"Well after all me years o' practice Miss Williams," said the older man, "you could say they were a piece of cake."

She hadn't told him her last name was Williams, had she?

Distracted, Sarah almost knocked into a small crowd of people watching a street musician play. Pausing to apologize to a young couple who dog she'd almost trampled, Sarah turned to leave when the first bits of a song reached her ears:

"I find it easy to pretend that we're not 
Heading for our end…

I find it so hard to be true 
But I'm gonna try my best for you

And every distance that we've known will disappear
Before too long and every line we've ever drawn
Will be erased before we're gone…
This I swear to you.

Take it back, take it back.
Those words that you never can help.

Will you dance and dance
Don't have me repeating myself
Because you came by chance
And I'll bring you right down again…"

Sarah's mouth fell open and the blood froze in her veins. It couldn't be… Pushing through the throng to reach the singer, Sarah was suddenly reminded of another time and another place when she'd madly followed a song. Her heart thumped loudly as she slipped to the front of the crowd…

It wasn't him.
She had known it wouldn't be, but she wasn't sure if she was relieved or disappointed. Tired of feeling like a frightened bird, she'd felt defiant and had itched for a good fight. She would have also liked confirmation that she wasn't losing her mind. Surely there was a point when coincidence became redundant? Surely all these signs pointed to something?

The busker had finished the song and his set, and the crowd dispersed accordingly. Counting the coins in his case, he was surprised to see a young woman still standing before him. She seemed lost in thought beneath a furrowed brow. The woman made no move to leave and no move to speak to him. He assessed with a practiced eye that she couldn't have been more than mid-twenties at most and that she was unusually attractive. He was damned if he was going to let an opportunity like this pass by.

"Are you trying to decide if me sad attempt at crooning deserves a coin or a swift kick in the arse?"

Sarah blinked, registered his comment and then laughed lightly. She fished in her clutch and pulled out a one pound coin, dropping it in his case.

The young musician winked with a rueful grin. "I think you made the wrong choice, love."

"Why would you say that?" Sarah demanded, rattled by his choice of words.

The man held his hands up. "I only meant that ye probably should've kicked me in the arse and saved yer money."

Sarah mentally shook herself. It was clear the musician was just flirting with her, not serving as a portent of evils to come. Sarah allowed herself to relax, and to be disarmed by his easy manner and open smile. He noted his handsome face and tousled auburn hair with interest. He seemed so… splendidly normal! She smiled at the concept.

"No, I really liked your song. It was very… poignant. Did you write it?"

The young man coloured modestly. "I did indeed. Just sort of came to me." He held out his hand.

"Finn."

"Pleased to meet you, Finn." She returned the handshake, liking the way his long lean fingers wrapped around hers. "Sarah."

"So yer American then?" asked Finn, looking genuinely interested.

"Accent gave it away?" Sarah laughed and then nodded. "I'm here for a year teaching at Trinity."

Finn's eyes widened momentarily. "Well I can't say I've ever had the pleasure of asking a professor if she would like to have a cup o' coffee with me, but there's a first time for everything. So what do ye think?"

Sarah smiled. "Sounds perfect. But don't worry I'm not a professor yet." The banality of a simple cup of coffee was irresistible.

Wrapping up his guitar, Finn sighed dramatically, "Well thank Jaysus! I won't have to worry about ye giving me a failing grade for 'lack of originality and depth'."

Sarah grinned wickedly. "We don't know that yet, now do we?"

As they strolled companionably along St. Stephen's Green, Sarah drank in the crisp autumn air with something akin to satisfaction and relief. They had enjoyed a great conversation over a rather pitiful
cup of coffee, which neither of them really noticed. The evening lamplight lent everything a warm inviting glow, and for once everything seemed to be right in the world. She slyly eyed the musician beside her.

Perhaps this was that romantic Irish encounter she was hoping for.

Almost immediately after the thought entered her mind, Finn’s guitar case was violently wrenched out of his hands and disappeared into the park. The Friday night crowd was thick, and neither of them caught a glimpse of the culprit. Cursing, Finn tore off in the general direction of the would-be thief. Sarah tried following, but couldn’t keep up with his longer strides. After waiting fifteen minutes, she walked back through the park, before giving up when a crack of thunder rent the evening air. It figured. Cursed. Dejected but hardly surprised, Sarah made her way to the Dart station, hoping that he had found his guitar at least.

Later, as Finn made it back to his flat, guitar case in hand, he quietly poured himself a stiff drink and shakily lit a cigarette. He had been hallucinating. It was the only thing that could explain his experience in the park that evening.

Running madly through the green, he’d overheard some odd snickers from a group of bushes and the distinctive twang of a metal string. Figuring that some teenagers had grabbed his guitar, he dove behind the shrubs… to be met with what he could only describe as little gargoyles. Inhuman eyes, sharp teeth and claws of various sizes greeted him. Before he could say or do anything except squeak in fear, the little beasts had him painfully pinned to the ground.

A shadow fell across his prone form and an unseen voice, low and cruel, warned him to forget about the girl if he wanted to keep the tongue to earn his living. Ear-splitting thunder punctuated the order. All he could do was nod emphatically against the din. He was no fool and whatever or whoever controlled the creatures holding him was clearly far more dangerous. His life was not worth a lay, even a beautiful one, and besides, he wasn't sure when his balls were going to drop back down again anyway.

Just as suddenly as it happened, he was free. As he rose on unsteady limbs, the creatures scattered and seemed to steal into the night. But not before one took a sizeable bite out of his guitar for good measure.

He hadn’t bothered to look for Sarah with an excuse, he’d just headed straight home with his ruined instrument. When friends asked what had happened to his guitar, he would just cryptically remark that some things are not what they seem.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: The heading quote and the song Sarah hears played in this chapter are both by the Irish band 'The Frames'. If you haven't heard them – go hear them. Their
songs are all available online. The lead singer of the band, Glen Hansard, used to busk on Grafton St – hence the inspiration for this piece. I don't own anything and the busker in this chapter is in no way meant to be a characterization of the band or Glen – who I also don't own. Check out the movie Once. The music is all Frames songs and some of the characters are played by members of the band.

The italicized lines are verbatim from the movie Labyrinth

The song Sarah hears is an amalgamation of the songs True and The Side I Never Get to See by the Frames.
A Decision Made

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part VIII

Games that never amount to more than they're meant will play themselves out

Falling Slowly, The Frames

Sarah rode the Dart back to Dun Laoghaire in a troubled state. Tonight had started out promising but it had all amounted to ashes in the end. She suddenly missed home and family very much. Toby had become a precocious little boy who never failed to lift her spirits. He had developed an alarming penchant for 80's glam rock, but she reasoned it only added to his character. Her father was as clueless about his children as ever, but he had a good heart and adored his family. Once she had finally forgiven Karen for marrying her father, Sarah found her to be warm, generous and more importantly, a woman who made her father happy. Sadly, her beloved Merlin was long passed, but Toby had acquired a sheep dog of his own. Sarah had affectionately named him Ambrosias.

When she thought of home her mind always seemed to drift to her 'other' family. She hadn't seen them in years. After that fateful night and the small celebration in her room that followed, she had refrained from calling on them. She consciously made the decision to view her experience as an adolescent right of passage. Calling on her friends would have been dangerous, probably to both them and to her. And though she'd been honest when she'd said there were times she would need them, she had never called… half afraid they'd answer, half afraid they wouldn't. Uncertainty was somehow preferable.

Sarah did her best never to question past decisions. That kind of thinking was perilous. It led to questions like 'what if…'

She needed to get out of the city. Time away from Dublin would mean time away from all of her worries. She'd drive herself mad seeing signs everywhere. Any more of this and she'd be back on Aer Lingus heading home, sacrificing her dreams all over again. And this was the perfect way to see more of Ireland – old Ireland - without the veneer of bright city lights and fashionable stores. She wanted to see the Ireland that haunted James Joyce and made W.B. Yeats renounce his British roots in order to become more Irish than the Irish themselves. That was the Ireland she dreamed of, but where?

As if on cue, Sarah glanced down and spotted a travel brochure on the seat across from her. With the large number of tourists who relied on the train system to navigate Dublin, it wasn't uncommon to find one left behind. Gingerly flipping through it while the city lights whizzed by, Sarah stopped on a dog-eared page.

'The Hill of Tara in county Meath.'

The glossy picture depicted an aerial view of an impossibly green field with uneven and asymmetrical hedges dissecting it haphazardly. No orderly quilt-like patches of wheat. How different
Ireland was from middle-America – so much wilder and untamed. A series of seemingly unconnected but concentric rings punctuated the grassland and a small copse of trees ringed the enclosure on one side. She could only make out one tiny building in the image and perhaps a small village. The only other interruption in the sea of green was a series of scattered white dots – sheep no doubt.

Overall, the photo was pastoral but unimpressive. Sarah flipped the page. On the other side was a close up view of one of the rings. It was breathtaking. The horizon was broken by a small bowl-shaped mound. There seemed to be an arched stone entryway into the hill, eerily lit from within. It was the sky, however, that drew the eye. A torrent of clouds in every shade of grey and steel blue stood in stark contrast to a blinding white sun. The paleness of the sky made the green of the grass almost too vivid to be real. The whole photo evoked a surreal sense of anticipation – as if something earth-shattering was about to happen. It was easy to see why the ancient Druids believed in the magic of these places and why 'good' Catholic Ireland had never been able to erase them completely. The caption below the photo read, The Mound of Hostages.

On the adjacent page was a short blurb on the site:

'The Hill of Tara or "the glory of the Gael" lies in county Meath, roughly halfway between Dublin and Navan off the N3 in the province of Leinster. Although one of many Neolithic sites in Ireland, it is of particular historical importance to Ireland. The Hill of Tara was once the seat of the High Kings of Ireland and is considered a sacral site long associated with kingship rituals. Over 142 kings are said to have been crowned there, including the most famous, King Cormac Mac Airt. After St. Patrick's conversion of Ireland, it was used as a site of Christian assembly and pilgrimage. In the last century it was the site of Daniel O'Connell's political "monster rallies" where one million people met in support of Catholic emancipation.

An interpretive centre is located in a nineteenth century church on site and provides tours from mid-June to late October. Accommodations are available in nearby Telltown.

Walking shoes are recommended. Cameras permitted.'

Sarah flipped the page, but that was it. The next page featured the province of Munster. She flipped back and noticed a hastily written scrawl at the bottom of the page:

'Fantastic time, well worth the visit – wish I'd stayed the night and made it to Bruig na Boinne the next day.'

Obviously the last owner of this brochure had found it worth the bus fare. Flipping through the rest of the book, she noticed that it was the only notation the tourist had bothered to make. Well that was recommendation enough for her. She had briefly considered a trek to Killarney Castle but the photo of tourists happily lost in a hedge maze made her slightly ill. No… better the unimposing hills in an open field. And that photo of the mound was simply mesmerizing.

It was settled.

She'd look into modes of transportation first thing tomorrow morning. The disappointment of the evening's mishap vanished beneath thoughts of lush green fields and heavenly skies. Sarah rode the train the rest of the way home with a satisfied smile on her face.

Elsewhere, another face smiled with satisfaction and something else entirely…

Still glowing when she arrived home and feeling rather genial, Sarah stopped in the kitchen to say a quick good night to Mrs. Whelan. The older woman was working on a cross stitch while waiting for
the kettle to boil, but she looked up when Sarah appeared in the doorway.

"Oh hello, Sarah love, I didn't expect you back so soon."

"Neither did I."

"Did ye have a good time in the city?"

Sarah paused before answering slowly, "Yes...yes, I suppose I did. I had a nice dinner, managed to write some postcards home and found a little present for my brother."

"That's nice, dear." Mrs. Whelan went back to her needle work.

Sarah turned to leave when the older woman spoke again. "Did ye meet any anyone interesting? Ye seemed to have a nice smile on yer face when ye came in," she asked slyly without looking up.

"That's not why I was smiling," replied Sarah, suddenly a bit embarrassed. "But sort of, yes. Didn't really go anywhere, though."

"Oh that's a shame, such a precious wee thing like you. But then it's probably for the best. There's lots o' men that would take advantage of a pretty young woman all alone. We wouldn't want you doing anything rash... We want to keep ye nice and safe after all," finished Mrs. Whelan with a matronly smile.

Sarah found the conversation more than a little patronizing and was about to defend herself as a grown woman capable of looking out for herself, when the kettle whistled loudly, effectively cutting off whatever annoyed retort she was about to make.

As if reading her thoughts, the older woman switched tacts. "Cup o' tea?"

"No thanks, I've had more than enough caffeine today. Plus, I want to get some sleep tonight. Tomorrow will be a long day."

Mrs. Whelan looked up with interest. "Oh?"

"That's why I was smiling actually. I've decided to go sight-seeing tomorrow. I found a brochure on the train," said Sarah, pulling it out from her bags and opening it to the dog-eared page.

"Ah... the Hill O' Tara. Lovely, lovely!" gushed Mrs. Whelan when Sarah handed over the brochure.

"It just looked so interesting – you know we have nothing at all like that in the States. It's said to be over 5000 years old!"

"Oh I suspect 'tis older than that," replied Mrs. Whelan with a small smile. "I think ye've made the perfect choice. Ye'll have a grand time. Do ye need a hand packing?"

"No thanks, I'm only going to spend the one night – I've got work before my first class on Tuesday and I've barely spent any time on my own thesis," Sarah finished with the quintessential sigh made by students everywhere.

"I did want to ask you about how to get there though. The brochure says it's not very far. Is there a train that stops close by?"

Mrs. Whelan paused mid-stitch and thought. "No train, but there's a bus that leaves from Busarus in the city. It's about a 40 minute trip and ye can just ask the driver to let ye off at the nearest stop."
Shouldn't take ye above 5 min or so to walk to the Hill. Of course ye can also take one of those bus
tours – they do the Hill O' Tara and then end up at Bruig na Boinne."

"Wow, thanks. Bruig na Boinne – that's Newgrange, right?" asked Sarah.

"Indeed. 'Tis another burial site in Meath and very impressive it be," replied Mrs. Whelan with a nod.
"But if ye want to see it the right way, I'd avoid the tour bus. Yer here for awhile, ye've time enough
to see Newgrange at a later date. Better ye see the Hill at yer own pace, like one of us. 'Tis less
spectacular than Newgrange but 'tis a more… important site in many a way."

Sarah nodded. She wanted to feel like she somehow belonged. Less like a tourist. "Thanks so much,
Mrs. Whelan. You've been a huge help. Are all Dalkey landladies as knowledgeable as you?" asked
Sarah playfully.

Mrs. Whelan laid her embroidery down on the table. Sarah noticed it was an intricate knotwork
pattern – the spirals winding round and round, getting lost in each other.

"Mayhaps not, m'dear, though ye give me too much credit. I just happen to know that area. 'Tis
where I'm from, after all," she finished with a wide grin.

Sarah did not return the smile. Part of her was annoyed that once again she was slapped in the face
with uncanny coincidence and part of her was genuinely unnerved. She was on the verge of just
cancelling the trip when she looked down at the brochure lying on the table. The picture of the
mound stared back at her. No, she still wanted to go. She was going to a tourist site, not the gateway
to hell.

Sarah wished Mrs. Whelan an honest good night and went to bed as excited as a young child the
night before a party.

The little landlady stayed in the kitchen sipping her tea and finishing her needlepoint. She sang a
song while she worked.

"There is a hill in this fair land
T'was never owned and never can
And from its prow the eye can see
The very ends of Inishfree

Here once stood the Royal Seat
And here once trod the Fianna feet
Silent now but not forlorn
For this is still the Ard Riongh's home

Cernait, Grainne, Cormac, Fionn
T'was here they loved and lost and won
Their secrets lie 'neath Tara's soil
Known only to the Lia Fail."
The song Mrs. Whelan sings is a traditional poem called the Song of Tara. The transcript of the song was taken from The Tara Walk by Michael Slavin

Ard Riogh – High King
Lia Fail – Stone of Destiny

The travel brochure's information was taken from:

Tara, by Edel Bhreathnach and Conor Newman
For the Love of Ireland, edited by Susan Cahill

I had the pleasure of visiting the Hill of Tara when I was (much younger) in Ireland. If you ever get the opportunity to go to Ireland, take time to see it and Bruig na Boinne (Newgrange). It's well worth it. At Newgrange they take you into the burial mound and recreate the solstice, where a stream of light slowly creeps along the passageway before illuminating the tomb. It was almost a spiritual experience. Tara is much more wild and perhaps less impressive, but beautiful in its own right.
Part IX

And if we don't hide now
They're gonna catch us when we sleep
And if we don't hide here
They're gonna find us

They're all spies…

Spies, Coldplay

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It begins…

Sarah rose early the next morning feeling refreshed and eager. Normally she abhorred getting up early; she was so much more a night owl. But today was going to be a much needed adventure and judging from the sunlight that streamed into her room, the mercurial Irish weather actually agreed. After showering and carefully making her bed, she grabbed a small hand bag and started packing. She was only staying the one night, so she only packed a night gown, a change of clothes, toiletries, a camera and a book. Jeans had always read adventure, so she pulled out a clean pair, topped it off with a silky top and finished the look with a short, fitted wool jacket. Her flat–soled suede knee boots would do for walking. Hair brushed, make-up immaculate and bag packed, Sarah gulped down a quick cup of coffee and headed downstairs.

Mrs. Whelan was waiting at the bottom of the stairs with a piece of paper in her hand. "My, yer up early this morning. All set then?"

"Couldn't sleep. I'm excited to get going. This will be my first trip outside of Dublin."

Mrs. Whelan smiled fondly. "And yer going to have the time of yer life, m'dear."

Holding out the paper, the older woman continued, "This is the address and the number of a bed & breakfast in town. Used to know the woman that runs it. She'll take good care of ye and give ye a fair price. Just mention me name."

"Thanks! I hadn't even looked into accomodations." Sarah took the paper and tucked it into her pocket. "You've saved me once again."

Mrs. Whelan's grin widened. "Oh I wouldn't say that. I just want to make sure everything goes right, love."

Sarah smiled and headed for the door, but not before the older woman called out, "Oh m'dear, I meant to ask. Did ye have anything ye wanted mailed?"

"Well, I did have a couple of postcards and that gift for Toby, but I was just going to mail them on Monday. It's Saturday anyway," Sarah said hurriedly, eager to get on the road.

"I only ask because I'm heading to the post-office today anyway. Thought I could help ye out,"
replied Mrs. Whelan kindly.

Sarah hesitated but then quickly dashed upstairs to retrieve the postcards and the small package. Postcards by nature were hardly private correspondence and she might as well get them in the mail sooner than later - who knew how long they would take to reach home?

She handed them to Mrs. Whelan as she reached the downstairs landing. "Thanks. Let me know how much I owe you."

Mrs. Whelan shook her head. "No problem m'dear. I don't mind. T'will be me pleasure to make sure yer family gets news of ye."

Sarah nodded and stepped out the door as Mrs. Whelan waved her goodbye. "And ye really never know what might happen between now and Monday, dear. Better to get it done while yer still in Dublin."

The door shut with a click.

Sarah found the right bus at the Busarus station easily and informed the driver where she wanted to go, asking him to let her off as close as possible. Settling into her seat, she put on her headphones and rested her head against the window. Toby would be so excited when she told him she'd gone to an ancient burial ground, where kings of old had reigned and slaves had been brutally sacrificed. He liked that macabre sort of stuff. She'd make sure to take lots of pictures.

As the bus passed the city limits, Sarah breathed a sigh of relief. Watching buildings give way to rolling hills and wide open spaces, she fell into a lulled slumber.

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"Miss? Miss?"

Sarah woke with a start and stared back at the driver in the rear view mirror.

"We're here, Miss. This'll be yer stop."

She grabbed her bag in embarrassment and headed to the front of the bus. "Already? Sorry, didn't realize I had fallen asleep - could have sworn I was just listening to my watch." Sarah glanced out the windshield. "So it's just a quick walk up the road? Is that the church off there?" she asked, pointing to a small stone building.

"That'd be it, Miss."

Sarah stepped down and out the door, turning to say goodbye. "Thanks. So is it worth the trip?"

The driver shrugged his shoulders. "Search me, I'm just the driver."

Sarah was left wide-eyed on the roadside.
Mrs. Whelan had been right and it was only a short walk. Sarah found the enclosure easily. When she entered the church she was immediately met with a beautiful view. A large stained-glass window took up almost an entire wall. The colours were vivid and the detail was exquisite. The scene depicted the rays of heaven cascading onto the worshippers below. Sarah stood open-mouthed in wonder.

"I see ye like our Pentecost window, Miss," said a female voice from her right.

Sarah turned to find a neatly dressed thirty-ish woman smiling back at her. "It's very impressive. Do you work here?"

The woman nodded. "I have that pleasure. Welcome to the Hill o' Tara. This de-consecrated church is our cultural centre, as you've no doubt guessed. And yer our only visitor today." The woman looked out the open door. "Strange since the weather is so mild and 'tis close to the end of our season."

Sarah was pleased to be the only tourist – it would make the whole experience more intimate. The guide explained that they would screen a short film and then she could walk to the mounds to explore on her own. Sarah marveled at the freedom. In America everything would have been roped off and tourists would never be invited to wander off on their own unless there were security cameras everywhere.

Settling herself on one of the hard pews, Sarah watched as a fair-sized screen was lowered in front of the great glass window. The lights dimmed and the projection began. After a brief series of aerial shots of the mounds flashed over the screen, a rich baritone voice welcomed the viewer to the Hill of Tara and began to recount its history:

"Long has the Hill of Tara been the Forradh - or Royal Seat of Ireland. It is one of the largest complexes of Celtic monuments in Europe and one of the most important historically. 142 kings have reigned by the name of Tara and have used the Forradh as their place of judgment. In ancient times the prospective king would have placed his hand on the Lia Fail - or Stone of Destiny – to be judged worthy. It is said that the Stone would scream three times if he had successfully met a series of challenges, and thus proclaim his right to rule. In this vein, the Hill of Tara was used as the island's political and spiritual capital for thousands of years. It was at this very site that laws granting greater rights to women were once enacted.

To the north of the ring forts is a small Neolithic passage tomb known as Dumha na nGiall - or Mound of Hostages."

Sarah's interest piqued as she beheld the hauntingly familiar image.

"Here, kings used to hold political prisoners as a guarantee to their unchallenged rule. It is considered a passage tomb because the ancient Druids also viewed it as the entrance to the Otherworld of eternal joy and plenty, where no mortal grows old. As such, The Hill of Tara was even named as the capital of the Tuatha De Danann – the pre-Celtic dwellers of Ireland.

At one point in Ireland's history, it was a capital offence to make a fire within the sight of the Hill of Tara for fear of attracting Fae revelers."

The hairs on the back of Sarah's neck rose to attention.
The film switched views and zoomed in on some of the spiral carved stones.

"These trinity spirals cover many of the free standing stones throughout the complex. Clearly pre-Christian, scholars agree that they most likely represent eternity or death and rebirth. Although dissenting scholars have labeled them labyrinths…"

"Oh, Hell!" Sarah failed to hear the rest of the film.

When the projection ended, she once again found herself in an internal argument. Part of her screamed she leave immediately, another cautioned that she couldn't live her life in fear. Nothing bad had actually happened.

Yet.

The latter half won the match by a narrow margin.

Sarah thanked the guide, assuring her that if she had any questions she'd be sure to ask, and armed with her aerial map and informative guidebook, she went out to the sacral site. The weather was still cooperating and she was soon lost in the beauty of ancient Eire. She found the Lia Fail easily enough. It was taller than her waist, very weathered, and overtly phallic. She was justified in her perception when she read a small plaque indicating that it was also called Fergus' Penis. Only the Irish would make their prospective kings place their hands on a stone cock to validate their right to rule.

She spent the next few hours touring the Rath of the Synods, the King's seat, King Cormac's House and finally the Mound of the Hostages – which had intrigued her from the beginning. The mound was just as she'd seen it in the photo, although the bright sunny day made it look far less ominous. The little entrance way, for that's what it was – you'd literally have to crawl to enter - was unfortunately barred with a little iron gate. She would have liked to see inside.

Touring the outside of the church afterwards, she read that it had been built over the former collapsed medieval church late in the 19th century, but that some of the original stones had been left about outside. They dotted the landscape like little sentinels.

Sarah easily found Adomnan Cross and to the east of that, she was delighted to find her very first Sheela-na-gig. She had read about and seen images of these short and grotesque pagan fertility goddesses before, but she'd never seen one in person. If the Lia Fail was phallic, this little creature - holding open the folds of her womanhood in invitation -was sex personified. Sarah had always been amused by the idea that these little hedonistic figures were usually found in older Catholic churches - a throw back to the pagan days. You had to look for them, as they were usually well hidden, but they were there, defiant in the shadows all the same.

After eating the soggy sandwich she'd thought to purchase on the way to the bus that morning, Sarah spent another couple of hours taking photos. She wandered around the mounds trying to frame shots she thought Toby would find interesting. She would not, however, be giving him a picture of the Sheela-na-gig. After that, Sarah wandered over to the forest glen, a dense but small copse of very old trees, and then even managed to discover all five of the sacred wells on the site.

Overall, the landscape was strangely peaceful in its wild simplicity. She was jerked out of her reverie, however, when a couple of small rocks hit her squarely in the back. She spun around only to see a small scattering of sheep. Frowning, she turned to continue on her way but the same thing happened again. This time she swore she heard snickers and the laughter.

"I know you're out there! Show yourselves!" Sarah yelled defiantly.
The sheep stared blankly back at her.

To her far right she spotted a group of male youths wandering across the field. She contemplated pursuing them to give them a proper whatfor, but decided against it. She couldn't be sure it was them and, really, if a small prank was the worst thing that happened the day would still be well above par. The time on her watch read 4 pm. To be safe she decided to check into B & B. Sarah left the site and made her way over to the village.

With its small cobbled buildings and bright oaken doors, it reminded her of Dalkey. She easily found the two storey stone house Mrs. Whelan had indicated on her note. The woman who answered the door could have been the twin of her landlady.

"Oh hello dear, ye must be Sarah. We've been expecting ye. I'm Mrs. Gannon. Please come in, dear, and let me take yer bag," the woman exhaled on one great breath. Her wide grin so closely mirrored Mrs. Whelan's that Sarah could offer no coherent comment.

Within moments she was ushered into a small room on the second floor.

"Thank you," mumbled Sarah, still slightly flustered. "I guess Mrs. Whelan must have called to let you know I was coming then?" She dropped her bag on the immaculately made bed.

The older woman merely smiled.

"So… erm, what do I owe you then?" Sarah asked awkwardly.

"Oh, time enough for payment later, m'dear. Is there anything ye'd like then?"

Sarah said no and Mrs. Gannon departed, smile still impossibly wide.

Left alone, Sarah was delighted to see that her window overlooked the street and that she could see the Hill if she leaned her head out. Freshening up at the small sink, she decided to explore the town. Her grumbling stomach reminded her it was time for food too. Soggy sandwiches only went so far. Mrs. Gannon pointed her in the direction of the local pub as it was currently the only restaurant nearby and it boasted some musical talent playing that evening.

On her walk Sarah passed the same group of young boys she'd seen in the field earlier but she said nothing to them. They ignored her. She found Finn MacCool's easily enough and snagged a small table in the corner. When she asked the bartender for a menu, she was informed that the Kitchen was unfortunately closed for renovations. The man didn't deign to comment further or offer any alternative. Disappointed but undeterred, Sarah ordered a Guinness – it was the next best thing to food in a pinch. She sipped in quiet pleasure.

Glancing about the pub in the fading light, her mouth dropped open and beer dribbled down her chin. All the archways in the pub were covered by intricate carvings of goblin faces. Jolting upwards and sloshing a good portion more of her beer on the table, Sarah wiped her mouth and approached the bar, hailing the bartender.

"The carvings in here. Did an older man named Declan make them by any chance?"

The bartender nodded and smiled. "Why yes, yes he did! Ye've a good eye fer Declan's hand."

Sarah mouthed an 'Oh'.

He turned his back and began drying some glasses, catching Sarah's eyes in the mirror behind the bar. "Made them before he moved away to Dublin. This be his hometown."

"The carvings in here. Did an older man named Declan make them by any chance?"

The bartender nodded and smiled. "Why yes, yes he did! Ye've a good eye fer Declan's hand."

Sarah mouthed an 'Oh'.

He turned his back and began drying some glasses, catching Sarah's eyes in the mirror behind the bar. "Made them before he moved away to Dublin. This be his hometown."
Part X

Oh no, what's this?
A spider web, and I'm caught in the middle,
So I turn to run,
The thought of all the stupid things I'd said.

They spun a web for me…

Trouble, Coldplay

Something wicked this way comes…

If the bartender was surprised by Sarah's reaction he didn't show it. Sarah rolled her eyes, wavered like she was about to faint, and then proceeded to swear with a vocabulary and a fervour rarely achieved by even experienced Rugby players.

"...Shit."

"Is something the matter then?" he asked, eyebrows raised.

"Not a damn thing. Everything's just peachy." She truned away and whispered angrily. "Did you hear that, you bastard?" It was directed to nobody in particular and someone quite specifically. "Well? Did you? This is a game? Let's play then!" Her voice rose shrilly, catching the attention of some nearby patrons.

The bartender eyed the girl warily. "I think maybe ye've had enough, Miss," he cautioned, reaching for her glass.

"Back off, Paddy!" Sarah hissed. She snatched the pint out of his reach and returned to her table.

The bartender just shook his head. "Americans."

Only after downing her pint and glaring at the bartender until he reluctantly pulled her another one, did she begin to relax again. No flash of lightening, no crystal balls. Nothing. Just a deranged tourist who had inadvertently reinforced a stereotype. Sarah cringed in remorse.

Still brooding on it, she caught the first bars of a song coming from the other room in the pub. Mrs. Gannon had mentioned that some live music was going to be performed, and from what she could hear it was wonderfully traditional. And blessedly instrumental. Grabbing her pint and casting the bartender an apologetic look, she followed the music into the other room.

Three men and a woman were set up on a makeshift stage. One of the men held a Bodhran, another a tin whistle and the third a guitar. The woman nestled a fiddle under her chin.

They were in the midst of an Irish reel and several of the patrons were dancing in time. Sarah sat and watched, a smile brightening her sullen expression. This was something she loved. Tapping her fingers along with the beat, her foot following suit, Sarah effectively forgot her grumbling stomach.
and her earlier outburst.

She laughed heartily when they played 'Dirty Old Town' and tears pooled in her eyes when they did a particularly sombre rendition of 'Parting Glass'. She drank two more pints over the next two hours. The bartender didn't bat an eyelash.

Between one of the sets the bodhran player stopped by her table. "Are ye likin' the show then?"

Sarah smiled. "Oh yes, it's great!"

He smiled back. "Wonderful. We want ye to have a grand time. And 'tis good practice fer us. Fer the festival and all."

"Festival?"

"Ah, sorry. The festival fer Samhain." He pointed at a wall. "Guess ye missed the posters."

A glossy print advertised the band playing on Tuesday night.

"But I thought Samhain usually fell on October 31st? That poster says it will be in three days." She arched a brow. "Aren't you a week early?"

The musician's lips twitched. "Yes and no. Ye see Samhain is an old holiday and it always followed the harvest, not the calendar. It marks the last reaping of the year – and that changed year to year depending on the crops and the weather. The new age version of the holiday matches it to Hallowe'en, as ye Yanks call it. Here at Tara we follow the old ways," he finished proudly.

"I see. So what's involved in the festival? Is it just music or is there more?" asked Sarah, fascinated by the tradition.

"In days passed, t'was always celebrated here at Tara - hosted by the royal court itself. It lasted three days. They'd light a bonfire on the Hill of Tara and that signaled other people gathered atop hills to light bonfires all across Ireland. T'was a mighty site to see, I've nary doubt. Dancing and drinking t'il all the wee hours..." The musician's voice once again swelled with fierce emotion.

"I'm confused." Sarah frowned. "At the cultural centre the film said that lighting fires in sight of the Hill was once illegal."

"Oh yes, t'was illegal fer a time. St. Patrick made it law – t'wasn't a very Christian practice to call upon the fey afterall. But times are changing and we may see it happen again soon." The musician grinned. "Fer now we play music and we dance and we give thanks fer our blessings. Mostly we drink."

Feeling the heady effects of alcohol without food, Sarah smiled flirtatiously. "It's a pity I came too early then. Sounds like a good time."

"I wouldn't say that," he winked playfully. "I'd say yer right on time." He wished Sarah a good evening and then returned to the stage to play the final set.

A moment later, Sarah's belly gave a loud gurgle. Four pints on a nearly empty stomach was rarely a good thing. She'd have to find food somewhere. At the very least she could ask Mrs. Gannon. She'd have something on hand if she ran a B & B. Nodding at the musicians in parting, Sarah left the pub more than a little light headed, and wandered down the street.

The stars lent everything an ethereal glow and the night air was lovely and mild. Turning the corner
to head back to the boarding house, she spotted a small cart on the side of the road. It had pumpkins, gourds and fresh fruit of all variety. Glancing at her watch, she saw it was after nine. This would have to do. They must just be closing as it was. A short balding man was packing up some sacks.

He looked up as Sarah approached. "Help ye, Miss?" he asked with a nearly toothless grin.

"Thank you, yes! I'm starving." Sarah perused the selection. Deliberately ignoring the peaches, she grabbed an apple and a few pears. "Just these, please."

"Enjoy, enjoy, young lady. Fresh as can be, they are!" He grinned again as he took the money and handed Sarah some change.

She wolfed down the apple and one of the pears as she walked away, wiping her wet mouth with satisfaction. She made it half a block more before a feeling of languid tranquility washed over her, and she began to yawn uncontrollably. After tripping twice on the cobblestones, she decided she should probably call it a night. She'd risen earlier than usual that day and drank too much on a nearly empty stomach.

Climbing into bed less than fifteen minutes later felt like Heaven. Sarah was asleep before her head hit the pillow.

Clink, clink, clink…

Sarah's head shot up. "What the…"

Clink.

Sarah stared at the window as a sizeable rock bounced off it. The clock beside her bed flashed 1:30AM.

Clink.

"Those little brats! What is this, 'torment the tourist' day?" she grumbled. Hopping out of bed, she stormed to the window and threw it open, intending to yell down at them. A rock whizzed by her head.

"Son of a...!"

She peered down at the street but couldn't see anything in the gloom. None of the street lights were on. She shivered as the cold night air seeped in. Stomping back to the bed, she grabbed her jeans and threw them on, angrily stuffing her nightgown into them. Pulling on her coat and boots, she padded downstairs quietly, trying not to wake her hostess.

When she opened the door she heard sniggers followed by footsteps running away, but not before a rock struck the door. Without thinking she blindly dashed down the street. She made it half a block in pursuit, but couldn't find any trace of the little delinquents. Cursing, she turned around and headed back to the house, but stopped short at the door. It had locked behind her. She knocked quietly. Nothing. She knocked again, louder this time. Nothing. Fantastic.

"It's not fair!" she fumed, kicking the door in frustration. She turned and leaned against it, trying to regroup. The front of the house was far too smooth to climb and the lower windows were firmly
locked. All the lights on the street were off. The pub looked equally dark and she didn't relish facing
the bartender sloppily dressed in her nightgown anyway. Looking in the other direction she spied a
faint light at the church centre. Maybe a caretaker was still up. At the very least she knew they had a
phone. She could call Mrs. Whelan and have her call Mrs. Gannon. Hope restored, she set off down
the lane towards the church.

The night was silent and dark, the moon masked behind clouds. The church shone out like a beacon
in the distance.

Sarah trudged into the church yard, vainly trying to stuff more of her nightgown in her jeans and coat
and smooth out her bed-mussed hair. Just as she neared the door to the church, all the lights went out.
She heard a snigger from her right. She'd kill them. She'd bloody well do their parents a favour and
kill them. A shortish shadow passed right in front of her. She dashed after it, epithets flying.
Grabbing the figure by his collar, she pulled him backwards and spun the kid around to face her. The
clouds parted and the angry threat died on her tongue.

She was holding a goblin.

Sarah released her grip and the creature fell to the ground, stones falling from its pockets. It smiled up
at her with a mouth full of wood splinters and then tore off into the night.

Heart beating wildly in her breast, Sarah almost didn't hear the sound behind her or feel the warm
breath on her ear.

"Hello Sarah," drawled a hauntingly familiar voice.

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------
A Wicked Game

Part XI

What a wicked game you play
To make me feel this way
What a wicked thing to do
To let me dream of you

Wicked Game, Chris Isaak

"Oh God…” Sarah whispered, her eyes going wide.

Soft laughter tickled her neck. "Yes, but you may call me Jareth. We are old friends after all."

A thousand replies ran through Sarah's mind only to bottleneck at her mouth.

"What, nothing prodigiously profound to say? Where is that defiant spark that once felled a kingdom? Such a pity…"

Her blood slowly began to circulate again, but Sarah refused to turn around. Maybe if she didn't, none of it would be real. It was a waking dream – she was still at the inn, wrapped safely in a quilt. Sarah closed her eyes. It's not real… it's just a dream… not real…

"I see your conversational skills haven't improved with time," remarked the Goblin King drily.

Sarah opened her eyes to mismatched ones.

"Hello, Precious."

Sarah turned and fled. Mocking laughter punctuated her every step.

Circling the church in darkness, with no set direction or plan, Sarah tripped over some of the fallen standing stones she'd admired earlier that day. She landed painfully. When she raised her head, she found herself eye-level with the Sheela-na-gig, its gaping nether maw opened before her. In the faint light of the moon it no longer appeared to be just an abstract pagan fertility goddess, she saw it for what it was - a jeering she-goblin, lasciviously offering herself in sexual abandon.

The veneer of reality was slowly peeling away like paint.

Sarah needed the solid prosaicism of the church. Some part of her suggested she'd be safe on hallowed ground. She whipped her head around but the Goblin King was no where in sight. Half expecting the doors to be barred, she was surprised when they easily opened behind her full weight and she ended up sprawled on her hands and knees in the vestibule, as though in an act of devout supplication. Breathing shallowly, and leg aching painfully from her earlier fall, Sarah looked up at the Pentecost window in relief.

"I must say, I have always wondered what you'd look like in that position," observed a lazy voice behind her.
Ignoring her injury, Sarah leapt to her feet and dashed behind the altar. She turned cautiously. The only light was that of the moon filtered through the coloured glass.

"So eager to run down the aisle? I had no idea you were so obliging, Sarah," Jareth remarked sardonically. He made no move to close the distance.

No where left to run, Sarah bravely squared her shoulders. "What are you doing here, Goblin King? This is a church and your kind isn't welcome here."

Jareth threw back his head and barked with laughter. "I'm not a vampire, you imaginative little girl. I am the Goblin King and I go where I please." His tone was imperious in its mixture of amusement and disdain.

"But this place is sacred," stuttered Sarah desperately. Her foundations were crumbling and it showed on her face.

"Sacred to whom?" Jareth canted his head. "God-fearing Christians? They feared us long before pious St. Patrick brought his crucified martyr to the island. And they will fear us long after."

He disappeared before she could blink and reappeared directly behind her. "Just as you fear me," he hissed.

Sarah spun around defensively but he was gone again. This time he was atop the altar, hands on hips and stance wide, mocking her with his spiritual independence. She flashed back to their final encounter. The same apprehension trickled through her, only this time she had no altruistic purpose to drive her, no Toby to rescue. He had, and would, forever toy with her. Sarah took a step, a hand unconsciously creeping to her neck.

Jareth merely watched her, an inscrutable expression on his pale face. It gave her the opportunity to actually appraise her adversary, unseen, but not forgotten for the last nine years. Involuntarily, her eyes swept him from hair to hessians. He was dressed as he had been the very first time she met him. His wraith-like cape was as thin and fine as a bat's wing. The intricate goblin amour was an unrelenting black, the collar high and imposing. Sarah had always known that if she ever saw him again he'd be dressed thusly. She knew that if he ever came back it would be to battle.

His eyes never wavered from her face, but she knew he missed nothing. Forcing her gaze upwards, Sarah cleared her throat, "Why are you here? I never said 'I wish'."

Jareth laughed and hopped down from atop the altar. He approached her slowly – predatorily. Sarah fought to remain still. "Your wishes aren't my concern anymore, little girl. You forfeited your power for a screaming baby. Wish away, wish away…" he mocked cruelly.

Sarah sucked in a breath but Jareth was far from finished.

"Why would I concern myself with the desires of a powerless little mortal?" His eyes raked her from head to toe, a curl of dismissal on his thin lips.

Sarah was immediately reminded of her state of dress and winced. Her nightgown had mostly escaped both her jeans and jacket and the former were torn from her fall, blood seeping through the knee. She forced herself not to adjust her clothing.

"Not that I don't find your bed-tousled hair fetching, sweeting. How kind of you to dress so appropriately for the occasion." His voice was a combination of derision and seduction. It made Sarah want to scream.
"I am sure that one as lofty as you," she bit out sarcastically, "didn't come all this way to laugh at my clothing and drop unwanted innuendos. Or are the goblins and resident fowl just not stimulating enough anymore? I repeat, why are you here, Goblin King?"

Jareth's eyes glittered dangerously, but he merely clapped his gloved hands softly. "I'm pleased to see that time hasn't dimmed your wits as it has your beauty."

Sarah felt an involuntary stab of pain at his words, followed by a stab of shame for allowing him that power.

The Goblin King smiled with satisfaction as he read the emotions flit across her face. He hadn't meant to be quite so cruel, but it came so easily to him, especially where it concerned the girl. He'd lied of course, a skill he'd honed with equal ease, she was no less beautiful. The first bloom of youth had left, but it had been replaced by something equally, if not more alluring. Maturity. Her face had thinned, but her cheeks were no less rosy and her green eyes looked all the more large and liquid by contrast - especially now, as they filled with angry tears. Her body had subtly changed in nine years. She was still willowy, but he could see the fullness in her curves; the promises her body had held now come to delightful fruition. Most importantly, the barrier of child-like innocence was gone. He could look freely, not that he hadn't before – he'd never been one for playing by the rules. No, now he could do more than just look.

His spoiled little girl knew she was beautiful and if she'd had her wits about her, she would have seen through the lie, but he preferred it this way. Her uncertainty was like a pheromone and he relished every hint. Although he'd enjoyed her poised and polished in the past, he relished seeing her in this state of disarray, replete with an injured knee. Bruised and bloodied Sarah was a rarity to be savoured.

Sarah collected herself, her pain masked by anger. "I don't think you came here just to insult me either."

Jareth flicked imaginary dust from his arm. "You are correct, Precious. Such things are hardly worth my time."

He strode past her towards the doors, his cape caressing her cheek as he passed. Sarah waited with bated breath for Jareth to say something, to offer her a crystal, to laugh at her, to strike her… to do something. Anything.

The Goblin King left the church.

For a fleeting moment she wondered if he was about to leave her life as cursorily as he'd entered it. She pictured waking in bed tomorrow with a slight hangover and a sour taste in her mouth, but none the worse for wear. She strained her ears but heard nothing. Rubbing her face in a bitter mixture of relief and disappointment, she opened the doors and stepped outside.

She would never know what might have happened if she'd stayed inside till morning. Perhaps nothing. Perhaps everything.

Her eyes adjusted to the unexpected light. The sky, it seemed, was ablaze. When her vision cleared she froze. A fire burned on the Hill of Tara. The first one in almost 1000 years.

Jareth stood framed by the light; his inhuman eyes burning embers. A gloved hand was outstretched. "How obliging of you to join us."

Sarah registered that they were no longer alone. A sizeable group of people surrounded the hill.
Their features were masked by cloaks, but she felt all eyes upon her.

Jareth couldn't wipe the smug smile from his face. Sarah hadn't been entirely wrong when she'd claimed he had no business in the church. While he was free to enter and to leave, it came with a price. He could not have physically forced Sarah to come with him and neither could he have used magic. Even touch was not permitted and oh how he had itched to. Whether to caress or crush, he wasn't sure. Such insolence and defiance she had showed. He'd left the church confident he'd played his role well and that she would guilelessly follow. And yet a tingle of doubt had lingered and he'd begun to formulate another strategy. But Sarah had seen only the veneer he'd wanted her to and her ingenuous nature hadn't questioned beyond mere appearance. It was propitious that her time in the Labyrinth hadn't completely wiped her of her trust; it would make later so much easier.

Sarah quickly took stock of her situation, hysteria screaming that they were going to burn her! She knew the Goblin King could be cruel but she'd had no idea Jareth was capable of this much hatred. And why? Because she'd beaten him? She didn't feel very victorious now. And the people, who were they? What new game was this? She couldn't win without knowing the rules.

Jareth, as if reading her thoughts again, spoke with sincerity if not kindness. "Come, come, Sarah. You should know that martyrdom is hardly my style."

She relaxed only marginally. Furtively she scanned the horizon, looking for any chance to escape.

"Tsk, Tsk." His gloved finger wagged. "I wouldn't do that if I were you. I would enjoy running you down and you wouldn't want to give me any pleasure, now would you, Sarah?" The last was drawn out with a sibilant hiss.

Before she could try, she was surrounded by goblins. They weren't the goblins of her memory either, they were less bumbling and more sinister in this firelight – all teeth and claws and yellowed eyes. They regarded her with mixed expressions: some almost reverent, some determined, but all were clearly waiting for a command from their king. Jareth's hand was still outstretched. Sarah stared mutely ahead and came to his side, but didn't deign to touch him. She would bide her time.

The crowd, who had been still as statues, seemed to sigh in collective unison. From the closer vantage point she was able to see their faces, easily recognizing people from the town: the bartender, the musicians, Mrs. Gannon and... she stopped with horror. Declan's wizened face beamed back at her. He winked even as she retched. His companion turned, letting her hood fall back. Mrs. Whelan grinned widely. By now Sarah was almost numb with shock, pieces of the puzzle beginning to fall into place. She turned and fled.

She hadn't made it two steps before Jareth lazily reached out an arm and hauled her backwards. The breath was forced from her lungs as she was slammed against his chest plate. "I warned you not to run," he said calmly, his eyes still on the fire.

Sarah pulled against his iron grip, finding his touch entirely unnerving. It had been nine since she'd felt those gloves on her and now they seemed to burn through her skin. "Is everyone I've met here your pawn, you bastard?" Sarah's voice rose hysterically. "Where's Finn then?"

A dark look crossed the Goblin King's face. "I wouldn't mention his name if I were you. I might change my mind about a burning tonight." His voice was dangerously low and the restrained fury was palpable.

But he collected himself and the moment passed.

"If it's not a burning, what is this?" She couldn't stop the tinge of fear that threaded through her
"This is the start of Samhain, Sarah. It's a celebration. Look." He gestured to the distance. Sarah watched as fires sparked successively in the darkness, some so far away they looked like mere candle flame.

"I know. You made sure I'd know," she whispered quietly. A part of her couldn't help but notice the beauty in the pattern. "But it's more, isn't it? This has nothing to do with Toby and nothing to do with the Labyrinth. Tell me."

The Goblin King looked down at his captive again. His eyes glittered with an indefinable emotion. Anticipation?

"Smart little Sarah. Yes, it is more. I am glad my signs did not go unheeded; I made sure they were obvious enough in the end." He chucked her under the chin with condescension.

Sarah ignored his provocation and glanced again at the old carver in the circle. "It's the taking of the Goblin Bride, isn't it?" Her heart was beating in her chest with fear and something else. The goblins to her rear sniggered and the chorus of revelers chanted something in Gaelic.

God how she hated Ireland.

"Indeed," Jareth replied quietly, looking off towards the trees. "Tonight I'll steal my bride." His face dropped to Sarah's and his gaze took on a predatory cast, his eyes more owl-like than ever.

Sarah quelled under the intensity of his look, but her head shot up when she spied movement to her left. Out of the trees stepped three figures. Two were dressed like the revelers at the fire. But what made her thumping heart still was the third figure between them – a young girl dressed in virginal white, her sable hair gleaming in the firelight and adorned with a simple circlet of ivy. She couldn't be much more than seventeen and she was undeniably beautiful. Sarah turned back to the Goblin King, feeling his eyes upon her.

Seeing her expression, he began to laugh callously, "Surely Sarah… you didn't think the bride was you?"
Whistle While You Work

Part XII

My little china girl
You shouldn't mess with me
I'll ruin everything you are

China Girl, David Bowie

"I'm confused," said one voice.

"About what?" asked another.

"Well, I thought we we're supposed to get the girl," replied the first, scratching a horn.

"What girl?" asked a third.

"Not again!" cried the rest in unison.

"The girl who ate the peach. The one we threw rocks at." Snickers and cackles were shared all round.

"I thought she was the one," persisted the first.

"The one for what?" asked a fourth.

"The one for Him."

"Ohhhhh...Now we're all confused," groaned the rest.

"Actually, I'm not confused, I just don't feel well," interjected a fifth with a groan.

"That's because you ate a guitar," replied the rest.

"Seemed like a good idea at the time!"

All grew quiet as a crystal sphere rolled into view.

"Just watch…" whispered another voice.

__________________________________________________________________________
Lies, Lies!

Part XIII

People say that your dreams are the only things that save ya. Come on baby in our dreams, we can live on misbehavior. Every time you close your eyes Lies, lies!

Rebellion (Lies), Arcade Fire

Sarah once again found herself at a loss for words and Jareth was clearly enjoying her discomfort. His grin had widened and his preternaturally sharp teeth glinted in the firelight. His overall demeanor was smugly triumphant. He still hadn't relinquished his hold on her arms and he made no move towards the approaching girl. Sarah winced as his fingers painfully tightened, reminding her of his latent strength. She wished she was anywhere than in his arms right now. She'd even take the bog at this point.

His Bride.

Sarah choked on the thought. So many emotions were running rampant through her head that she had to fight to keep her face carefully blank. Was she relieved? Was she disappointed? Probably caught somewhere in between. And she was mired in that feeling. She had never forgotten the expression on his face when she'd made that fateful choice nine years before. Sarah wondered if hers now mirrored it.

She'd been terrified when she first saw the sacral fire and recognized some of the revelers. All the signs she had ignored and denied for the sake of her sanity had suddenly flooded her conscious mind. She had wanted nothing more than to hide from him and from herself, because if they spoke true that meant the Goblin King had fallen in love with the girl. When she'd thought she was the girl, all she had wanted to do was run away - to go back to her toys and her costumes, to forget about everything. Now that she knew she wasn't, all she wanted to do was stay and demand why not.

His Bride.

The trio was nearly at the fire's edge. Sarah appraised the girl in white. Had she looked something like that nine years ago? So young, so fresh… just dripping with naive innocence. And what must she look like now, so resplendent in her soiled nightgown and torn jeans?

"I'm pleased to see that time hasn't dimmed your wits like it has your beauty."

Oh that had cut her to the quick, as he'd known it would. He was a master puppeteer. Angry tears threatened to spill when she should be elated. She wasn't.

Jareth looked down at the woman in his arms. The tension in her body was unmistakable and he savoured it selfishly. It reminded him of holding a tiny bird – its heart beating frantically in his talons. So fragile, so easy to crush. Its beak was sharp, but ultimately it was powerless. Oh to see Sarah
brought so low. It nearly had him hard just thinking about it. This was even better than he'd expected. "Sarah, you seem upset. I might even say you seem… jealous. Surely, I must be mistaken."

His mocking tone caused something in Sarah to snap. "Jealous? JEALOUS? I hate you. I loathe you with every fibre of my being. I wish you were dead. I really do." Sarah realized she was spitting every word. Never had she felt so out of control. "Why am I even here? Why are you doing this? You're sadistic!"

Jareth laughed and Sarah wondered if she'd be able to maneuver him close enough to the fire that she could push him in. She didn't care if she fell with him.

"Sarah. I am surprised at you! I wouldn't have thought you capable of murder."

Crying out in frustration, she managed to free her arms long enough to begin raining blows upon his chest. He didn't flinch and only moved when her knee came precariously close to unmanning him.

He swiftly captured her wrists with one hand. "Now, now, Sarah, that's hardly ladylike behaviour. I'm going to need that for later. My bride won't appreciate it if you damage me beyond use."

If looks could kill, the Goblin King would reign no more.

"Why?" she asked so softly Jareth almost missed it.

"Why not? I thought you'd enjoy seeing this ceremony. You always did have a penchant for theatries, as demonstrated by your recent behaviour, and this is all very impressive you must admit."

Jareth swept his arm wide.

"...but... so much trouble...?"

"Trouble to bring you here?" Jareth asked with a raised brow. "It was hardly any trouble at all. You were so very easy to lure. You really should try listening to your instincts. Not that it would have helped you; I always get what I want in the end." His hands tightened on her wrists. "But I digress. I thought it fitting that you, my adversary of old, be here on the day I take a bride. I thought you'd want to watch." His voice trailed off suggestively.

Having run the full gamut of insults and for fear of betraying herself further, Sarah said nothing. She turned as the girl joined them, her face once again studiously impassive.

Jareth contemplated the younger woman with a smile. "Pretty young thing isn't she? You mortals burn so brightly and so briefly. Especially when you're so young and fresh," he added pointedly.

The girl didn't even flinch under his scrutiny, but merely looked at Sarah with curiosity.

"But what about her, Goblin King?" Sarah's voice rose with each word. "Who speaks for this child? Maybe she doesn't want you. Maybe she wishes for a normal life!"

"Do you wish for a normal life, Sarah?" returned the king with a raised brow.

"This isn't about me!"

"Isn't it?" he countered. "No I suppose you're right. It's about me – a far more interesting subject. And you asked who speaks for her? Her parents do." The two cloaked figures lowered their hoods. "And I don't see sweet Moira here objecting to my attentions either."
Sarah saw a blush stain the younger girl's cheek.

I hate them both.

Jareth let go of Sarah and stepped towards the girl, lightly taking her hand. Sarah had never felt more alone or cold in her life.

As Jareth led the girl away, he did not turn back once. He knew she watched them.

Sarah felt a light touch on her shoulder. "Yer shivering m'dear. Come closer to the fire." Mrs. Whelan had left the circle and was smiling pityingly at her.

Sarah wrenched her arm free. "You!"

"Yes, m'dear. I expect yer angry and I don't blame ye a wee bit. T'was not a nice thing for me to do, I know, but t'was necessary."

"Yes it was, dear." Sarah turned to the other voice. Mrs. Gannon had come to stand beside her treacherous landlady. So close together they looked like carbon copies with only slight differences.

Seeing the look of incredulity on Sarah's face, Mrs. Whelan began chuckling.

"Are you twins?" demanded Sarah bitterly. "That would certainly explain the Judas streak that runs in the family."

"No love, we're the same person." Mrs. Gannon began to chuckle as well. "Well… sort of."

"Are you even human?" Sarah demanded, her suspicions multiplying.

"One of us is. Or used to be anyway," replied the one on the right. Sarah was beginning to have difficulty even distinguishing between the two.

"I'm a changeling, dear. Her changeling to be specific," explained Mrs. Whelan, her arm now linked companionably with Mrs. Gannon's. "Me poor 'da' was more right than he ever knew!" Both women cackled in unison.

"I live in the Underground, as ye know it. I've just come up fer the festival. But I shall have to go back down again soon – it ages me so terribly to be up here." Mrs. Gannon rubbed her wrinkled face absently.

Sarah looked back and forth between the two women. "Don't you want to stay here? This is your home!"

"No love, me home is down below," smiled Mrs. Gannon. "I have wee ones who'll want me back soon I expect. Tis a good life, Sarah."

"Fer both of us," echoed her changeling.

Sarah glanced over as Declan approached. "So what does that make you then?"

"Oh, I'm human through and through. Me arthritis reminds me daily," he answered, rubbing his wrist.

"Good," replied Sarah. It wasn't clear if she referred to the human aspect or that he suffered physical pain on a regular basis.
Staring at the three traitorous faces, Sarah didn't know why she felt so deeply betrayed. She barely knew these people and they certainly owed her nothing, but she felt it keenly nonetheless.

Everything was always a lie.

"So you're just a pathetic little minion of Jareth's then?" Sarah accused.

"I wouldn't say that exactly. We are followers of the First ways, Sarah. Eire is a land of old souls and fierce hearts. And despite appearances, the Goblin Lord is a just and a mighty king. We respect him for that. Him being crowned High King will bring prosperity to this land and strengthen the old ways. It will be a rebirth and we are privileged to be part of it," explained the carver, pride tingling his voice.

"Did ye yerself not find loyal followers amongst His people when ye traversed the Labyrinth? Aye, we all know yer tale Sarah Williams," he added at the startled look on her face. "Is it not fair that He finds loyal followers amongst yours?"

Sarah despised his logic, but she could not fault it.

"And don't ye think someone with that much responsibility in this world and the Other deserves some reward, some comfort?" Declan looked deep into her eyes. "The comfort only a warm-blooded and truly worthy woman can bring?"

Sarah didn't know what to say.

"The king may not be human, but he's still a man. And a man likes a pretty wee colleen to warm his bed at night."

"But… it's not fair…the girl…" Sarah whispered, not knowing what she was really saying.

"True, but things aren't always what they seem either," Declan winked.
"It's barbaric!" Sarah blazed. "Why should the king get to carry off whomever he chooses, however he chooses? Does he just bash her over the head with a club or does he employ a more subtle technique? Why doesn't the woman ever get a choice… or even a voice for that matter?" she finished acerbically, her eyes trailing the silent girl in white.

Declan sighed, "Ireland is a wild island, Sarah. The Romans couldn't conquer us, neither could the British. The Holy Church has changed us, aye, but not deeply enough. We've always been a strong people. We love with fervour and we love with fire, though it be brief and often sad. Our history and our writings show that. Ye of all people should know that well."

Sarah's eyes rolled.

"Not all stories are fairytales and not all endings are happy ones." Declan's voice took on a gentle, almost sympathetic tone and Sarah wondered if he was referring to her own story. "'Tis a tradition, Sarah. And some things are sacred… if not fair. Would it make a difference if I told ye High Queens have stood on this very spot and performed the same rituals?"

She shook her head vehemently. "Choice is choice."

"'Tis hard to take in, I understand. But who says they have no voice? Yes, they be 'stolen'. But they all come of their own free will… to a degree. And many love the kings in return. Ye can understand that can't ye?"

Sarah gestured impatiently.

"And all have been strong. Beautiful and strong. Viragos even! They'd have to be to put up with such… strong-willed kings. And only a worthy woman would be chosen. I told ye that not long ago. There are no wilting flowers here; they are queens in their own right. We've a choice to follow these Fey lords and believe in the First ways, just as they've a choice to be a victim or no."

Sarah stared off glassily, giving no indication she'd heard the carver's final words. Beautiful and strong. She felt neither right now.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the first bars of music piercing the night air. It was rhythmic and primal - the music of Ancient Ireland.
"It begins," cried Mrs. Whelan, clapping her hands together in joy.

The crowd began moving in unison towards the Rath na Riogh. Sarah found herself pushed and pulled along with them. She didn't bother to resist. Her face was flushed from the fire and her knee ached painfully, but she would see this through to the end. She had already made her choice.

Inside the ringed enclosure torches were lit in a semi-circle. Jareth was standing alongside the mysterious girl - clothed in virginal white and still dutifully silent. His hand rested on her lower back. Jareth, by contrast, was still wearing his unrelenting black. His gossamer cape beat softly in the night air, but gone was the Goblin armour, replaced instead by a simple black shirt open to the waist. The archaic emblem of his lordship glinted on his pale chest. Sarah now saw it for what it was – a stylized torc, like the high kings of Ireland had once worn. He was in his element - a strange mixture of ethereal beauty and raw male strength. It made Sarah's breath hitch. It was so different seeing him now through a woman's eyes.

A rough stone table stood before them, a golden chalice it's only adornment. To their right was another figure, swathed from head to toe in deep Celtic blue and face in shadow. Sarah kept her eyes everywhere but on the Goblin King.

"On Ancient Tara the loyal gather, both Fey and mortal 'like. As it has been and as it will be again, let He who is worthy present Himself," intoned the blue-robed figure.

"I, Jareth, King of the Goblins, present myself as worthy of becoming High King in three days hence, just as my father and his father were before."

Sarah couldn't help a small smile at the arrogance in his tone, even then.

The blue-clad figure chanted something in Gaelic and the revelers echoed a rhythmic response. It was remarkably like a Catholic Mass and Sarah wondered how much Christianity had borrowed from their pagan ancestry.

"The Stone's Voice asked if anyone objects to His claim," whispered Declan helpfully.

Sarah was sorely tempted to step up and declare him a sadistic bastard who wasn't fit to rule chickens, let alone people on two planes of existence, but Jareth seemed to know her mind and shot her a quelling look. Sarah scowled back, but remained silent.

"Then we ask that Queen Maeve, Goddess of Sovereignty and Fertility, bestow her blessing on this rite of passage."

Sarah looked around expectantly for another figure, but none came forward. The young girl in white passed her hand over the cup and closed her eyes. She spoke with a voice far too deep for one so young, and with an accent Sarah had never before heard.

"I am both birth and death. She who intoxicates souls and maker of Kings." The woman-child turned towards Jareth. "I give my blessing that He might become the Ard Riogh. He shall be strong in his power and unchallenged by friend or foe. He shall find love with a woman of equal strength and through their joining the circle will continue unbroken."

Sarah shuddered with something indefinable at the thought of Jareth's future progeny.

"Together we shall partake of this giving cup and through this symbol of our union, shall the transcendence begin."

Jareth watched Sarah throughout the entire proceeding, though she stubbornly refused to meet his
eyes. The only time she'd looked directly at him was when he'd surmised she was very much considering objecting to his right to rule. He chuckled inwardly. Brave and foolish, little girl. Her continued inability to look at him spoke volumes too.

He raised the Quaich cup and took a sip of the fragrant drink – mead, heavily sweetened with spice and fruit, before passing it to the goddess. The throng erupted into cheers when she drained the two-handled bowl.

"And so am I joined with the Goblin King and He has received my blessing through this union." She turned to Jareth. "We seal our spiritual bond with an earthly kiss."

Sarah couldn't help but gape as the young girl – no, goddess - did something she had never dared to consider. It was no chaste salute either; the Goblin King grabbed her waist and pulled her flush against him. With one hand he forced her chin up, slanting his mouth across hers roughly. His other hand rested just beneath her breast - fingers splayed. It was the kiss of a victor.

The girl was by no means a meek bystander either. She returned the assault with equal measure, one hand twining into his hair and the other on his lower back, pulling him into the cradle of her hips.

The whole act left a sour taste in Sarah's mouth, and her nails bit painfully into her palms, but she still couldn't look away. She wondered if they were planning on consummating the union right then and there on the stone altar. He'd probably relish making her watch.

Jareth felt Sarah's eyes on him and it drove him wild. His hand crept up to Moira's pert little breast. He imagined Sarah tasting the bitterness so clearly visible on her stark face. It made his kiss so much the sweeter and he found he was painfully aroused by the thought. He'd deal with that later. Watch, little girl. Watch.

The two broke apart to cheers. Jareth licked his lips surreptitiously, eyes slanting to Sarah.

Sarah hoped the girl was diseased. She hadn't even noticed that Declan had put a comforting hand on her arm. God, she really did loathe Ireland. At least it appeared to be over and she could now leave. Hopefully this would mean the end of the Goblin King in her life. She'd bloody well walk back to Dalkey, grab her stuff, find a cab and sleep at the airport. She'd be on a plane home by morning, thesis be damned. She'd finish the thing in America. It was time to finally wake up from this nightmare.

But the revelers made no move to quit the circle. In fact, they had quieted again, as though waiting for more. The girl had rejoined her parents and another cloaked figure. He looked to be a young man not much older than she. Jareth spoke briefly to them. Sarah had to strain to hear, but she caught a snippet.

"I wish you both, luck in the future. The goddess has surely blessed you for use of your body today, Moira. You will have a long and happy life with many children. And as per the escheat, they will not be touched nor taken by Fey for 100 years."

The girl blushed profusely, eyes coyly dancing to the young man beside her.

Sarah frowned in confusion, but almost immediately the quartet bowed low and the crowd parted to let them through. Many of the revelers reached out to touch Moira in congratulations.

As they passed Sarah, the girl whispered something so softly Sarah thought she might have misheard. "He's a very good kisser." Her voice was high and lilting, nothing like the deep cadence Sarah had heard earlier. Moira blushed again and continued on her way. The young man wrapped an
arm about her waist, like a boyfriend might.

What the hell is going on here?

Sarah turned to look at Declan quizzically, but he was gone. Nor could Sarah find Mrs. Whelan. The revelers were once again still and expectant. The Goblin King remained silent and unmoving in the circle's heart. Before she could sort her thoughts or even think to panic, the blue-clad voice began to speak again.

"Now that the spiritual union has been sanctified and our King has received the grace of the goddess, He must begin His journey." The Voice continued, "The King has chosen His companion, a mortal woman of flesh and blood - an earthly bride who has proven her strength. She whom He has deemed powerful and worthy of becoming High Queen."

My kingdom as great…

Sarah shivered at the next words.

"She has come here of her own free will and by that right the King may claim her at His pleasure. His alone to love, His alone to steal, His alone to bind, His alone to keep."

Sarah eyes flew to Jareth. His inhuman face had once again taken on a feral cast. Almost anticipatory. A slight smile bowed his lips, but he made no move to break the circle.

"He who shall be the Ard Riogh, name your choice on sacred Tara," the Voice commanded, a gloved finger pointed at the Goblin King.

Sarah's feet froze in place, her injured knee long forgotten.

Jareth's smile deepened and his eyes flashed with fire. "My choice has always been and will always be… Sarah Williams."

Chapter End Notes

AN:

Ard Riogh – High King
Lia Fail – Stone of Destiny
Rath na Riogh – Fortress of the Kings or Royal Enclosure

Queen Maeve is the Goddess of Sovereignty and Fertility and was known as 'she who intoxicates souls'

Quaich cup is a two handled drinking vessel. The word "Quaich" is derived from the Gaelic word "Cuach" which means "shallow cup". It was commonly used as a visitor's welcome or farewell cup, and also as a wedding cup, symbolizing the union of two people.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part XV

Did I disappoint you or let you down?
Should I be feeling guilty or let the judges frown?
'Cause I saw the end before we'd begun.
Yes I saw you were blinded and I knew I had won
So I took what's mine by eternal right.
Took your soul out into the night.

Goodbye My Lover, James Blunt

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

The cloaked figures turned to look at Sarah without surprise and something akin to reverence. Jareth looked at her with something else entirely.

A brief flash of euphoric and selfish satisfaction shot through her, before being replaced by unmitigated anger. He had led her to believe she was nothing to him. He had made her wish otherwise. She had questioned her own worth; looked inward and found fault. But what's worse, she had actually envied the girl. Jareth had masterfully played her and she had let him do it.

Manipulative bastard.

Judging from the smirk on the Goblin King's face, he knew exactly what she was thinking. She would pay him in kind if it was the last thing she ever did. And she'd wipe away that arrogant smile.

Jareth kept his distance, wisely watching from a distance as understanding washed over Sarah. It was a better vantage point and undoubtedly safer. She had nearly unmanned him once already this evening and that would have been unfortunate… for both of them. Sniffing the air with satisfaction, he could smell her fear, rage and something latent, but altogether more appealing – desire.

"The choice has been made. Let the Chosen come forward to be fasted," beckoned the Voice.

The sea of robes parted until nothing stood between Sarah and Jareth. Looking at the faces in the crowd, she saw only expectation and ardent loyalty to their King. Sarah felt vulnerable and entirely exposed without the barrier of people between them. Jareth's eyes never wavered from her face.

Declan joined her, followed by her errant landlady. "I told ye not everything is as it seems," offered the carver, his voice lacking in any artifice.

"Yer so lucky, m'dear! But I reckon he's lucky too," grinned Mrs. Whelan, clasping her hands together in abject delight.

Sarah ignored the pair, eyes locked on the dark figure of her dreams. His gloved hand was once again extended in mock invitation; a crystal now perched on his fingertips. From the expression on his haughty face, Sarah could tell that the allusion to their final encounter in the Labyrinth was by no
means accidental. The final straw, however, was the apparent laze with which he stood. He fully and without doubt expected her to walk to him, sealing her own fate.

Get used to disappointment, Jareth.

With a final pointed look of disdain for the Goblin King, Sarah turned her back and walked out of the enclosure. 'Entered of her own free will' be damned. The choice to leave would be hers as well. She carefully measured each step. It was difficult to appear regal and forthright when you were tripping over a partially tucked nightgown and sporting torn jeans, but she left with as much dignity as they allowed. It was his turn to stare at her retreating back.

For a brief moment, Sarah thought that was to be the end. She'd gracefully bid his world goodbye and return to real life, unchecked. In fact, she'd count this as yet another victory against his royal high and mightiness. Time enough to worry about her own feelings later; she had a point to make after all. The calm night air seemed to echo her sentiments...

Until all hell broke loose.

No one moved for several moments, muted surprise etched on many a face, and then a collective gasp broke the silence. Whispers of fear and anger and anticipation followed.

The Voice turned to Jareth. "That was unexpected."

"Hardly. My mother did nearly the same thing," replied the Goblin King, his face a mixture of pride and aggravation.

The revelers, who had expected to be at the drinking and cavorting portion of the night by now, turned back to the King for direction.

Jareth sighed, "Well… get her."

The cloaked figures blinked once and then spun away in pursuit. The goblins, though still confused by the turn of events, understood the last command better than most. They certainly understood the ramifications of failure. "Not again," they moaned in unison and then dispersed. One stopped to fill his pockets with rocks.

Declan chuckled fondly to himself, "I knew that girl had spirit."

Jareth glanced at the Voice, smiled, and then disappeared. He would always give her a sporting chance just as he'd done with the Labyrinth, but that didn't mean he wouldn't bend the rules.

Oh Precious, if only you knew how much I am going to enjoy this.

If Sarah had seen that smile she would have been very worried indeed.

In fact, Sarah was worried. She hadn't made it far before she heard the Goblin King's command echo through the night. And she certainly hadn't made it far enough before she heard the footfalls in pursuit. She would not go down without a fight, however. If her time in the Labyrinth had taught her anything, it was to never give up. She briefly considered heading for the town, but she knew she would find no help there and they knew it better than she.

Damn Ireland and its unending green fields.

Frantic, she spied the copse of trees. Perhaps she could lose them in the forest long enough to devise an escape plan. Gathering her remaining strength she limped her way into the dense wood, hoping
the cover of darkness concealed her direction. At the very least, she felt less exposed. But the trees themselves seemed to be against her. Their roots slowed her feet and their branches snagged her clothing. She considered climbing one, but thought better of it. She could easily imagine coming face to face with an owl, or one who regularly donned its guise.

Stumbling through some tangled branches, Sarah drew up short before a small goblin. It was hard to tell which of them was more shocked. It was clear, however, when she kicked the goblin as hard as she could with her good leg. The snarling creature sailed through the underbrush and landed with a satisfying thud. Too bad it had screeched the whole way; it wouldn't be long before more followed.

Desperate, she crawled into the cavity of a rotted oak. The tree was old enough that the hollow easily accommodated her. It must have stood a silent vigil for a thousand years or more. Sarah wondered how many other 'brides' had hidden themselves thusly. Or perhaps they had been brave - and foolish - enough to fight. Regardless, she grabbed a fallen branch to wield in defense and then waited.

If there had been any light in the dense wood, Sarah might have seen the faint grooves that marred the wooden hollow. Marks left by feminine fingernails that had once clung hopelessly, before being dragged away.

She heard nothing at first, save the wind rustling leaves, but soon the din of muffled voices and disturbed undergrowth echoed in the wood. Shrinking back as far as she could, Sarah forced herself to breath evenly. Panicking would only alert the pursuers to her location. Between the branches, she spied a small party of goblins pause near her refuge, before continuing on their way. One had a handful of rocks. If she was taken, she'd make sure to get even with him too.

Several minutes passed and she heard nothing more. Cautiously leaning forward, she was immediately greeted by the grinning face of Mrs. Whelan. "Damnit!"

"So ye've decided to give our King a merry chase, have ye? Don't blame ye a bit, m'dear," confided Mrs. Whelan in a hushed tone.

"Aren't you going to call out for the others? I wouldn't normally hit a defenseless old woman over the head, but I've had a really trying night," warned Sarah drily.

The older woman brushed over the half-serious threat. "I made sure to send yer package and yer postcards, love. So don't worry yer wee head over yer old family."

"They are STILL my family!"

Mrs. Whelan switched tactics. "He's not a bad man."

Sarah refrained from comment, rolling her eyes tellingly.

"I know He's treated ye rather… unfairly, or so it may seem. But He really is a good Lord. And He will be a powerful High King."

"So it may seem…?" Sarah repeated; voice full of vitriol. "Do you think forcing me to be something I don't want is really a testament to his character?"

"I never said He was a good man, just not a bad man," Mrs. Whelan offered by reply. "He's not even a man, if we want to split hairs. And really Sarah, even ye should be able to admit the jealousy ye felt when ye thought he was taking wee Moira. I am a woman after all…well close enough, and I know a jealous girl when I see one."

Sarah inhaled sharply.
"Can ye blame him for trying to stir ye to some other emotion than fear or hatred?"

"Yes," replied Sarah stubbornly, "I can."

"There, there, m'dear. I can see yer pride is well bruised," Mrs. Whelan continued undeterred. "Ye two are more alike than ye'd like to admit." She affectionately smoothed Sarah's hair. "Here, let me see to yer poor knee." She pulled a handkerchief from within the folds of her robe and dabbed at the drying blood.

"So are you going to call him then?" Sarah asked quietly. Butterflies were doing cartwheels in her stomach.

Mrs. Whelan pocketed the soiled handkerchief and stood back. "No… I don't think I will. Ye deserve a bit of help after all the tricks He's pulled." Mrs. Whelan laughed, "And I'm a sprite. We like causing a wee spot of trouble now and again."

Sarah's eyes widened with uncertain hope.

"Go." The older woman winked

Sarah didn't need to be told twice. If this was a reprieve, however temporary, she'd take it. Still clutching her makeshift weapon, she cautiously exited the hollow and once again disappeared into the gloom.

Mrs. Whelan watched her go with a twinkle. "They'll have pretty wee babes, me thinks. With very strong wills." The tree seemed to nod in agreement.

Sarah reached the edge of the clearing unhindered. The fire still burned on the Hill. This time there were no revelers about and the grounds were eerily silent. Thinking perhaps to reach the road before they abandoned the search in the woods, Sarah took her chances in the open. Crouching low, she crossed the field, careful to avoid the Royal enclosure. As she passed the Mound of Hostages, Sarah thought she heard voices approaching. She looked wildly around for a place to hide. Spotting the small entrance to the mound, she grabbed the barred gate and found to her surprise that it opened easily. Panicking, she dove inside. The entryway was dark and confined, and the earth was very damp. It smelled of rot and age and beneath that, something else altogether. Something forgotten, but still familiar. She didn't dare go any deeper into the mound.

Before she had time to wonder why the locked gate had been open, her mind shot back to the film.

'It is considered a passage tomb because the ancient Druids also viewed it as the entrance to the Otherworld of eternal joy and plenty, where no mortal grows old.'

She swore she heard dark laughter. The Labyrinth, that's what she had smelled. She would never forget it. Cursing her stupidity, she scrambled out of the tomb. She refused to be caught so easily. On hands and knees she scaled the grassy mound, desperate to be anywhere but underground.

As she reached the top, she stood on shaking legs. The night seemed to close about her – entrapping. Her eyes darted wildly. Hearing a soft noise behind her, she spun, blindly swinging the tree limb.

It was caught midair by a black glove.

"The hare doesn't attack the wolf, Sarah." The Goblin King's mismatched shone lupine in the moon's light. His teeth looked all the more predatory. His lips parted in a half smile. "I can taste your fear, Precious. Did you know that when an animal is just about to die, just about to sate the hunger of another, a strange sort of peace overcomes it? Why do you think that is?" As he spoke, he slowly slid
his hand down the branch until it rested just above hers.

"Maybe the doomed animal hopes it's poisonous," snapped Sarah caustically.

Jareth threw his head back and laughed. "Still so defiant, even in the face of insurmountable odds. I think you might just be poison, Sarah." His hand covered hers. "But I think I might that death with open arms."

With a firm tug she dropped the branch and was against him. His cape fluttered softly around them. The embrace was as confining as it had been earlier, but this time it was more dangerously intimate.

Sarah only had a moment to register shock, before her senses were overwhelmed by his mouth on hers. If she had ever, in all her girlhood fantasies, imagined a kiss with the Goblin King to be gentle or softly romantic, she was sorely mistaken. It was savage in its intensity - filled with nine years of his repressed desire and the recent thrill of the chase. Sarah tasted blood when his sharp teeth snagged her lip.

The taste of it sent Jareth over the edge. Victory. One hand tangled its way into her dark hair, wrapping the locks around his wrist to better angle her head. His other possessively cupped the column of her throat, the leather cool against her heated skin. Sarah imagined he could crush the breath from her body with a single flex. Easing back, his long fingers dipped down her neck and across her collar bone, stopping only at the edge of her nightgown. Goose bumps rose in their wake.

Sarah's own hands, which until now had been clenched by her sides, moved upwards and came to rest on his smooth chest, torn between pushing him away and pulling him closer. Her skin felt singed from the heat, her heart beating madly in her chest. His matched the tempo. He smelled like pine and dew and fire. His mouth tasted like spiced wine. She wondered what she tasted like to him.

Jareth's hand trailed down the neckline of her nightgown, the buttons undoing as he passed. He smoothed the fabric back and lightly brushed his fingers over the tops of her partially clad breasts. Even as her nipples tightened in anticipation, Sarah flashed back to Jareth's hand on Moira, not an hour earlier. The thought froze her to the core, the mood shattering into a thousand crystal shards.

Sarah wrenched herself free, closing her nightgown with one hand. The other, she outstretched like a barrier. Jareth was breathing heavily and his eyes flashed dangerously. Sarah noticed faint nail marks on his chest and cringed. He was the poison. She had never meant to fall so easily.

Jareth licked his lips, the taste of Sarah's blood lingering. He took in her flushed face and wide eyes, still glassy with the remnants of unwanted desire. He had always known she would be passionate; he'd just underestimated her effect on him. Why she had stopped them he didn't know, though he had a fair idea. It mattered little. They had already started on a course of no return.

She was his by right.

Hate him she might, resist him she couldn't… not forever.
Credits:

There is a tree at the Hill of Tara officially called 'The Faery Tree'. I've never seen it, but it was inspiration for the old Oak.
Hook and Sink Her

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part XVI

You fit into me
Like a hook into an eye

A fish hook
Into an open eye

Margaret Atwood

Sarah forced her heart to slow. Her nerves were ablaze and the cool night air did nothing to ease the fever that burned through her. Wild thoughts ran rampant…

I just kissed the Goblin King.
I can still him taste him on my lips and in my mouth.

My nails raked his chest.
His hand was on my breast… as it had been on hers.

I'm a fool.
I'm doomed.

I HATE him!

Sarah's eyes were glassy and red with unshed tears, a combination of the confusion and terror of the last few hours. But sadness was not the predominant emotion in their depths, as Jareth could easily see, it was disgust. Disgust and anger. He wasn't at all surprised. He would expect nothing less from a girl of Sarah's calibre; she would not take defeat easily. They were well suited in that respect. And he embraced her hatred. It was, at base, a clear indication that he affected her… and oh how she resented him for it. He didn't blame her; he resented his feelings for her on a nearly daily basis. But as much as he'd like to watch her burn, it would hardly benefit him in the end. He'd been cruel and he would likely be cruel again. It was his nature. Luckily, she was made of sterner stuff. It was the reason he loved her. And it was why he had waited until the time was ripe, and why he would have her in the end. It was also why she could have no choice in the matter. He suspected she would be strong enough to walk away.

So be it.

"Don't touch me." Sarah fought hard to keep her tone steady and forceful. One hand clutched her nightgown closed at the neck and the other was still outstretched, warding him off.

"Don't you mean touch you again? I've certainly touched you already… in more ways than one, sweetness." Jareth's voice was infuriatingly calm.
It angered Sarah that he could so easily appear unaffected. It was another nail in his coffin lid. "You know what I meant, you sanctimonious bastard. I've no intention of standing here arguing semantics with you." A small amount of desperation and exhaustion crept into Sarah's voice. "All I want to do is go home, take a shower and go to bed."

The Goblin King smiled coldly. "I don't blame you. You're very dirty." His eyes narrowed on her soiled nightgown and torn jeans before returning to her face. "And all that can be arranged. Once we finish what was started here, I'd be delighted to escort you to our home." His grin widened until he looked like a twisted Cheshire cat. "I'll even bathe you myself."

"Thank you, no," Sarah replied with a muster of dignity. "I have no intention of going anywhere with you. Ever. You have… have… abused me beyond reckoning!" She winced at her choice of words. Ever the flair for the dramatic…

Jareth clapped his gloved hands together slowly for the second time that evening. "Bravo, Sarah. You really should have been an actress. You play the martyr so well. But I wonder if you'll ever tire of being a victim? It's I who bears the wounds after all," he finished wryly, indicating the marks on his chest.

"You tricked me," Sarah countered weakly.

"Into what? Fulfilling your own fantasy?" He tsk'd. "Don't lie to yourself, Sarah, it's beneath you."

Unable to bear his smug countenance any longer, Sarah turned away, preparing to walk down the mound. Instead she found herself standing inside the Royal enclosure, surrounded by the cloaked figures once again.

Smothering a curse, she slid through the crowd without a backwards glance… only to end up back in the circle. Crying out in frustration this time, she shoved through the throng, not caring who she stepped on. She was making good time across the field… until she once again stood in the circle of fire facing an amused Goblin King.

"You really are a rather dizzying girl."

"Stop doing that!"

"No."

I won't stay!"

"We have all night…" he offered suggestively.

Sarah gaped at the Goblin King. He was enjoying this! "Let me go!"

"I think not."

"Please…" Her voice came out barely above a whisper. She'd promised herself that she would never say that word to him, but she was exhausted and tasted the bitterness of dawning defeat.

"I can't, Sarah." He spoke softly, his voice having lost some of its acidity.

"I don't want to marry you!"

Jareth said nothing, his expression implacable.

"I hate you!" Sarah was quickly losing whatever little control of the situation she'd had.
"That's a start."

Sarah stared incredulously at her captor and then looked around at the revelers, as if seeking confirmation of his lunacy. "You're deluded! How is that a start?"

Jareth smiled. "Love and hatred are so very alike, wouldn't you say? They are both passionate emotions that cause sane people to do insane things. I might have cause for concern if you said you were indifferent." He paused and looked first at his marred skin and then pointedly at Sarah's bruised lips. "But I think we can both agree that I needn't lose any sleep on that count."

Sarah turned red at the chuckles and the knowing glances from the crowd.

He took advantage of her momentary discomfort to close the distance between them. Gripping her hands gently but with finality, he brought them to his chest. "Listen to me Sarah, there is no way out of this. And as much as I enjoy how you fight me, ultimately it is pointless."

Sarah reluctantly looked up at him. It was so alike their final encounter. He was entreat ing her to stay, even though she once again had no choice. Nine years had passed, everything had changed and yet at the foundations, nothing had. She wondered at his earnestness. He seemed to be of a single mind, but then so must she be.

"You have no power over me." She had no trouble finding the words this time, but she still winced as she said them, wondering if everything would shatter all over again.

The only thing that shattered was the calm.

Gone was the lazy mockery and amused indulgence. The anger that crept into the Goblin King's face was vivid and fierce. "Stop defying me, Sarah!" His grip tightened on her hands, her fingers numbing under the pressure. "Why do you insist on re-playing these childish games? You will never and I mean never say those words again. They no longer have any power over me and I don't enjoy hearing them. I remind you that I can be cruel and your stubborn defiance grows rather stale."

Though Sarah had not really expected him to disappear into a cloud of white feathers, she certainly had not expected the ferocity of his reaction. He was volatile. Though she was sure he wouldn't harm her, she realized that she knew very little about him. Hope dimmed, but not entirely dampened, Sarah decided to bide her time. The Goblin King was forever playing games with her and sooner or later it would be her turn.

Jareth was not fooled by her carefully schooled countenance. His little Sarah was planning something. They were well matched indeed. He had no doubt she would make a formidable queen. The resiliency of mortals never failed to astound him and it was something they tended to keep, even after the changes living in the underground brought. No doubt, he would no doubt have to woo his little wounded cat, but that was no problem, so long as he minded the claws.

"So you expect me to just accept all of this without batting an eyelash?" Her tone was heavily laced with sarcasm.

"No. I'd be surprised if you did. The girl who defeated my Labyrinth was no weakling. I enjoy your ire. It's a mark of your passion. I merely expect you to love and fear me."

Sarah's mouth dropped open. The ease and confidence with which the Goblin King delivered his edict was provocation personified. "I will NEVER warm your bed. NEVER!" she spat Declan's words back at him.

"I'll just have to warm yours then," he countered undaunted.
Sarah was becoming painfully aware of their audience. Eyes were following the byplay with avid interest, though none dared venture a comment. Jareth ignored them with the apathy of a practiced ruler.

The temporary lull permitted the Voice to speak.

"The King and His Chosen stand side by side, a symbol of the union between this world and the other. Let the ceremony of binding begin."

A cheer arose drowning out Sarah's protests.

When the noise subsided, the Voice addressed the king. "Was the girl given the warnings, as is her due?"

"Yes," replied the Goblin King.

Sarah looked askance at her nemesis. He called those warnings?

As if reading her thoughts, Jareth glanced down at her. "I gave you a sporting chance, Sarah. You delivered yourself to me like present," his eyes swept her disheveled appearance with derision, "despite the pitiful wrappings."

The voice nodded. "And yet the girl came to the Hill of Tara. So then she is deemed willing."

"No I am NOT," interrupted Sarah emphatically.

The Voice ignored her. "Did she willingly eat the Goblin's fruit?"

"Mm. Twice actually."

"What? A nine year old peach doesn't count!" scoffed Sarah in indignation.

"And how about a pear earlier this evening?" Jareth asked innocently.

Sarah flashed to the closed kitchen and the conveniently located fruit cart. She heard a small cackle. Scanning the crowd she spied a very familiar looking goblin with a toothless grin, his mortal glamour gone.

"So pomegranates come in many shapes, just as serpents do."

"Regardless, I was the means to sate your hunger. I wonder when you'll return the favour." Jareth added with a leer.

She opened her mouth to retort but the Voice continued, "And has she proven worthy?"

"She has defeated my Labyrinth. That makes her worthy of ruling it." Jareth smiled at her shocked expression. "Does it please you to know you sealed your own fate?"

"You wanted me to win?" Sarah asked in disbelief.

"Hardly. But it planted a seed, shall we say. One that today is coming to fruition."

Sarah had never before felt so used. He had managed to turn her victory against her. She felt manipulated and powerless. Jareth could not have planned a better revenge. Was it all meaningless then? Had fate been against her from the start? It didn't matter. Sarah steeled her resolve. She would persevere if only to foil him.
"Then so be it," continued the Voice. "By the right of Tara and the lives given on the sacral site, let the two-become-one make their blood sacrifice."

Sarah was immediately dragged back to the present. So caught up in her exchange with the Goblin King, Sarah had failed to properly assess her situation. The stone table still stood before them, but in addition to the chalice, now filled with an iridescent blue flame, was a length of silver cord and a very lethal looking dagger.

"Blood? What blood?" Sarah demanded nervously.

When she received no response from the Voice, she worriedly turned to Jareth but the words died on her lips. He was leisurely removing his gloves. Never before had she seen his bare hands and watching him peel back the leather was somehow incredibly intimate. His fingers were long and lithe, like the rest of him, and looked very soft. She knew the latent strength they belied. His right palm was marked with the symbol she had seen all over Ireland. It was the same image that had been carved into the standing stones at Tara – the triskele spirals… a labyrinth.

Jareth felt her eyes upon him and knew what fixated her. Taking the dagger from the altar, he made a shallow incision in the fleshy part of his hand. He held it over the open flame and allowed the blood to drip into the bowl. The flame flashed brightly. Both Jareth and the voice seemed satisfied with the result. Jareth turned and held the dagger out to Sarah, his intention clear, but she made no move to comply.

The Voice cautioned the King, "The blood must be given willingly."

Sarah felt a wave of triumph wash over her and couldn't stop a small smile from curling.

Jareth's eyes narrowed. With his free hand he grasped hers and pulled it over the flame, the knife poised above it. "We'll just do it my way then."

"He said it had to be given!" cried Sarah, trying to wrench her hand away.

"The Chosen is correct," cautioned the Voice.

Sarah was impressed that the figure did not falter under the Goblin King's glare. Snarling, Jareth released her hand and once again held out the knife. "Well!"

"No!"

"Sarah…" His voice had taken on a dangerous edge. "I warned you not to defy me."

Her response was drowned out by a voice from the crowd. "I believe I can be of service, your Majesty."

Sarah turned as Mrs. Whelan approached, her head bowed respectfully. "I'm sorry Mrs. Whelan, but nothing you say will convince me to cut my hand for his sake."

Smiling apologetically at her, the older woman pulled a soiled handkerchief from within her robe. Sarah's eyes widened.

"I thought this might come in handy. Sorry, m'dear. It's all fer the best. Ye'll see." She handed the blood-stained cloth to the triumphant looking Goblin King and then disappeared back into the revellers.

"That doesn't count! I had no idea what it was going to be used for!"
"It was given freely." His tone was pure satisfaction.

"That's not fair!" Sarah cried, cringing even as she said it.

She made a swipe for it, but the Goblin King merely smirked and then dropped the cloth into the flame. Sarah watched, helpless, as the chalice flared brightly again.

Jareth sighed with relief and released the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. She was indeed worthy. He'd been confident of this result, but there was always the possibility that she would have failed. He was not sure what he would have done in that instance. Likely, he would have kept the girl anyway, consequences be damned.

Sarah looked around with disgust at the joyful faces. The crowd was obviously pleased with the result and the rhythmic drumming had started again. Turning back to her adversary, Sarah watched with a frisson of fear as Jareth sank his hand into the brightly burning blue flame. The mark on his palm began to glow with a white light. Without giving Sarah a chance to react, he swiftly grasped her hand – naked palm to naked palm. She stifled a gasp at the sensation. The scholar in her marveled.

…palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss…

His hand was warm and soft, but the mark burned with a cold heat that seemed to creep up her arm and spread throughout her body. Stars danced in her eyes and her head began to swim. While their hands were joined, the Voice took the silver cord and wound it around their palms and wrists, binding them together with an intricate knot. Sarah watched with mounting horror as the cord flashed and then sank beneath their skin.

Just as soon as it had started, it was over. Jareth released her hand and broke the contact. Sarah instinctively stumbled away and cradled her arm to her chest protectively. The King pulled his discarded gloves on, a curling half smile his only reaction. Examining her tingling palm, Sarah saw that it now bore a mirror image of his mark.

She rubbed at her skin to no avail. "Take it off!"

The King merely adjusted his gloves.

"You have no right!"

Jareth regarded her coolly. "I have every right in the world, little girl."

"Stop calling me that! It's insulting."

"Then stop acting like one."

Sarah ignored him. "What was that cord? I can still feel it underneath my skin!" She began to claw at her arms until Jareth pried her hands apart.

"It's a bond, shall we say," he whispered, his finger lightly tracing an invisible pattern beneath her skin. "We both shall wear it forever. It prevents you from straying too far away. There will be no running home this time, Sarah."

"It's a glorified leash!"

"An added bonus," continued Jareth, unfazed, "is that it prevents you from seriously harming me. Let's just say that not all brides are as sweetly accepting of this bonding ceremony as you are."
The barb hit home. "I promise you that the series of cheats and tricks, which have unwillingly led me
to this point, does NOT a happy marriage make," Sarah fumed, her chin raised haughtily.

With a flick of his wrist, they were once again alone atop the mound and his arms were once more
around her. "No indeed, you eager and willing beneath me will."

Desperation prompted her to speak. "This won't work, you know. I am not even a virgin anymore."
Any embarrassment she might have had discussing her sex life was overshadowed by her sense of
self-preservation.

Jareth merely laughed derisively.

"It's true! Doesn't the bride have to be a virgin? They are always maidens in the stories."

"She should be innocent, yes."

Sarah smiled in triumph. "Well, I am afraid you'll have to find another victim, because I am not
innocent anymore. You're too late!"

Jareth eyes flashed. "Innocence drips off you like dew from a peach."

"You're not listening," she persisted. "A while back, I…" Her voice trailed off as Thunder rent the
air.

"I am quite aware of what you are referring to and I suggest you never mention it again." His voice
dropped dangerously quiet. "Foolish girl."

Sarah's heart skipped a beat.

"Too late indeed," his eyes glittering maliciously, "but then you managed to bungle that situation
yourself, didn't you? It was a rather spectacular display of ineptitude."

Sarah couldn't help the tears of hate and shame that slid down her face. "How dare you!"

"No. How dare you! I worked hard to keep you safe and content and you nearly undid everything
and for what? Just because you felt you should?"

"That's none of your business!"

"Of course it's my business! After everything I've done for you, after everything I've offered you!
You were going to throw it all away on a nameless boy. Something of value shouldn't be wasted on
a mere whim."

"Done for me?" Sarah felt her rage mounting. "Fending off potential lovers was not in the best
interest for me! You didn't do that for me!" Sarah hurled in accusation.

"You're right. I did it for myself, but you'll thank me later. Don't pretend you loved any of them."
Jareth's embrace tightened possessively. "I will come second to no one in every aspect of your life."
He smoothed the angry tears from her cheeks. "Know this, I would still have chosen you even if you
had been touched by a hundred. You will always be just a little innocent, Sarah. It's in your nature.
The flame tonight proved that we are well-suited and you are very much worthy. You once felled a
kingdom. I would think that you would want a reward."

"What reward?" asked Sarah caustically, already suspecting his answer.

With another flick, they were back inside the Royal enclosure. "A crown."
"I don't want it."

"You will," he replied with the confidence born of experience.

"And so the union is complete and the bond forged," the Voice continued, as though they'd never even left.

Sarah felt Jareth's body stiffen in anticipation as the figure approached the stone of destiny.

"As the Voice of the Lia Fail, I proclaim that the King must now prove himself worthy in a final test, before returning in two days hence to be proclaimed the Ard Riogh. Should He fail, all that is will be lost and undone." Sarah's face brightened. "Should He succeed, He may claim His bonded bride and return to His realm reborn. Ancient Eire shall have a High King again and the First Ways will gain strength once more."

The crowd sighed but the Voice held up a slim hand. "As it has always been, a challenger has the right to offer Him His test." A pause. "But as no challenger has come forward, that right falls to a worthy adversary - the one who wishes Him the most ill." The Voice placed a hand on the stone. The stone seemed to ring softly like a bell and the Voice listened intently. The figure stiffened in surprise before speaking. "The Lia Fail calls upon… Sarah Williams."

Sarah couldn't decide who was more shocked. She supposed at that moment in time, none save she had as much cause for grievance. All eyes trained upon her expectantly… save two mismatched ones.

Jareth howled with mocking laughter. "What can she even do? She bears my mark and we have already been bonded. She can offer me no real harm, she cannot undo what has been done and the test must be within the realm of possibility." His vainglorious grin had returned with full force.

Of all the things he'd said it was perhaps the most condescending. All along she'd felt like a toy on a string, dangling for his amusement. She was unable to decide her own fate, everyone she'd met was somehow connected and nothing was ever as it seemed. He'd tormented with cold calculation. And now he deemed her powerless. He couldn't possibly understand how she felt.

Love her indeed.

Everyone was waiting, breath bated, for her to announce her revenge and he was still just laughing at her. She wished she could shake his confidence, make him understand what it was to be manipulated. Sarah looked down at her filthy nightgown, her very old and torn jeans visible…

…Come on feet…

And then she knew.

Sarah straightened her back defiantly and placed a hand on the stone. It was surprisingly warm to the touch. She mulled the words over several times before she finally spoke. "I never asked to be here. I never asked to feel so powerless."

Jareth watched her with indulgent condescension. Sarah seethed at his arrogance.

"I wish the Goblin King could see what it's like to be a pawn in a game where the rules aren't his to bend. I wish he could experience the uncertainty and fear of not knowing what will happen, of having to act without magic to decide his own fate." Sarah paused, eyes on her villain. "I challenge the Goblin King to run the Labyrinth… just as I did."
Chapter End Notes

I'm not mixing metaphors; many biblical scholars attest that Eve was probably offered a pomegranate, not an apple. I've always liked that correlation between the creation story and the Persephone/ Hades myth, and I wanted to include it.

The line "palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss" is taken from Shakespeare's Romeo & Juliet.

Ard Riogh – High King
Lia Fail – Stone of Destiny
Part XVII

May stillness be upon your thoughts and
Silence upon your tongue!
For I tell you a tale that was told at the beginning
…the one story worth the telling…
A traditional Irish storyteller's opening

The Goblin King stopped laughing abruptly.
All the others went quiet, some in fear, some in shock, and at least one in satisfaction.
"What?" he asked with deathly precision.
"You heard me," Sarah spoke with more calm and more conviction than she'd felt in days. "I said I w-i-s-h you had to run the Labyrinth."
"Then I hope you're also ready to accept the consequences of those words," he replied, fey eyes darkening.
"You yourself taught me the power of words. Frankly, it's worth it just to see that sanctimonious grin wiped from your face," Sarah added triumphantly. She couldn't help the hypocritical smile that followed.
Jareth returned it with a vicious look. He'd never expected events to come to this. He'd been so sure that she was just a lost little girl, confused, afraid… broken. After everything she had endured, she was supposed to finally be manageable! He'd already underestimated her and nearly lost his kingdom in the bargain… Fool me once…
"The Chosen has decided and the Lia Fail accepts!" proclaimed the Voice, arms raised to the skies.
Jareth took a menacing step towards Sarah, but stopped abruptly when the early morning skies were rent with vivid flashes of lightening. The winds howled and seemed to blow impossibly from all directions at once. The accompanying thunder that pierced the air was deafening in its ferocity. The revelers scattered in fear and excitement. Declan gave Sarah a wink and a nod before disappearing into the twilight.
Sarah was left standing alone in the circle with the Voice and a livid-looking Goblin King. Both of them ignored the calamity around them. Jareth had not taken his eyes off of her once. As her hair beat wildly about her face, Sarah felt her conviction begin to waver. She wondered if she had single-handedly destroyed the world trying to get revenge upon her enemy. The ground shuddered beneath
her feet and the panes of the beautiful window in the nearby church began to shatter one by one. She screamed in fear and Jareth smiled. She was on the point of crying out for mercy, but she managed to choke back the words, steeling her resolve. She was doing this for all the girls that had gone before her, for all the stolen brides, and most especially for herself. Nine years was a long time to wait.

As if sensing her thoughts, Jareth closed the distance between them and lowered his mouth to her ear to be heard over the din. "Just wait, little girl. Just wait!" It was a promise. He disappeared in a cloud of silver dust.

Sarah shivered involuntarily. Strangely, she felt more vulnerable without him.

The Voice raised a hand towards Sarah. "And so it begins."

A final burst of lightening seemed to set the sky on fire, drowning everything in blinding white and then she saw no more.

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"Did she just…?" began one voice.

"She did," answered another.

"Did what?" asked a third.

"SHUT UP!" cried the rest in unison.

"So He has to…?" continued the first.

"Yep," nodded the second.

"Ohhhhhhh…" they all breathed with solemnity.

"He's going to be sooo mad!"

"I'll kill her."

"I'll torture her and then I'll kill her," Jareth reasoned with relish. "No, I'll kill her and then I'll torture her!"

The Goblin King stood alone atop a sandy hill, under a dusky red sky. A thirteen-hour clock was suspended midair beside a gnarled tree. The imposing outer wall of his Labyrinth lay before him. He had never loathed the sight more.

Gone was his stark black attire, instead he found himself clothed in simple slate grey breeches, a white shirt and black leather vest, finished off with dull leather boots. His hand went to his chest, but his torc was gone. Clearly he was meant to be without distinction. Suspicion dawning, he flicked his wrist with the practiced ease of a millennium of experience. No crystal appeared.

"Damn her beautiful mouth!"
He wondered if his mild-mannered mother had proved as difficult for his father. He somehow couldn't imagine it.

Looking at the vast expanse stretching before him, Jareth knew that he should know the way to his castle. It was HIS kingdom; it was in every fibre of his being, but he… didn't. The castle was a mere speck in the distance and he had no idea how to reach it. For perhaps the first time in many hundreds of years he felt a wave of uncertainty wash over him. It looked so very far. It looked… defeating. It must have been the naiveté of youth that had allowed Sarah to tackle such overwhelming odds.

That, or sheer dumb luck.

Comforting himself with the thoughts of all the wicked things he would do to her, Jareth forced himself to walk down the hill. He couldn't help but wonder what his precious bride was up to.

Sarah awoke disoriented and with a slight headache.

"It was all a dream," she murmured with a relieved sigh, before snuggling back into the pillow. A pillow that smelled disturbingly familiar. Spices, woodlands, masculine… magic.

Her head shot up.

She was in the Underground. She was in the Labyrinth. She was in the castle beyond the Goblin City. She was in his bed! Panicked, Sarah's mind raced, trying to make sense of the last few hours. How had this happened? The sacral site, the Voice, her challenge… Jareth.

As her eyes adjusted to the low light, she warily looked around. She lay entwined in a vast sea of soft linen sheets and covered by a richly embroidered blanket of labyrinthine knot work, the colours of a midnight sky. A dark fur throw was draped haphazardly across the foot of the bed, which itself was set upon on a stone dais and was adorned by an elaborately carved stone headboard.

To her left was a huge stone fireplace. A small blaze heated the room comfortably and provided the sole source of light. It was tall enough that Sarah could have stepped into it without bowing her head. Two polished stone dragons flanked it like vigilant minions. She thought with disgust how much the ostentatious display suited its owner but she had to admit that the craftsmanship was without compare. A pair of supple leather arm chairs and a small table was arranged in front of it invitingly. A bowl of fresh fruit and a flagon of wine with two glasses were set upon the table. An open book rested on one of the chairs.

The room itself was entirely made of stone like the rest of the castle, but the steely coldness of the walls were softened by ornate tapestries and paintings depicting various mythical scenes. The one above the fireplace was a fine rendition of the Hades myth. Sarah scoffed at the smile on Persephone's face as she held a pomegranate outstretched in her white hand.

Escaping slowly from the bed, Sarah's foot met the stone step of the dais. Her bare foot. Looking down, she saw with a mixture of horror and relief that her torn nightgown and jeans were gone, replaced by a beautiful silver nightdress intricately embroidered with the ever-familiar spiral pattern. The material was luxuriously soft against her skin. Sarah hugged her arms around herself protectively as she descended the final few steps.

The stone was surprisingly warm beneath her feet and the floor of the bedroom was covered by a large silk rug, woven to display a bird's eye view of the Labyrinth. Sarah watched with awe as the
threads seemed to periodically unweave and reweave themselves into new patterns, no doubt shifting with the very Labyrinth itself.

"No wonder he knows it so well," she whispered in awe.

Unable to quash the irrational fear of touching it, Sarah carefully stepped around it to the other side of the room. The wall sconces flared to life as she passed. Most of the room was lined with well-stocked bookshelves, a large desk providing the only other piece of furniture. There were also two small arched alcoves leading to smaller rooms. The first housed carved armoires, some depicting nymphs and sprites, some depicting goblins and dragons. With a wardrobe like his, Sarah was not surprised to find such a well-appointed dressing room. The smirk was wiped from her face, however, as she opened one of the doors. It was filled with dresses, dresses of every imaginable colour and cut and all in her size she'd hazard a guess. Pulling open the adjacent door she found coordinating shoes of every style, from delicate dancing slippers to glossy riding boots. Exasperated, she yanked open another wardrobe only to freeze. It was filled with irritatingly familiar masculine garments: billowy shirts, leather pieces and tight breeches. Sarah recognized with a sickening heart that this wasn't just his room, it was already theirs.

The other alcove housed a large bathroom with an impressive sized tub set into a stone dais, spacious enough for two. The candles flared to life invitingly as Sarah entered and water began to fill the tub. Slamming the door shut with disgust, Sarah strode back into the bedroom. If this was her revenge, why did she feel like she just delivered herself on a platter... into his bed, no less? She hoped he never had the chance to find that detail out.

Flinging open the brocade curtains with equal force, she revealed a large window. As her eyes adjusted to the sunlight, she realized that she must be in one of the high towers. Her elevated vantage point afforded her an excellent view of the Goblin City and the ever-changing Labyrinth beyond. Narrowing her eyes, she could make out movement between the maze walls.

"Where are you Goblin King," she murmured, chewing her lip in frustration.

Sarah nearly dropped the sphere that instantly appeared in her hand. "What the…"

Before she could fling the offending article away, an image flickered in its depths. Sarah's pupils dilated and a smile slowly lit her features. Testing a theory, she flicked her wrist and the crystal disappeared. This was going to be fun…

The Goblin King stood before the wall of his Labyrinth, scanning the horizon in both directions and swearing with vehemence and proficiency. Where the hell was the bloody door? He knew there was one. Not that he'd ever had to endure the degradation of knocking on the door to his own cursed Kingdom. He tried flicking his wrist again, but still no crystal appeared.

His savage thoughts were interrupted by the sound of water trickling. Turning around, he beheld a leathery gnome-like creature pissing into a murky pond. Jareth scowled in disgust. This was clearly one of his subjects - of the less than savory variety.

"After you've finished polluting my gardens, you'll lead me into the Labyrinth," he announced imperiously.

The creature buttoned his fly. "What? Oh… it's you – Ha! Wouldn'a have believed it!" He picked up
his sprayer and continued his work unhurriedly, laughing to himself silently.

Jareth had never met with such insolence before. "Show me where the door is immediately!"

"57!" The creature ignored him.

"Well shot," remarked Jareth in unwilling admiration. He'd had an aversion to the flying nuisances ever since a traumatic episode from his boyhood days.

"58!" The creature continued to ignore him.

Jareth was no longer feeling magnanimous. Seriously considering beating the creature until it begged for mercy, his instincts telling him it was something long overdue, Jareth allowed wisdom to prevail. His interests would not be best served with violence and he was unfortunately at a disadvantage.

"If you tell me where the door is, I'll ignore your abject disrespect and continue to provide the portion I obviously pay you," reasoned Jareth generously.

"Not much of a salary…" mumbled the gnome under his breath. "59!"

Outrage was etched in every feature on the Goblin King's face. "What is your name, you revolting little excuse for a troll?" Jareth would keep a tally of who he had to punish when this ordeal was over, starting with his lovely bride first and foremost.

"Hoggle," replied the creature slowly.

"Well, Hoggle…"

"Argh! It's Hogg… oh! Well, I never…" The gnome seemed genuinely shocked and was staring at the Goblin King with something akin to amazement.

Jareth grabbed Hoggle by the scruff of the neck and raised him to eye-level. "You clearly know who I am and what is going on here. You are clearly also a very disloyal subject… one that I suspect has always been a trouble maker. When this is over and I remember everything, I will make sure that every single faery in this kingdom has a chance to get their revenge for each and every comrade you have felled."

Hoggle swallowed audibly.

"Now, how do I get into MY Labyrinth!" he finished with a cruel squeeze.

Hoggle, who had been enjoying this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to turn the tables on the king, had not forgotten how very close he had once come to being crowned Prince of the Land of Stench. In fact, he was lucky to still be breathing, all things and all temperamental kings considered. He also knew that the Goblin King in question could be a very dangerous man on any given day, but a desperate Goblin King was somehow far more unpredictable. If that wasn't incentive enough, as a subject, Hoggle was bound by the rules of the Labyrinth; he had no choice in the matter.

"You gets in there," he gasped, gesturing behind him. He was unceremoniously dropped in the dirt as the main doors revealed themselves and opened.

The Goblin King strode through them without once looking back. "I won't forget, Hogwarts!" The doors shut behind him.

"It's Hoggle!" the dwarf whined to no one in particular. He kicked a fallen faery in frustration.
Chapter End Notes

Jareth arguing with himself over what he will do to Sarah is a shout-out to the Buffy musical episode – "Once More with Feeling." Spike sings something similar. I've always loved their dysfunctional relationship.

Many of Jareth's and Hoggle's lines are modified ones from the Labyrinth movie script.
Sarah poured herself a fortifying glass of wine, glared distrustfully at the fruit, and saluted the image of Persephone before taking a sip. "To wiser women than you."

The wine was cool, fragrant and tasted like victory on Sarah's palate. In a fit of gleeful abandon, she tossed the empty glass into the fireplace, delighting in the satisfying shatter. She was going to enjoy watching him suffer. She'd worry about the possible repercussions later… and there would be repercussions. Whether he won or lost the Goblin King would return to the castle eventually. Although their bond would be removed, Sarah knew she'd never be truly free. Something beyond her control had been set in motion the day she'd spoken those hasty words some nine years before. I wish…

Pushing those thoughts from her head, Sarah bathed and then searched for her clothing without success. She was hardly surprised and only mildly disappointed. Still, she had to wear something; running around in a white nightgown was far too Gothic for even Sarah's taste. She threw open the wardrobe doors. Immediately dismissing the more frothy confections, a wicked thought entered her mind and refused to be banished. This was perhaps the only opportunity she'd ever have to put the arrogant king in his place – certainly if he won, there'd be no reprieve – so she might as well play things out in their proper form. The Lia Fail clearly intended her to have an active part in this challenge and she would be a fool to pass up any proffered advantage.

Sarah selected a pair of black breeches from one of the king's closets, but after disrobing, she hesitated a moment before slipping them on. None of the feminine undergarments she'd found would fit under the pants and sliding them over her bare skin felt somehow sinful. She wondered if it was her imagination or were they still slightly warm. Stuffing the excess length into a pair of polished riding boots, she caught sight of herself in the full-length mirror. Naked to the waist, the black of the boots and pants made her skin appear all the more pale. Her damp hair curled in dark tendrils around her face. The stark contrast in colour turned her eyes an almost iridescent green. Sarah couldn't imagine a more artful male fantasy than the one staring back at her from the mirror. It was strangely empowering in a primal way. She arched her brow in mocking imitation.
I wonder what he'd give to see me now…

The silvery surface reflected Sarah's shock at that unbidden thought. Crossing her arms over her chest, she hurriedly found some undergarments. Grabbing a billowy shirt from his closet and an ornate leather waist cincher from hers, she finished dressing. Rolling the long sleeves, she contemplated her finished look in the mirror. The masculine austerity of her garb lent her the veneer of strength and the knowledge that she had invaded his private domain, while personally unnerving, was very satisfying. She looked powerful, poised and seductive. She looked very… Goblin.

With a final fortifying swig of wine from the remaining glass, she took a steadying breath and exited the bedroom. There was much to be done if she was to write her own destiny.

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The Goblin King looked left and then right in consternation. This was absolutely absurd. There were no turns or corners or anything! He sorely missed the lack of a goblin or chicken to kick. If he wasn't in this predicament, he might have congratulated himself on the ingenuity of his design. The long corridor stretched to infinity in both directions. To add insult to injury, he was painfully aware of the many mossy eyes surrounding him, now witness to his indecision.

She, on the other hand, was no doubt enjoying the comforts of his castle. He hoped she was taking advantage of them while she could, because he was going to make her decidedly more uncomfortable as soon as he reached the gates. An oubliette for a while maybe. And then he'd have her in a different way every night for each excruciating step he was forced to take. He show that forever could be very long indeed.

Choosing to hedge his bet with the right, he moved methodically along the wall, searching for any imperfections or anything out of the ordinary. While he couldn't remember what the trick was, he knew himself well enough to know there was one.

Precious time passed and still he made no progress. He should have dragged that stinking gnome with him. Errors of miscalculation are what had nearly cost him his throne. He had to focus if he wanted to win at his own game and he would take nothing for granted. Leaning against one wall, he placed a gloved hand to his temple in frustration.

"'Ello."

Jareth looked up and then down… at a tiny white worm peering intently at him.

The Goblin King raised a brow.

"Fancy a cuppa tea?"

"I can think of nothing more repulsive," replied Jareth dryly.

The worm took no offence and merely smiled at the king.

"Do you know who I am?" asked the Goblin King, the wheels in his head beginning to turn.

"Yes, Majesty."

"And do you know the way through this Labyrinth?"
The worm managed to convey a shrug without the aid of arms. "Like I told the girl before, no, I'm just a worm."

"That much is painfully obvious."

"Come and meet the missus – she's never met royalty before."

How Sarah had put up with these pitiful creatures, he couldn't fathom. Already he was growing very tired of this conversation. "I know there is a way in somewhere, there has to be. Tell me where one is. All semblance of patience was now lost.

"There's one right in front of you." The worm's tone indicated that fact should have been self-evident.

Jareth's questing hand met empty space. He'd given up about a foot too soon and it irked him to no end to know he'd unnecessarily relied on an invertebrate for guidance. He stepped into the void, but then paused. "And which way would you recommend?"

The worm didn't hesitate a moment before answering, "Go left."

"Indeed," remarked the king, before heading to the right.

The worm shook his head. "And here I thought he'd want to go straight back to his castle! Wait 'til I tell the missus."

Jareth congratulated himself on his forethought as he stepped out into the sunlight. The worm had clearly been a decoy. That was something he definitely would have set up. Either that or he was one of the treasonous subjects that had aided Sarah the first time. Faces flashed through his mind only to vanish. He wished he could remember…

"I'm coming, Sarah," he promised. He planned to turn her world upside down.

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Pandemonium was ensuing all around her.

Sarah had easily found the throne room of the castle, as though instinct or magic guided her. Having never really seen the Goblin King's seat of power, she really had no expectation or frame of reference. She was wholly unprepared for it. When she'd first thrown open the heavy doors, there had been shocked silence and gaping maws. Now those maws were all speaking at once, chicken feathers were flying everywhere and the prevailing sour stench rivaled that of the bog. How the ever-immaculate Jareth had the fortitude to rule in this chaos, she couldn't fathom.

In the light of day, the goblins had gone back to appearing mostly comical and largely ineffectual, though some continued to follow her every movement through narrowed eyes, their claws and talons flexing with malicious intent. Sarah forced confidence into her stride; their kind fed on fear. First she tried yelling, to no avail. Then she tried waving her arms, with no result. Finally she collapsed in a disgruntled heap on the archaic throne. Straining her ears, she caught snippets of the conversations around her.

"It's her…"

"…the girl who ate the peach…"
"…His bride."

"She's in His seat!"

"She's in His pants!"

"Where's my chicken?"

The goblins were both fascinated and leery of her. They knew what was going on, many of them had been at the sacral site and they had spread the news to the rest like wildfire. Their king was running the Labyrinth… without his abilities and without direction. And it was all due to the girl in front of them. Most weren’t sure if they were supposed to attack her or bow in deference. Instead they did nothing but babble and wait. Goblins were good at waiting. Though simple creatures by nature, they well understood the stakes at hand. As before, this fragile little mortal was on the verge of forever changing or destroying a kingdom.

Sarah finally stood in exasperation and in the process toppled a passing goblin. Stones scattered from his pockets.

"You!"

The goblin peered up at her with watery yellow eyes.

"What's your name, you wretched little imp?"

The goblin looked around for help from his comrades, but all avoided eye-contact. "Muskul," he answered in a quavering voice.

"You threw rocks at me!"

The goblin nodded slowly, unsure if he was about to be praised or punished. He smiled innocently with a toothy grin, a few remaining wood splinters dotting his gums.

Sarah frowned, biting her lip in indecision. As goblins went, this one was definitely in the harmless end of the spectrum. "You shouldn't throw rocks at people."

The goblin blinked. Punishment it was. "Please, please! Muskul is sorry!" He collapsed at her feet in sloppy and damp supplication.

The other goblins ceased their caterwauling, eager to hear her mete out justice. Sarah stared at their faces, realizing that something grand and probably showy was expected from her. What would a Goblin King do?

"Alright. I'll… forbear… this time," she warned, trying to imitate his characteristic haughtiness. "But do it again and I'll… I'll suspend you head first over the bog of eternal stench!"

Sarah had hit her mark. The goblins were dutifully impressed and Muskul nodded in the fearful understanding, born from years of experience. The bog was something they could all understand.

"But feel free to throw rocks at his majesty anytime you see him," Sarah added on a whim.

Muskul's eyes widened in horror. No one ever attacked the king. No one even suggested it.

"I don't think I ever want a bride," whispered one goblin.

"Just wait until he gets back," replied another. "There'll be hell to pay."
Even the chickens grew silent in expectation.

Jareth was clearly not going in the right direction. No more so than he had been for the last hour or so. Every wrong step he took seemed to echo the tick of the clock. As soon as he reached the castle, he would make sure to increase the local bird population. The early bird catches the worm… and his missus too.

Around and around he walked, but could make no head way. He didn't bother trying to mark his route; his instincts told him that the walls were constantly changing anyway. Unfortunately, threatening to dismantle them brick by brick had had no effect. It was little wonder that Sarah had been the one and only mortal to ever overcome these traps and artifices. In fact, she was one of the few that had survived it at all.

"Nice day for a stroll."

Jareth's head canted. Where there had been a wall, now stood two nearly identical doors, guarded by what resembled a pair of red and blue playing cards. Each door was comprised of two jester-like creatures, one atop the other. They were frustratingly familiar, but though the Goblin King's mind raced, the answer eluded him.

The doors whispered behind their shields as he approached.

"I assume I have to choose a door," Jareth remarked, arms crossed.

"Never assume. It makes an ass of…"

"I wouldn't finish that thought, if I were you," he interjected with a gloved finger raised.

"If we were you, we would know what to do!" crooned the bottom red door unperturbed.

The four fools laughed in unison.

The Goblin King had only been laughed at with such derision once before. And he wasn't finished with her yet. It was a feeling he refused to get used to. "Are you through?" he asked acrimoniously.

"Yes, but you aren't yet!"

They collapsed in laughter again.

The Goblin King had long felt that the Labyrinth was due for some… stream-lining and this was further proof if ever he'd needed some. "One of these doors leads to the castle and one of them leads to something devastatingly horrible, though ingenious, I'd imagine," continued Jareth impatiently.

"Well, I wouldn't say ingenious. Would you, Ralph?"

"I would, but I might be lying!"

Again, the king was subjected to snorts of glee.

Addressing the top blue guard, Jareth spoke with deathly precision. "Am I to understand that one of you intends to deliberately lie to me?" His voice dropped to a dangerously soft pitch.
The doors conferred amongst themselves. "Yes."

"Then I demand to know which one tells the truth," persisted the king.

"The girl was much better at this," whispered the bottom blue guard, before disappearing behind his shield in fear. The guards tittered quietly.

Nothing could have filled the king with more gall.

Hands on his brow, he stamped his ire down. The Labyrinth was a puzzle at its core… wasn't it? One of them always lies and one of them always tells the truth… which meant asking the correct question was the trick. Jareth had always enjoyed watching people defeat themselves, it was just his style.

"You!" Jareth poked the red guard in the chest plate sharply. "Would your treasonous little compatriot tell me that this door leads to my castle?"

The red guard scratched his head, conferred with his bottom half and then nodded slowly.

Jareth's eyes glittered triumphantly. "Then I will simply choose the other door."

The guards opened their mouths to continue but Jareth raised a warning finger. Without hesitation, he opened the red door and stepped into nothingness.

Sarah watched his descent with a smile on her face.

"So I was right then." The crystal in her hand disappeared.

Goblins were notoriously easy to manipulate and Sarah quickly discovered that they were very proud of their King's nasty machinations. Muskul himself let slip that Jareth had rigged the doors accordingly. When she'd chosen the correct path, the Goblin King hadn't hesitated to exercise his penchant for interference. Sarah couldn't possibly argue with his taste. She had merely manipulated the game and returned a long-owed favour.

The Goblin King's rapid descent came to a resounding halt. The ignominy of having fallen in the first place was overshadowed by his currently undignified predicament. At least a dozen leathery hands gripped him in a number of highly questionable places. Though relieved they had slowed his fall, their timely intervention did nothing to alleviate his dark mood.

"Unhand me!" he commanded, trying to infuse some lost dignity into his voice.

At once, the hands let go and Jareth was swallowed by the darkness below. As the gate clanged shut, several of the hands began to form faces.

"Why did you do that?" asked one.

"We didn't even get a chance to ask him which way," whined another.
"He's the king. Seemed only proper to obey his orders," replied the rest.

The hands all nodded in agreement.

Chapter End Notes

Muskul is actually the name of one of the goblins from the movie. Brian Froud did character sketch cards of some of the goblins and I thought it would only be fitting to include at least one. Muskul looked like a trouble-maker. All this to say, he is yet another thing I do not own.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part XIX

All I want is everything
All the words and the truths between
All I want is everything
Everything you're keeping from me
Will you give in?

Give In, The Bravery.

Jareth landed in an undignified heap on a well-beaten earthen floor.

His current state did not lend itself to grace or decorum and never had he felt quite so filthy or bruised in his entire life. Knees and wrists aching painfully from his fall, he couldn't help but recall Sarah's torn jeans and bleeding leg. At the time there had been a certain satisfaction in seeing his bane brought so low. She had been so strong nine years before, so resilient in the face of his defeat that he had found a strange… justice in her tears and suffering. Now, a small part of him felt pity. Not a lot, given the relativity of their current conditions, but some measure of empathy.

Perhaps even a smidgen of remorse. He wasn't sure how to process this new feeling.

The Goblin King dismissed the thought with a sneer.

Standing, he attempted to assess the situation despite the growing sense of unease. He'd been so sure that he'd chosen correctly and yet here he stood. Had he been wrong? What if he couldn't find his way again? What if he was lost? That would mean defeat at her hands… again. And perhaps more importantly, that would mean life without Sarah. Duty and destiny aside, the latter thought filled him with more misery than he dared contemplate. Jareth narrowed his eyes and allowed his mask of indifference to return. Weakness would not further his cause. Whatever else might change, he would always be the Goblin King and everything that the role entailed.

It was in this guise that he turned to confront the newcomer. "You again!"

"Me again," replied Hoggle without enthusiasm.

"This must be one of the oubliettes?" Jareth found, not without a measure of disgust, he was actually pleased to have someone to talk to.

"It is. A nice place to put people you want to forget about," Hoggle continued with a glint in his eye, "It suits you real well."

Jareth despised the gnome beyond reason. "Then I imagine she must want to forget about you too then," he countered slyly.
"No! Sarah is my friend! She would never forget about…” Hoggle threw his hands over his mouth to stop the rush of words.

The smile Jareth gave him made him want to hang himself over the bog.

"I knew it," he hissed venomously. "She really should choose wiser friends."

Hoggle winced. He had allowed Jareth's words to fuel his doubts. Maybe Sarah really had wanted to forget about him. She certainly had never called upon him, not once in the long years. He hung his head in shame. Not that he could blame her. He'd betrayed her the very first time he'd met her and here he was again, only this time he was not only a turncoat, but a fool.

"I knew you seemed familiar. I can't believe I didn't get rid of you years ago. I must be nicer than I thought," Jareth mused as he watched the emotions play across the gnome's face.

Hoggle couldn't help a derisive snort.

"It was an error in judgment that I won't make again," Jareth promised with cruel sincerity.

Hoggle took an involuntary step backwards at the all too familiar tone. "Looks, I'm not trying to get in your way or nothing. I don't want to even be here," he stammered.

"Then why are you pestering me with your presence? Trying to lead me astray?" The Goblin King's innocent tone was belied by the savage glint in his mismatched eyes.

Hoggle couldn't imagine leading the king anywhere. He looked around in frustration. "I just has to come here. It's part of your Labyrinth." His hands fidgeted nervously with a plastic bracelet on his wrist. "You yourself made it part of the rules," he added bitterly.

"My errors in judgment seem to grow by leaps and bounds," replied the king drily. Hoggle watched apprehensively as Jareth began feeling along the walls for any depressions that might indicate an exit. The King made a full circle before he spoke again.

"I don't suppose you're going to tell me where the door is? Try and regain some of your lost standing?" The question was asked casually and the King continued his search without looking up.

Hoggle eyed him warily before answering. "I don't have to - it's not part of the rules. I only has to lead you back to the beginning."

"Probably wise, Hedgewart. It wouldn't do you any good anyway."

"It's Hoggle," he mumbled out of habit.

"No, it's soon to be unemployed. Or perhaps it's soon to be no longer breathing," remarked the Goblin King jovially. Jareth had to admit that he enjoyed tormenting the little twit. Perhaps that's why he'd kept him around even after his obvious treason. Perhaps he'd also been curious about the loyalty Sarah seemed to engender in some of his subjects. And right now, his company was better than none, albeit barely.

"I could show you the way back…” Hoggle's words trailed off at the glare shot in his direction.

"You care for the girl, don't you?" asked the King, pausing in his fruitless search.

Suspicious at this change in tact, Hoggle was slow to answer. "Er… yes…"

"So you'd like to see her again?"
"Yes..."

"I see." The King went back to searching, but continued to watch the dwarf from the corner of his eye.

Hoggle fidgeted. "Why... why do you ask?"

"Oh no reason in particular, I was merely curious as to why you would want to jeopardize your own happiness." Jareth now abandoned all pretense of working and watched his subject closely.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I would have thought you of all... people, would want Sarah here at the castle."

Hoggle's reaction was instantaneous. "I won't do nothing to harm her! I told you that a long time ago and I still means it!"

Jareth had to admire the gusto with which he delivered this declaration. He was clearly frightened, but the loyalty he felt to the girl was paramount. Jareth found that he was actually pleased to know his future queen was so well loved. Not that it will save her in the end, the little viper. It would make the transition so much easier for her... which, in turn, would be easier on him.

"I never said anything about hurting her. Why would I want to hurt my bride?" Jareth asked; gloved hands raised in feigned innocence.

"Bride?" Hoggle's eyes widened. "So it is true! Scarce believed it myself when I heard. Thought you were just up to your old tricks."

"You paint such a flattering picture of me," remarked Jareth drily. "There is no trick this time. I fully intend to make Sarah a queen."

"Queen of the land of stench?" asked Hoggle suspiciously, remembering a similar conversation had nine years previous.

"Tempting," he replied honestly. "But no. I prefer the way she smells right now. I plan on making her my royal consort and your sovereign lady."

Hoggle openly gaped at Jareth. "But why... she, she beat you! You don't want her!"

"Oh but I do," said the Goblin King, crossing his arms. "I want her very much, in fact." In that, at least, he was being truthful.

"But she made you look like an idi..." Hoggle quailed under Jareth's stare.

"That aside, I still want her. And I plan on having her."

"But she don't want you! She wants to play with her toys and read stories and grow up!" Hoggle protested desperately.

Jareth knelt to look him in the eye. "She has grown up, Hoggle. She grew up and was prepared to forget all about us," he finished seriously.

Hoggle fingered the gaudy bracelet. The plastic had turned dull with time.

"If she were Queen, she could hardly forget about us. She'd be here forever... for us all to enjoy," Jareth continued. Hoggle's eyes were becoming misty and Jareth pressed his advantage. "Don't you
think she really wants to be with her friends?"

"But you…" Hoggle wavered.

"But me what? I'd give her everything she ever wanted. Is that not generous? Is that not love?"
Jareth's voice rose in thinly veiled anger.

Hoggle's confused face was a mass of leathery wrinkles. His instincts told him not to trust Jareth an inch, but something in the king's voice was sincere. And while he was no expert, he'd spent years learning its cadences and nuances in an effort to save his own hide. Neither could he ignore the joy that the king's words had sparked… Sarah in the underground. Sarah, his Queen. She would make things better… Wordlessly, he gestured at a pile of rags on the floor that had not been there a moment before.

Jareth unearthed the hidden door with his boot. A smile of triumph twisted his fine features. Lifting it up gingerly, he placed it against a wall. He paused to glance back at the gnome, still lost in thought. "Coming?"

"I just damned her again, didn't I?" His voice was weak and full of self-loathing.

Jareth hesitated a moment before answering. "Perhaps, but we're better off burning together than apart. We need her and she needs us," he replied honestly. "She just doesn't know it yet."

The Goblin King wrenched open the old door, only to be greeted by a barrage of falling objects, many of them moldy and dust-ridden. He narrowly side-stepped them. He'd kill the dwarf. Hoggle had better hope that Sarah proved to be a very loving and soothing wife, because he doubted if even she could save him now. Slamming it shut and opening the other side, he stepped into the cavernous maze beyond.

Hoggle took no notice of the king's misfortune or his savage looks. He stayed alone in the oubliette, feeling like the most selfish bastard that had ever lived.

"Oh Hoggle..." Sarah sighed softly as the crystal she held cleared.

While she was angry that he'd managed once again to work against her, she found she couldn't blame him. He was like a child in many ways and had acted purely on instinct. Sarah was the one that had tried to move forward and forget, never sparing a thought to how her friends had fared.

And Jareth had manipulated him. He was far too good at getting what he wanted she thought bitterly, and so far this was no exception. She was troubled both because he was persevering and because he had once again forced her to question herself. He'd seemed so sincere when he told Hoggle he would give her everything. It was the same and somehow different from when he'd promised it years before. A traitorous part of her wondered if perhaps they were better burning together. She had left a part of herself here nine years ago. Maybe she did need them after all… all of them.

Sarah dismissed the thought angrily. She was here against her will and was unable to leave until the challenge was over, won or lost. Powers beyond them both were binding them to this fate. She may have succeeded in making Jareth a pawn, but she'd barely loosened her own strings. She needed focus.

"I think it's time I made an appearance," she announced to the throne room before vanishing from
The goblins stared at one another in wonder.

Jareth heard the cold echo of the door shutting behind him and found himself in a twisted maze of rough-hewn rock faces, once again with no idea of where to go. He had briefly considered dragging the dwarf with him, but the dwarf was suffering enough for now. Certainly he would be when he realized how expertly he’d been played. A nagging part of him felt a twinge of what could be considered guilt, but he would not lose sight of the end objective for anything. Sarah.

The Goblin King paused. He was shocked at how honest he’d been with the little gnome. He really did love her… or as close an approximation to the sentiment as he was capable of feeling. Sarah was many things to him, not all of them nice. He wondered how many things he was to her.

His self-reflection was cut short by the cacophony of booming voices.

"Don't go on!"

"Go back while you still can!"

"This is not the way!"

Jareth pointedly ignored them.

"Take heed, and go no further!"

"Beware... beware!"

"Soon, it will be too late!"

"Beware, for the…"

Patience lost, Jareth stopped. "Enough!" His voice echoed throughout the suddenly silent chamber.

"Why does everyone always interrupt me?" whined the rock face nearest to him.

Jareth merely glared, an eyebrow raised.

Taking that as an invitation, the rock face cleared his throat, "Beware, for the… wait, aren't you the King?"

All ears perked intently.

"Indeed."

The rock faces grew silent, and the ones that could, looked at one another apprehensively. This was something new and there was nothing in their scripts to direct them.

"Um…welcome?" one said weakly after a long pause.

The others followed suit.

"This is the way!"
"We're honoured by your visit!"

"Please come again!"

The sounds of their sycophancy followed Jareth out of the cavern and into the adjoining tunnel. Sometimes it was good to be the king. But his triumph was to be short lived.

"Looks like you've found yourself some cheerleaders," mocked a very amused voice.

Jareth stilled at the unexpected sight before him. "Sarah…"

"Jareth." Sarah gingerly leaned against the tunnel wall in a pose of studied indolence. One lean booted leg rested over the other and her arms were crossed beneath her breasts artfully. Confidence dripped off her like a pheromone. He had never before seen her like this and Jareth was at a loss for words. He almost wished she was still splendidly vulnerable in a soiled nightgown and torn jeans. Almost. And the sudden stirring of his groin almost made him forget how much he wanted to kill her. Almost…

"I see you found my wardrobe," he remarked with a pointed look. He allowed his eyes to drift back down her long legs. A small shudder ran through him at the thought of his clothes against her naked skin. If he'd been angry, he had trouble remembering why at that moment. A thousand wicked fantasies were running rampant through his head. Fantasies he'd put into action as soon as time permitted.

Sarah simply smiled. His reaction had not gone unnoticed.

"And how are you enjoying my pants?" He licked his parched lips.

Sarah's smile deepened at his double-meaning. Purposefully, she stepped towards him, crushing a long-abandoned beggar's disguise underfoot.

"They fit like a glove, Goblin King," she breathed.

Another tremor ran through him, but he leaned in this time, crowding her. "Excellent. I can't wait to have them back… smelling ever so sweetly of you," he finished with a feral grin.

Sarah couldn't help an unsteady swallow of her own under the intensity of his appreciative gaze. Despite the change in their situations, she couldn't deny he affected her. The fact that he was dirty, without magic, and lacking his usual composure, did little to dampen the effect.

He let one gloved hand trail along her hip and she shivered involuntarily. His eyes raked her with desire and malice. It was the former that broke her composure.

"You manipulated Hoggle," she accused, clearing her throat shakily.

Jareth made no attempt to deny it or to stop his wandering hand.

"He didn't deserve that. Do you really need to use innocent people to cheat at your own game?"

"Sarah, precious Sarah, what a narrow point of view you have. Did you not use him for your own ends? Oh yes, I remember that much at least," he added at her shocked look. He watched with satisfaction as the myriad of emotions warred on her face. "I think we both know what it takes to win." Jareth tipped a finger under her chin and lifted her eyes to his face. "And I very much plan to win," he promised softly.
Sarah wrenched herself free and stared down the dark tunnel. She couldn't argue his point, but she hated his honesty as much as she did his subterfuge. "You won't win," she said over her shoulder.

"Then neither will you."

Sarah turned, unaccountably angry. "You can't possibly believe that I need you!" She flung his words back in his face.

He betrayed only mild surprise. "I believe you need all of this," his arms swept wide before pointing at her accusingly, "and I think I am more a part of you than you'll ever admit."

Sarah looked away again.

"We can end this charade now, you know. I could be so kind…" He let his words trail off as he brushed a gloved hand along her exposed collar bone. He looked almost vulnerable.

Sarah stepped back, an inscrutable look on her own. "And what are you offering me now?"

Jareth looked confused by her question, but had no time to answer before she continued. "This?" Sarah produced a crystal.

He stared at it with hungry eyes, before exploding into anger. "You play with dangerous things, little girl!"

She answered with equal enmity. "No, I play with smoke and mirrors… nothing more." The crystal vanished and a clock appeared midair. "You were right, Jareth. We will both do whatever it takes to win." With an unsteady finger, she forced the minute hand forwards, removing three hours as it spun.

Jareth said nothing.

"What, nothing pithy to say to your wayward bride?" She craved a reaction, anything but the cold silence.

"Sarah…" his voice was laced with venom, "before this is over, I promise you'll be exhausted from living up to my expectations."

They stared at one another for a moment, the air between them fraught with tension.

"We'll see about that." Sarah produced another crystal and then hurled it down the tunnel with all the force of a desperate woman.

Jareth followed the sphere with a mixture of reluctant admiration and annoyance as it materialized into something else entirely.

Chapter End Notes

I promise that although I have followed Sarah's original journey very closely until now, Jareth will make different choices that will lead him in new directions.
A Foul Encounter

Part XX

I heard thy music,
O melody of melody,
And I closed my ears
For fear I should falter.

I blinded my eyes
And I closed my ears
I hardened my heart
And I smothered my desire.

Renunciation, by Padraic Pearse

For a brief moment Jareth stared blankly at the spot where Sarah had been and lamented that things always ended this way. And then he ran, ran as fast as his lithe legs could carry him.

The acrid smell of what pursued him overshadowed any humiliation in his retreat.

And oh, was she sadistic!

It was not a spinning mass of blades that bore down upon him, but a roaring tidal wave of pure unfiltered bog. The sound of the sludge sluicing through the tunnel was enough to make his skin crawl and wild hair fall tame. The smell itself was foul enough to make his fey eyes burn. Never had he run so fast in his life. Never had he been forced to run so fast in his life. But he couldn't spare concern for appearance's sake if he was to preserve his own.

The brick tunnel stretched out before him, no turns or exits in sight. Any minute now the deluge would carry him away. He'd be lucky if he drowned quickly. Ahead, the barred gate was fortunately still lying amid a pile of rubble, though it was doubtful he'd even make it that far. He could feel the stinking damp of the bog behind him, and the tunnel was fast becoming noxious with fumes. His limbs ached painfully with each step he took, promising failure.

And then he saw it… salvation.

One of the tunnel walls was collapsed - the very spot where Sarah had escaped nine years previous. Bless goblin work ethic. With a final burst of speed, he stumbled into the alcove and threw himself against the ladder. Clawing his way up the rungs in desperation, he only narrowly avoided the rising waters licking at his boots. His only thought was reaching the surface level before he was overcome by the fumes.

When Jareth pulled himself from the old urn, the harsh rays of the midday sun temporarily blinded him. He gulped in a breath of fresh air thankfully. After his heart slowed to normal, he began to laugh derisively in both anger and relief. He had to give her marks for originality; he probably would have just sent the cleaners. But then, he also had a stake in preserving his kingdom. Those tunnels would be unusable for years now! A fitting punishment would be to have her scrub them clean, but no one wanted a foul-smelling wife. He fleetingly wondered if the wave had reached the cavern of
false alarms. That would truly be a pity. There was a marked deficiency of loyal subjects in his kingdom. Then again, perhaps the wave had swallowed the insolent dwarf. At that Jareth smiled.

It slid from his face when he noted that the stench was not dissipating. It only took a moment to realize why. With shock and disgust he looked down at his left boot. A sizeable splatter of muck was rapidly soaking into the raw leather. Cursing in several languages at once, he tugged the offending article off and tossed it over a wall as far as he could. He hoped it hit somebody. Examining his clothing for any other signs contamination, he was satisfied that he'd escaped relatively unscathed… until a tendril of his hair fell forward. His usual ash blond lock was now a putrid shade of green.

He'd murder her.

He snagged a loose piece of slate from one of the walls and began slicing through the damaged strands. Five sizeable hunks landed in a pile before he was assured that he was clean. He looked down at himself in seething horror. His pants were now mottled grey with dirt. One pale foot stared balefully back at him. He ran a gloved hand through his messy locks and met air. While it was mostly intact, it was not nearly as chaotically impressive as it had been and it was definitely... lighter.

The rage the coursed through him, made impotent by his lack of magic, surprised even him.

He should have married that insipid child goddess! She would have been biddable, she would have been sweetly submissive… she would have been safe. Cursing the day he'd ever laid eyes on her, Jareth disappeared into the maze of stonewalls with more savage determination that he'd ever felt before.

Sarah stared into the crystal, her body rocking with silent laughter.

The goblins eyed each other apprehensively. The girl laughing meant the king probably wasn't.

It had been a spur of the moment decision. She had planned their meeting with high expectations. She was going to rattle him, to show him that he hadn't brought her low at all. She would mock him and toy with him just as he'd always done. Tit for tat.

And then she'd seen the way he looked at her. She'd felt it.

It was the reaction she'd desire, she just hadn't planned on returning the feeling. He'd lost some of his characteristic poise, but he was still the Goblin King - the dark figure that had haunted her dreams and fueled her most suppressed fantasies. His forbidding presence was no less dimmed by their circumstances. She wondered if he'd realized how close he'd come to slipping under her skin. He'd seemed so… sincere, so vulnerable and for a brief moment, Sarah thought she might actually hold some power in their relationship. But then he'd so easily slid back to old lines - offering threats, silent and spoken, that had shivered down her spine.

Sarah knew that if she gave in she'd be a slave to his whims and nothing more - beloved of a king, but still a slave. The fact that she'd been tempted only focused her more. His maddening composure and his impossible perfection in the face of his predicament had sparked the idea. The bog. He used it as a threat all the time. In fact, some of the goblins regularly wet themselves when the place was even mentioned. It was a fitting punishment.

And Jareth's face had been priceless.
It was worth whatever fate threw at her.

The Goblin King was not amused.

He had been walking around in circles for at least an hour and time was growing short. That minx had robbed him of his fair due and he found he had no taste for humble pie.

But he was also the casualty of an inner war. Part of him was livid – angry that Sarah failed to see what was really at stake – while the other part cast doubt. He desired her and if he was at all capable of love, he certainly loved her. He wasn't foolish enough to try and pretend otherwise. He had been cruel to her, but that was in his nature, and certainly the girl herself had demonstrated a similar predilection to hurt. What more did she want? The small voice he was having trouble suppressing, posited an answer. Perhaps he had missed the mark entirely. Perhaps after years of watching Sarah Williams, he still didn't know her.

When she had produced the crystal using his power, he'd been envious to the point of bitterness. Never before had he felt so helpless and he'd hated her for it. That bitterness strengthened his resolve. She would have to learn to bend before he broke her.

Turning the same corner for the third time, Jareth was relieved to finally see a new sight. An old man was seated in a stone chair, softly snoring. An ostrich-like bird protruded from the top of his head like a hat. It was the hat that noticed him first.

"Woo, woo, woo! And what do we have here?" The bird's beady eyes took in Jareth's appearance. "I had no idea the kingdom had fallen on such hard times!" The bird's subsequent laughter woke the old man beneath him.

"Humph…what? What's going on?"

"The King has come for a visit. The invite said casual attire!" the bird replied between shrill guffaws.

Jareth's hands curled at his sides. He was unused to being mocked. He found he especially hated being mocked about his appearance. And he found he absolutely despised being mocked by a glorified hat.

"Eh? Ah… that's not the King, you twit. That's just a poor beggar. Now be quiet!" The old man lapsed back into slumber with a glare.

Jareth and the bird eyed one another.

"It's not very stimulating being his hat," sighed the bird.

"It wouldn't be stimulating being dinner either."

The old man stirred awake again and sniffed the air with his bulbous nose. "Do you smell something?"

Both the bird and man looked at one another and then stared pointedly at Jareth.

Jareth's face suffused with anger. "I do not smell."

"No, of course not," agreed the bird, who knew well with whom he dealt. "But I suppose you'll want
to be on your way soon?" he finished hopefully.

The old man frowned at his hat. "We can't deny help to one so down on his luck. What is it you seek?"

"A bath?" interjected the bird with a snort.

The old man scowled at his hat again before turning back to Jareth. "Speak quickly, young beggar."

"I am no more a beggar than you are a Wiseman," Jareth spat. All traces of equanimity were lost.

"Told you," crowed the bird. "He just looks like a bum."

Jareth added the feathered hat to his list.

"BE QUIET!" ordered the old man in exasperation. He'd either missed or ignored the barb in the Goblin King's words.

Jareth stepped forward, his hand wrapping around the old man's throat. He flexed his fingers and spoke in clipped tones. "I need to reach my castle and I suggest you tell me or I will show you that there is more than one way to skin a bird."

The two looked at one another again. "And then you'll leave?" they whispered in unison.

"I'd like nothing better."

"Your path lies before you," the old man pointed. The hat attempted to follow suit but lacked the necessary appendages.

Jareth started off in the indicated direction, but turned back when he heard the man shake something noisily.

"Please leave a contribution in the little box," added the bird helpfully.

Jareth's lips curled, "Consider my contribution the continuation of your lives," and then ripped the box from the old man's hand.

The bird and man stared incredulously at his retreating back.

"Can you believe that crap?" asked the bird.

"Can you believe that smell?" asked the old man, before drifting off to sleep again.

Jareth's mood matched his odour. He had stolen the old man's coin box purely out of spite. He'd take whatever petty satisfaction he could get at this point. About to toss it over a wall, he noticed the rattling sound coming from within. Tipping the box over, a small gold ring dropped into his hand. The sheen of the band had dulled with age, but the stone shone like blood in the sunlight.

He looked more closely at the band.

-To Sarah-
Jareth closed his fist around the delicate object. How fitting.

He slid it over the end of a gloved finger and then continued on his way.

Sarah left the throne room in vexation. The goblins were more unruly than an English football team and she couldn’t fathom how the ever-fastidious Jareth dealt with them. Although she imagined he wasn’t quite as polished right now. The thought made her laugh again.

She decided that she should probably explore the castle while she was its unwilling occupant. She ignored the insidious voice that suggested she could have all the time in the world when this was over. Perhaps she would stumble across something helpful.

As she wove her way through the rooms, she realized that the castle was as confusing as the Labyrinth itself. She might have left a trail of breadcrumbs, but she didn't need a brood of chickens following. She needn’t worry about the goblins unless she left a trail of beer. Their thirst was astounding.

All the doors seemed to be of different sizes, colours and shapes and many of them were firmly locked. Even the corridors themselves seemed to fluctuate in size. Some were so oddly angled and asymmetrical that Sarah had to suppress a queasy feeling of vertigo. Though many of rooms had fallen into disrepair and disuse, they all spoke of neglected elegance. It was a stark contrast to the castle’s eccentric inhabitants.

The feeling of connection was unexpected. She could actually sense the castle and the Labyrinth beyond, as though they were alive. Not sentient, no, but ever fluctuating and fluid. It resonated within her like a tethered cord. She rubbed her wrist absently. Some of the rooms were evidently traps, no doubt meant for hapless runners that made it as far as the castle. There were false exists, hidden walls, and mirrors – all of them portals to places much more formidable. They spoke of dark magic in words Sarah could see but not understand. They felt… wrong and Sarah shivered as she passed carefully.

The underground was such a study in contrasts. It was beautiful beyond belief and filled with such vibrant and often comical life, that she often forgot how deadly it could be. Or how fortunate she had been. Sarah could think of no better match for its king.

Pushing open a set of massive and ornately carved doors, she stepped into a vast chamber. The sconces flared to life and a fire sparked in the grand fireplace. It was a portrait gallery. Frames of every size and shape lined the walls. The colours ranged from garish to more sombre hues that seemed to disappear into the very walls. Most noteworthy, was that the majority of the portraits bore a striking similarity - the men in them were all uncommonly beautiful in an ethereal way and they all resembled varied versions of Jareth. Turning in a slow circle, she drew in a sharp breath. Life-like effigies of goblin kings surrounded her. The firelight flickered strangely over their painted eyes, which seemed to shadow her every step.

Many of the portraits depicted the imperious goblin lord with a young woman. Almost all of them were unusually lovely, dark haired and human. Sarah could have been looking at relatives.

One painting matched the one above the fireplace in the bedroom, its gilt frame was well-aged and a Celtic dog motif bordered the image within. Sarah leaned forward to read the plaque but frowned when she could not read the language. Almost immediately the unfamiliar words unwove themselves
and reformed into English.

Haden, King of the Underground and his mortal bride, Korin.

Sarah shrank back in shock. She studied the male figure in the painting. Take away the beard and change the hair, and you had the same aquiline features. Her mind raced. The Greeks must have simply altered the true story and absorbed it into their religion and culture. The implications rocked Sarah to the core. It had been her favourite myth – a story, nothing more. Just a story… just a harmless little red book.

The girl in the portrait was smiling, a pomegranate clutched in a pale hand. She looked… happy. Wiser women indeed. Sarah wondered how much artistic license had been taken in the rendering.

The next portrait showed a similar pair. The girl wore only a simple sheath dress, while her dark hair reached well past her waist. Her exposed skin was tanned a rich brown. A leafy crown artfully adorned her brow. They stood in what looked to be a lush garden, with a large tree prominent in the background. The girl held a ripe apple. Sara's eyes flicked to the serpentine border before scanning the plaque, her hand covering her mouth nervously.

Serpin, King of the Underground and his mortal bride, Eden.

Another story based on a sickening truth, another belief system poisoned. The foundations were collapsing beneath her. It was a violation to think they had pierced her very world to such a depth. She had never taken the bible literally, but she found herself duly rattled. What else had they influenced? Sedorbed? What else had they spoiled with their rotten fruit? It pained her to realize she had unwittingly made them her life's focus. And Jareth had known. She felt a fool. A naïve little fool.

She wandered around the rest of the room morosely. There were so many of them. So many girls. All smiling or wide-eyed in innocence. Each one held a piece of fruit and each goblin lord grinned in arrogant pleasure. It felt like a mortal tomb. It was defeating. It was…

The hair on the back of her neck shot to attention. From the last painting on the long wall, her own image stared back at her. She and Jareth were in the white ballroom. Her gauzy dress had been painted with such startling realism that Sarah nervously touched the canvas half-expecting to feel silk. Her image clutched a peach in her left hand, while Jareth held her waist possessively – fingers splayed. A Celtic owl motif decorated the periphery of the frame.

Jareth, King of the Underground and his mortal bride, Sarah.

Part of her railed at the image in outrage. Jareth looked sickeningly smug while she looked enthralled. She hadn't looked like that… had she? Another part whispered, saccharine words twisting, that they made a striking pair. It suggested the inevitable, as though it were already written. From the canvas, Jareth's mismatched eyes glittered in the firelight.

Sarah's reaction was purely visceral. She wrenched the canvas from the wall, faltering under its weight. Breath hitching, she dragged it to the fireplace and shoved it within. She watched, emotions roiling, as the flames consumed them both.

The eyes of the other portraits followed her exit. Sarah had the disquieting impression they were laughing at her rather feckless act.
Part XXI

Last thing I remember,
I was running for the door.
I had to find the passage back
to the place I was before.
"Relax," said the night man,
we are programmed to receive.
You can checkout any time you like,
but you can never leave!

Hotel California, Eagles

Jareth rested against a weathered wall and contemplated the twisted spires in the distance.

"And how you are enjoying my castle, Sarah," he asked softly. A devilish smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. He wondered if she had stumbled upon the portrait gallery yet.

As though in answer, a terrible roar of pain from somewhere near pierced the day's calm. Unconcerned, he peered around the crumbling sandstone and spied a bevy of impish goblin knights tormenting a hapless beast entangled in a rope. The hairy brute paused in its wild thrashing long enough to stare beseechingly at the Goblin King.

Jareth's smile deepened. It was comforting to know he was not the only one suffering.

Without a second glance he continued on his way feeling suddenly rejuvenated.

Sarah sank against the doors of the portrait gallery and allowed her erratic breathing to slow. She was maddened beyond belief – both with him and herself.

How long had he been planning on wedding her?

And how long had she secretly fantasized about just that?

"I'm a fool and he's a bastard," she whispered bitterly.

The walls around her seemed to snicker in agreement.

"Oh shut up!" she muttered, before stalking off down the hall.

Passing goblins carefully avoided her, darting sidelong glances at one another and later remarking on
the similarities between the girl and their King. Living with two of them was going to be hell. Even the chickens were subdued by the thought.

Sarah was oblivious to it all. Lost in self-reproach, she rounded corners blindly until she found herself once again in the tower that housed the master suite. She looked with disgust at the exterior of the great carved doors. A man and woman stood side-by-side, crowns atop their heads. Their hands were designed to join at the handles. She loathed the sight.

Dreams were such dangerous things. Sometimes they came true.

She rubbed her arms to smooth the goose bumps that had arisen with the thought and drifted down the empty corridor. Had Jareth felt as restless waiting for her thirteen hours to be up? Had he paced? Would his arrogance even permit a pang of worry?

It was strangely comforting to believe that he had suffered too.

Sarah stilled as she drew upon another set of carved doors – the only other ones in the long winding hallway. Though she hadn't noticed it hours earlier, there was something unnerving about the room. The mark on her palm tingled in recognition. The goose bumps returned with full force and the hairs on the back of her neck echoed the sentiment. The ornate relief depicted a menagerie of labyrinthine figures at play, both familiar and not. Her fingers lightly traced a cavorting Fiery, his grinning head balanced in one paw. As her hand brushed the wood, the door opened an inch.

Sarah could see the sconces flare to life in invitation through the crack. Unable to resist, she parted the heavy doors and cautiously stepped inside. What she saw within made her throat go dry.

It was a nursery.

Her hands crept to her neck as she slowly turned. Almost everything about the chamber was antiquated. The furniture looked well-used, some carved from wood, others stone. The heavy drapes were tightly drawn, but the fireplace, which seemed to share the same enthusiasm as the sconces, was blazing warmly and lent everything an ethereal glow.

A child-sized bed rested against one wall, hewn from what appeared to be a living tree cast in burnished gold. Its branches were interwoven around the bedding like the most intricate knot work. The linens were threadbare, but had once been rich and very fine. Near the bed was a gilt crib, its circular design mirroring Jareth's throne. Again, it looked like it hadn't been disturbed in years. A bookcase lined one wall, matching the one in the master suite. The titles reformed themselves into English as Sarah passed. She wondered if they were fantasy stories or family histories.

The room's style reminded Sarah a little of a Victorian nursery. A rocking horse in the guise of a dragon stood in one corner. It began rocking slowly as she approached and she half-feared to see a child appear atop its back. The wall hangings around the room were decorated with stylized animal forms and vaguely familiar Celtic designs. They echoed the borders in the portrait gallery and she reflexively turned her eyes away.

The entire room had the forlorn air of neglect, but she noted with a strange sense of unease that parts of it had been recently cleaned and polished. The implication was clear. Sarah was disgusted by the presumption, but she was unable to shake the feeling that she was invading something personal, something sacrosanct. There was an unsettling vulnerability to the room.

A pair of lushly-cushioned chairs and a small table was set near the draped windows. A wooden model of the Labyrinth and its castle sat atop the table's centre. Like the rug, the walls changed at random. Small figurines completed the set. She gently picked up one that bore a striking resemblance
to Sir Didymus. He looked fearless atop his cowardly steed. She wasn't prepared for the wave of guilt that followed. A hot tear slid down her cheek. She carefully placed him back at his post, guarding the passage over the bog.

Rubbing her sleeve across her damp eyes, Sarah opened the castle and peered inside. Tiny goblins were carved in various stages of mischief, but her eyes were immediately drawn to figure in white. It was a miniature version of herself and she marveled at the uncanny likeness. The Goblin King was no less perfect. Every feature was wrought in minute detail from his wild hair to the eyes that glinted mockingly. She noted that the hands of the two figures were carved so as to join. Impulsively, she clicked them together. They fit together perfectly. Disgusted, she tried to separate them again to no avail. She carelessly dropped the pair back inside and shut the castle, praying it was not a portent.

Sarah immediately moved to the fireplace to warm her chilled form. Glancing down, something glinted at her from the seat of one of the worn arm chairs before the hearth. It was an exquisite crystal rattle, strangely warm to the touch. When she shook it gently, the most beautiful sound issued forth. It was almost like music and like nothing she had ever heard before. Without warning, the figure of a young woman appeared before her, an infant in her arms. She was cooing the babe to sleep with a soft lilting voice. Sarah dropped the rattle in fear. When it hit the hearth, the babe blinked sleepily. One blue, one brown. Sarah shook her head. It couldn't be him even as she rationalized that it was. The sight of Jareth so young and innocent was more disturbing than anything she had yet encountered. As if in response, the woman turned her head and smiled warmly. Sarah stumbled backwards in shock, knocking the small table over. The pair faded from view.

Sarah stared wildly around the empty room and then fled, crushing the crystal rattle underfoot.

Jareth pressed on until the creature's howls of rage faded. He had no idea how much time had passed but he certainly knew that thanks to his wayward bride, he had precious little to spare. Rounding what he suspected was the same corner yet again, he found himself before a pair of doors adorned with gargoyle-like knockers.

"It's very rude to stare," admonished the knocker on the left, a ring through his ears.

Jareth's lips curled mirthlessly. "It's very unwise to address your king in such a manner."

The knocker on the right opened his eyes in astonishment, but a ring impeded his speech.

"Eh? What's that?" asked the left loudly. His brass nostrils flared. "Do you smell something?"

Jareth canted his head. "I have a half a mind to have you melted down into brass buttons."

"No good. Can't hear you," replied the knocker obliviously. "But I can certainly smell you."

"Forget buttons, a chamber pot."

The right knocker followed Jareth with wary eyes as he approached.

"And you, his mute partner, anything pithy to say?"

The knocker's response was unintelligible, but his eyes beseeched.

Jareth imagined having a similar ring fit for Sarah. The thought made him smile.
"Mumble, mumble. He's said the same thing for years," offered the left rudely.

Patience exhausted, Jareth coolly pulled the ring free from the mute knocker's mouth and jammed it into the deaf knocker's mouth. The left's eyes widened in silent outrage as his two rings clanked together.

"Now that's much better, isn't it?" Jareth asked jovially.

"Mthmdhfgtb!"

"No good. Can't hear you," mimicked the Goblin King.

The other knocker flexed his stiff lips in relief. "Oh thank you, Sire!"

"Mm, I imagine the ring is far from comfortable."

"I meant for shutting him up, Sire. I've had to listen to his off-tone singing for years!"

"No doubt," Jareth replied indifferently. "Now where do these doors lead?"

"Search…" he trailed off at the look on the Goblin King's face, "Ahem… We don't actually know. You must choose a door and knock," he finished, cringing at the thought of his ring being returned.

"Of course you don't," breathed Jareth in exasperation. He contemplated the two portals. "I suppose I've already made my choice, haven't I?" Without another word, he gripped both rings of the left knocker and rapped soundly. The door swung open.

"Ughhshfluagawt!"

The door clicked shut behind the Goblin King.

"Serves you right," replied his liberated companion unsympathetically.

Sarah would give almost anything to switch places with Jareth right now. The Labyrinth in all its wild and mercurial nature was far preferable to the castle, full of omens and portents. Choice had once seemed a burden to Sarah, now its lack seemed a yoke. The sense of inevitable was hard to deny. She wanted to rush into the master suite and hide beneath the covers. Old habits die hard. She wanted to wake up.

She froze when she entered the bedroom however, her eyes on the fireplace. The portrait she had so recently burned presided over the mantle, mocking her with its pristine glory. All thoughts of hiding evaporated in an instant.

"I hate this place! I hate YOU!" she wailed.

The very walls seemed to snicker at her impotence.

Sarah grabbed for the frame, but found it just out of reach. In a fit of childish frustration she snatched up the crystal decanter and hurled it at the portrait, delighting as it smashed in a spray of dark liquid. Several shards of glass were embedded in the canvas, marring the face of the imperious king. Red dripped from the frame.

Sarah flashed to a dark haired woman singing to an infant. The Goblin King had a little human in him somewhere. The smile on the woman's face had been peaceful, content to rock her child. But she had been a stolen bride too – a fellow victim. And now Sarah was the enemy of her son. The idea rattled.
Lines had been drawn but none of them were straight.

She needed to clear her head. Out of habit she walked to the bookshelves. The titles reworked themselves into English as she ran her fingers across them. She paused on a familiar red book with gold lettering.

The Labyrinth

"It can't be," she breathed softly. But it was. The same tome she had memorized so many years before, the one that had started everything. Sarah snatched the book from the shelf and flipped it open.

The History of Jareth and Sarah

She began flipping pages wildly. Where her copy had ended at the climatic confrontation, this copy continued. Her heart thumped madly with each leaf turned.

… "ancient Eire"… "Hill of Tara"… "chase"… "kiss"… "binding ceremony"… "run the Labyrinth"… "bog"… "portrait gallery"… "knockers"… "nursery"… "ruined painting"…

The next page was blank. Sarah flipped through the rest but they were the same. As horrifying as it was, it was strangely heartening. The lack of ending meant anything could still be written. "You haven't won yet, Jareth," she promised with renewed conviction.

Scanning the other titles, she began pulling books from the shelves at random. Many were simply geographies and histories of the inhabitants of the Labyrinth. Others were something else entirely - more tales of stolen brides and Goblin Kings. She flipped through them with a building sense of urgency. It was clear that many of the brides had given their prospective husbands almost as much trouble and strife as she had. One had even tried setting her husband on fire. Sarah had at least restricted herself to his portrait.

While most mentioned the birth of the heir, she could fine none with the name Jareth. Most importantly, not one of them mentioned escape. Flinging the books aside in frustration, she collapsed into a chair, grimacing when she felt something dig into her thigh. She pulled an open book from beneath her.

The Water Horse

The History of Riven and Etain

Leafing through the book, her eyes lit on a passage near the end of the story.

"…and the much awaited heir to the Goblin Kingdom was born. His mother named him Jareth…"

Sarah flipped back to the beginning with wide eyes and began reading.

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Chapter End Notes
Etain (e - tane) is an old Irish name based on a famous Celtic legend.

Noteworthy - Another old Irish name is Jarlath – pretty close eh? Jarlath was a saint known for his piety, so the resemblance pretty much stops there ;)

Jareth stepped through the door, his eyes narrowing as he took stock of his new surroundings. Sandstone walls no longer stretched for miles on end. Instead, statues in various states of disrepair flanked an arched stone corridor. Their marble looked worn and several broken appendages dotted the path ahead. Beyond the lifeless figures, Jareth spied what appeared to be a spacious room with a high domed ceiling. He was either very fortunate in his choice or hopelessly lost. Vacant eyes awaited his next move.

Suppressing a sudden feeling of unease, the Goblin King stepped into the corridor. As he slowly passed between the figures, he began to feel the fatigue he had been stemming off hit him full force. Each step was a leaden weight threatening to anchor his foot to the floor. Was it his imagination or were the statues brushing against him ever so softly? His eyelids felt heavy and he found his breathing had slowed with exhaustion. His skin prickled with phantom sensation.

"Who's there?" he demanded, speaking loudly to jolt himself awake.

We've been hungry for so long… whispered hollow voices.

Just a little more…

… you have so much.

The Goblin King closed his eyes.

sleep…

It would be so easy just to sleep. He would dream of Sarah…

"Sarah!" His eyes shot open.

With a final burst of strength, he stumbled into the light. Turning back to the statues, he found almost perfect forms standing tall where once there had been mere decay and rot.

Our thanks…

… Goblin King.

Jareth could not help shivering as he rubbed feeling back into his numbed limbs. Had he not been Fey, he would likely be dead. Not much gave Jareth cause to question his own end; he found it ironic that it was his own Labyrinth.
His kind lived for so long and with so little risk, he found the idea of death alien. He had feared for mortal lives before, well one anyway, but never had he worried about his own life being cut short.

And he was without an heir.

The realization rankled. There were precious few Fey of his power left. So many had already chosen the long sleep, to return to the quiet earth from whence they came. Those who remained were so scattered across the realms that he rarely had much interaction with them. Even the changelings were dwindling. His own father and mother had left him an already dying kingdom before departing. So few mortals still believed… the magic was slowly ebbing.

The world above had changed. He hoped to change it back.

Although Sarah could not have known, this was more than a test of himself; it was a test of all of their futures.

The Goblin King was shaken from his morose reverie by the clamour of jovial voices and effusive applause. Looking around in surprise, Jareth found himself standing on the topmost edge of a stone amphitheatre. At the bottom centre, two masked harlequins were vigorously clapping. Both were tall and thin and were identically garbed in leotards of black and white diamonds. One sat in the audience, while the other stood poised on the stage. Both regarded Jareth with rapt interest.

"Bravo!"

"Huzzah!"

"Well done!"

"Masterful!"

"It's been ever so long since anyone has made it this far!"

"What a performance!"

The Goblin King raised a brow is surprise, but offered no other acknowledgement.

"No, no, no. That's not how it's done at all!" cried the harlequin on the stage, shaking his head emphatically.

"You must bow!" explained the harlequin in the audience.

"It's how all the greats do it," added the first helpfully.

Jareth remained as still as glass.

"You'll never go far with that attitude," sighed the second.

"I hardly need go far. I am already the King," Jareth snorted disdainfully.

The two looked at one another. "No, no, no. We are not playing Kings today," interrupted the first.

"Come down. We shall help you," welcomed the second.

Jareth found their masked faces disconcerting, he could discern no expression or emotion behind the
porcelain, but he no other choice. The stairs led only downwards and he would not hazard a second trip through the statues. He descended to the platform below with forced stoicism and a doomed sense of impending martyrdom. Nearing the bottom, he realized the wall of the semicircular stage was covered in a variety of masks, as was a small door in its centre. It was the only exit.

Catching the direction of his gaze, the first harlequin stepped forward. "You can't leave until you've performed."

"It's in the rules," called the second from the audience.

"Whose rules?" demanded the king, suspecting the answer.

"Yours," they replied in unison.

It was yet again a galling reminder that Sarah had managed to make himself his own worst enemy. He'd congratulate her after he strangled her.

"What must I do?" The words sounded bitter.

"We'll show you!" they sang, clapping their hands in delight. Neither seemed daunted by his lack of enthusiasm.

"Change places!" cried the first.

"Change faces!" cried the second.

Both harlequins rushed to the wall and grabbed a mask at random. Pulling the ones from their heads, Jareth saw that they lacked any facial definition at all. If he had found their masks disconcerting, he certainly found their smooth featureless faces more so. Placing the discarded masks back on the wall, they quickly donned the new ones – the expressions subtly different. The first harlequin whisked Jareth off the stage and seated him in the audience before he could voice a protest.

"What do y…"

"Shh," admonished the harlequin, his voice now subtly altered as well.

The second harlequin took his new place at centre stage and cleared his throat before beginning.

"Let us make our claim recorded
Against the powers of earth and sky,
And that cold boon their laws award us-
Just once to live and once to die.
Thou sayest that fate is frosty nothing,
But love the flame of soul that are:
Two spirits approach, and at their touching,
Behold! An everlasting star!"

The harlequin beside him began to clap profusely. "Oh, bravo, bravo!"

The two stared expectantly at the Goblin King.

He clapped his hands together slowly.

The performer bowed with great exaggeration. "You see? This is how it's done!"

Jareth ignored him. "Why don't you act together? Wouldn't it be more entertaining?"
The two merely laughed. "There must always be an audience! Speaking of which…"

"Change places!" cried the first.

"Change faces!" cried the second.

Again, the Goblin King was unceremoniously bustled onto the stage. After changing masks again, this time the two harlequins sat side by side in the audience.

Jareth merely blinked.

"This is where you speak," prompted the first.

"And we listen," added the second helpfully.

Frowning, Jareth began to recite some old Goblin lore in a toneless voice.

"No, no, no!" interrupted one.

"Not right at all!" agreed the other.

"If you want to perform, you must choose a mask. The masks will show you what to do," they explained in unison.

"If you wish to leave, choose one from the door," suggested one.

"Or choose one from the wall if you wish to stay. We always need more performers," offered the other. His voice was low and soothing; its cadence coaxing.

Jareth grimaced at the thought of performing endlessly with the faceless duo. Turning, he examined the masks on the door. They were all simple, all faded and all similar in expression. One, with a particularly long crack down its centre, caught his eye. He picked it up gingerly.

"Beware," they cautioned in unison. "Some show you what you want to see, some what you need."

Jareth laughed derisively. "And why would that be a bad thing?"

He received no response; the two merely sat back and awaited his performance expectantly.

Smile fading, he fitted the mask to his face.

-----------------------------------------------

Colours danced before his eyes and the ground beneath him seemed to shift violently. As his vision cleared, Jareth found himself in the castle. In his Relativity room.

And he was not alone.

He stared in shock at a mirror image of himself, dressed as he had been nine years ago. He'd not worn it since. Never again. Jareth raised his hand to his mouth but no leather touched his lips. His eyes widened at the delicate skin of the small hand, peeking out from within a linen shirt. He ran the hand through long dark hair.

He raised his eyes to meet his own and then he knew.
He was Sarah.

Before he could make sense of anything, the other Goblin King spoke.

"I have turned the world upside-down, and I have done it all for you! I am exhausted from living up to your expectations of me. Isn't that generous?"

He remembered saying those lines. He remembered the anger, the frustration and the longing he'd felt. Jareth opened his mouth, intent on explaining his predicament to his former self, but without warning, he was barraged with alien emotions. Determination, exhaustion, fear...

"Through dangers untold and hardships unnumbered," he said smoothly. It was her voice that sang from his lips. He was unable to halt the flow of words.

Jareth's mind raced, trying to stop the events he knew were unfolding once again. The words danced from his mouth all the same. "I have fought my way here to the castle beyond the Goblin City."

Memories washed over him... the oubliette, the bog, goblins, dancing, dancing, dancing... she had wanted him to kiss her..."For my will is as strong as yours. And my..."

The other Goblin King held up a hand in warning. "Stop!"

He could remember how scared he'd been and how hard he'd fought to keep his confidence. Why couldn't she see what he'd felt? Why couldn't she see what he was truly offering? And yet...through her eyes he could see only smoke and mirrors. False promises.

"Wait. Look, Sarah. Look what I'm offering you... your dreams."

Jareth glanced into the offered bauble. He tried to raise his... her hand to take it. Perhaps he could change everything. Nothing happened. His lips parted again. "And kingdom as great."

Jareth felt her need to save the child... save Toby! She must save Toby... He must save Toby! Jareth was having trouble differentiating between their warring emotions. He could remember the desperation and desire he'd felt; the anger at her resolve. But he was awash with her feelings too. She loved her brother. She had to sacrifice her dreams... He could feel her longing and it filled him with satisfaction. She had been tempted. She had felt something...

His head pounded under the pressure. The mix of emotions and memories were tearing him apart and Jareth prayed for respite.

"Just let me rule you... and you can have everything that you want."

From this new perspective, Jareth found himself wincing at his own words. Had he really thought that tact would work? No wonder he'd lost. He played it all wrong. He hadn't appreciated the sacrifices she would gladly make for her loved ones. He saw a spoiled child. He hadn't understood...

Jareth felt the hesitation of the girl as she searched for the forgotten lines. He felt her desperation and fear... fear that she'd lose everything. Fear that she'd give in. Jareth trembled under the force of her... his emotions, hating himself for being drawn into pitying the girl.

"Just fear me, love me, do as I say and I will be your slave."

Jareth could feel his heart beating, he could feel her heart beating and he swore he could feel the heart in his other self matching the tempo. It was a strange and terrible sensation.
"My Kingdom as great…" Jareth struggled to stop the inevitable. "My Kingdom as great…"

He was going to say it; he could feel her mouth opening. Feel the words begin to form on her tongue. He dreaded it for his own sake and yet reveled in it for hers. She had no choice…

With that final thought, he felt the world shift and he shut his eyes against the sensation. When he opened them again, he was staring at Sarah. He was alone with his thoughts. He was himself again. He flexed his gloved hands in confirmation.

And then her eyes flashed with steely resolve. "You have no…"

Jareth did the only thing he could think of. He dropped the crystal and enfolded Sarah in his arms, crushing his lips to hers.

At first she froze in shock, but then she struggled to free herself.

"Do not do this again, Sarah," he whispered against her temple, unable to stop himself. "I don't want the baby. He is free if you wish. You are what matters…"

Sarah moved her head to stare up at him, green eyes wide with confusion. And then, hesitantly, she softly kissed him back as the clock chimed thirteen. Jareth smiled against her mouth, tightening his embrace. He'd won. And more importantly he had her without artifice – she was willing. Toby was safe in bed and Sarah was where she belonged. Her tentative kiss was intoxicating – this was what he'd always wanted. This was how he'd always played it out years later. While her defiance had fuelled his desire, her surrender was far sweeter. He could stay like this forever. It was better than any trap. It was true. It was…

All wrong.

Jareth pulled back from the embrace and stared at the girl - a Sarah that had already been and couldn't be again. His Sarah was supposed to be somewhere else. She was the Sarah he'd waited for, the woman who had fought him tooth and nail, driving him mad.

And then the girl smiled at him with youthful inexperience, just as he'd always imagined she would have had she chosen differently.

And… he didn't care.

As he leaned in, the garnet ring on his finger flashed at him in the light.

It wasn't real.

Jareth tore at his face and everything went black.

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

He was alone on the amphitheatre stage. Through the haze, he caught the sound of clapping.

"Oh that was a good one!"

"I love romances…"

"…especially doomed ones."
Jareth flung the offending mask aside, the force of the throw deepening the crack. He hated being played for a fool, especially by himself. To think he had pitied the girl. To think he had laid himself bare. It was weakness. He tried to clear his thoughts, but the conflicting emotions continued to writhe like serpents below the surface of his skin.

The door behind him clicked open. He was halfway through when the harlequins halted him.

"You will have to remove your mask eventually," said one.

"I just did," he replied gruffly. He gestured at the damaged one on the ground.

"It's the only way you'll win the girl," finished the second.

Jareth paused for a brief moment, before allowing the door to close behind him.

Chapter End Notes

The piece the harlequin performs is an excerpt from "Fand", a poem by 19th century Irish poet, William Larminie.

The harlequins were an ode to the Mad Hatter and March Hare from Alice in Wonderland. In case anyone is unfamiliar with the term harlequin, it's a masked performer (usually found in pantomime). Their traditional dress is alternating white and black squares.
Of Plums and Peaches

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part XXIII

Fair woman, will you go with me far
to the land of wonders, under the star?
Hair grows yellow as primrose flower
All skin is like a white snow shower.

Woman, if among our fine race you would live,
a crown of gold to grace your head I'll give;
Fresh pork, ale, milk, and mead you'll take,
and me as well, Fair Woman, for your sake.

Midir's invitation to Etain, Anon. Irish poet
Trans. Caitlin Matthews

Etain drifted listlessly along the shoreline, pausing every so often to toss a smooth pebble into the sea. The wind violently whipped her sable hair against her face, though she barely felt the sting. Her thoughts were far away on a much anticipated wedding feast. Much anticipated by everyone save her. It was the sole reason she'd been spared her daily duties. Her mother believed she was collecting reeds to fashion a St. Brigid's cross for her new home. She'd also suggested the sea air would bring colour to the pale girl's cheek. 'A young bride should have the bloom of a rose,' her mother had said, not without a touch of censure. Etain felt a bride should also be allowed to marry someone who didn't have roving hands and suffer from gout, but she'd wisely held her tongue. She would marry the town's wealthy merchant because it was her duty. Her family depended on her to make a good match and that need was far more important than the folly of girlhood dreams. But she wouldn't smile about it and she'd never cared for roses.

Etain closed her eyes and hurled a particularly large stone with all the force she could muster, imagining it to be her future husband. "I wish there was another way," she whispered, her soft words carried away by the wind. Instead of the expected splash, Etain heard the distinctive whinny of a horse. Her dark eyes shot open to behold the most beautiful black stallion she had ever seen. Framed by the salty spray and steely sky, it looked almost unworldly with its glossy midnight coat and astonishingly pale blue eyes. Etain had never had much experience with horses, but she knew a quality animal when she saw one. It was strange that it had no rider or bit.

Ignoring the icy sting of the sea, she approached the beast slowly with one hand outstretched. "Hello there," she cooed soothingly. "I am terribly sorry I hit you."

The horse snorted, clearly unconvincing.

Etain dropped her hand and laughed nervously. "Aren't you a rare beauty, then?"

Bobbing its head, the horse flicked its long tail impressively.
Encouraged, Etain moved forward again. "You must be one of the few wild ones left on the isle," she breathed in wonder.

Etain was surprised how close the untamed steed was letting her come. With a gentle hand, she stroked the horse's flank. It whinnied so deeply, she almost thought it purred. She noted how human the beast's eyes appeared. His pale blue irises tracked her every move with interest. She had the sudden urge to climb atop its back though she had never ridden before. The horse bent invitingly, as if reading her desire. She slowly raised her sodden skirts, preparing to lift a leg.

"Etain…"

The moment was shattered. Etain turned to see her mother ambling over the hill. When she looked back the horse was gone.

Sarah skimmed through the next few pages, chewing her lip in thought.

Etain finally managed to slip out of the house after seemingly endless hours of sewing and embroidery; her mother was determined to outfit her with a respectable trousseau. With no direction in mind, she was surprised to find herself once again nearing the shore. Brightening, she half hoped she'd stumble across the wild stallion again. As she navigated the steep hill, she was disappointed to see not a horse, but a man wading through the shallow water. Etain wondered at the unusual sight, however. All the men she knew would be working the fields at this hour. Intent on wisely leaving the stranger to himself, Etain was dismayed when her legs disagreed and carried her down towards the sea.

The man turned and waited, as though expecting her approach. He was garbed from head to toe in black and Etain guessed, even from a distance, that the material was very costly. His hair was so fair it looked white in the sunlight. It fell past his shoulders, but was held back from his face by a black cord. His form was tall and lithe, unlike the strong-armed men of her village, and certainly unlike the excess of her betrothed's corpulence. He suggested a more latent strength that she found strangely pleasing. Etain only absently noted his handsome features, her attention drawn to the intensity of his vivid blue eyes. They reminded her of the sea.

The stranger noted her thinly veiled interest and grinned. Sunlight glinted off his sharp teeth. "Am I to your liking, Cariad?" he laughed. It sounded like crystal striking glass.

Etain blushed profusely and turned to leave in embarrassment, but the stranger held up a staying hand.

"Oh, you can't leave yet. It's only fair that I return the favour." His eyes glittered wickedly.

Etain's blush deepened under his appreciative gaze. Never before had a man shown such frank interest in her, aside from the unwanted leers of her intended and those made her skin crawl.

"Worth the look, lass. Worth the look," he said with a half smile.

Unused to such forward behaviour, she found she didn't know how to react. She nervously tightened
her wool shawl around herself. "I'm betrothed," she said defiantly, hoping he didn't mark her quavering voice.

"Happily?" the stranger asked, a thin brow arched mockingly. His expression suggested he already knew the answer.

Etain sputtered indignantly, "That's none of your bloody business!" She couldn't help herself. Her father had always chided her for her fiery temper. Judging by his clothes and apparent idleness, she may well have just offended a lord's son or the lord himself even. It was difficult to place his age and even more difficult to place his accent.

The man sensed her unease and grinned. "No matter, Cariad. I like your fire."

Etain stared at him as though he'd sprouted wings.

He began to sing softly.

"Rose o' the world, the grief you give
Is worth all days that a man may live:
Is worth all the prayers that the colleens say
On the night that darkens the wedding-day."

Throughout his song he watched her with an indefinable expression in his glittering eyes. Etain wondered if it was possible to drown in them. She shook the silly thought aside and tried to re-establish some order and propriety. His words had muddled her.

"I am a good Christian girl, and I will be a dutiful… wife." She couldn't help a small grimace when she spoke the last word.

"Promise?" His eyes danced mischievously.

Etain frowned in confusion and said nothing.

"I think you'll be nothing of the kind."

Etain opened her mouth to protest.

"But you'll be worth it anyway, Precious," he finished enigmatically.

Etain found his cryptic words disturbing and the look in his eyes far too personal. Without another word, she turned heel and stalked off towards her home.

"I shall see you again soon, Etain," he called.

When she looked back he was gone. She shuddered in the warm breeze. She hadn't told him her name, had she?

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------

"Like father, like son," whispered Sarah, with a glance at the ruined portrait. She promptly laughed at her absurd remark. Like father, like father, like father… how many years back did it all really go? It was in their very nature. She wholeheartedly pitied Etain, though she could well imagine the attraction. She had felt the same spark. At least Etain and Riven had not begun as enemies…
On the market day before her wedding, Etain and her family journeyed to town for last minute supplies and so Etain could go to Holy Confession. Afterwards, her and her sister, Grainne, wandered the stalls to pass the time. Grainne kept up a constant chatter about wedding preparations. Etain scowled throughout.

Her mind slipped back to the last visit from her betrothed. When her mother had slyly left them alone, the merchant had wasted no time in accosting her. Etain could still taste the sourness of his breath and remember the feel of his hand as he'd tried to snake it down her bodice. She's been torn between her desire to scratch his eyes out and her fear that any remonstration would damage her family's already dwindling prospects. They needed this marriage. Many other girls had endured similar fates and none of them had complained. This was simply the way it was. Not everything could be fair.

She had tried to stay his attentions, begging to wait for the wedding night. The merchant had merely laughed, commended her on her modesty and promptly tried to wriggle a hand under her skirt instead. Etain had been poised with a knee raised, unwilling to be raped in her own garden, when the merchant suddenly slipped and conveniently landed in a small pile of dung that Etain had not noticed before. She'd vainly tried to smother a laugh. The ever fastidious merchant had immediately forgotten his throbbing erection and bid a hasty retreat, cursing the entire way home.

The memory still made her giggle. She wondered if she could arrange for a conveniently placed pile of dung on her wedding night.

Sarah laughed heartily despite herself. She had no illusions as to who had afforded the timely interruption.

Grainne ceased her well-meaning prattling long enough to complain about a rumbling stomach. With her sister's permission, she disappeared into the throng to search out a vendor, leaving Etain alone with her thoughts. Her reverie was broken by a gravely voice behind her.

"Fresh fruit, Miss?"

Etain turned to find a little man with beady eyes and a marked lack of teeth grinning expectantly at her. His cart was filled with a myriad of fruit, the likes of which Etain had never seen.

"I'd take one for my sister, but I probably couldn't afford it anyway," she replied honestly, eyes still savouring the exotic delicacies.

"Consider it a gift for your upcoming nuptials then," offered the squat seller.

"I couldn't possibly do so. You must earn your living too," Etain protested, her cheeks pale. She
wanted no act of kindness for an event she dreaded more and more with each passing day.

"It's already been paid for… in your honour," replied the man, jerking a thumb beside her. She spun half fearing to see her betrothed, but saw nothing save busy villagers. She thought she caught a flash of blue eyes, but when she blinked they were gone.

Etain bit her lip. "Alright then, I'll save it for my sister."

The vendor simply smiled and held aloft a deep red plum.

Etain took the fruit, marveling at its colour. Thanking the man, she left to find her sister. I wasn't long before she found Grainne beside a meat pie vendor, licking her greasy fingers.

"I have a fruit for you," said Etain, holding out the plum almost reluctantly.

"Thanks, but I am plenty full. Best rabbit I ever ate."

Etain looked down at the fruit, her own stomach beginning to growl at the thought of food. She hesitated only a moment before taking a bite. The juice ran down her chin, the taste sinfully sweet and strangely uplifting. For the rest of the day, Etain forgot about her lecherous merchant and wandered about with a satisfied smile on her face.

Sarah licked her lips absently, swearing she could taste the faint hint of peaches.

Over the next few nights, Etain found herself dreaming about the white-haired stranger - dreams like none other she'd ever had. They were full of tiny imp-like creatures, the kind her grandmother had spun bedtime tales about. The wild horse was also present; his eyes shining like costly stained glass. The dark stranger always appeared and offered her jewels, riches and untold delights if she would only come away with him. He presented her with a moon-like orb and held a hand out invitingly. He promised her her dreams. She wanted to take it, wanted to ride the wild horse through the crashing surf, wanted to flee her soon-to-be husband. The stranger assured her he would make sure her family would never go without. He stroked her brow and kissed her with soft lips that tasted like plums…

Etain always woke in a cold sweat, feeling chilled and slightly wicked. Half-remembered Faery stories ran suggestively through her mind. Her people had so many legends, despite the Holy Church's efforts to repress them, and Etain was ever the dreamer.

For this reason, she once more found herself on the crest of the hill over-looking the sea. It was the eve before her wedding and she'd felt an irrepressible need to feel the untamed freedom of the salt air one last time. She strolled along the sand, sinking beneath the crushing weight of familial duty.

The sudden sound of hoof beats broke the calm. Turning, she spotted the black horse galloping towards her. Instincts told her to run, but she found herself rooted to the spot unable to move. The horse slowed as it approached. He nuzzled her cheek gently as if in reassurance. Once again, she was overcome with a desire to ride him and as before, the horse bowed accordingly. Throwing caution to the wind, she pulled herself atop its back, hiking her skirts up to straddle his flank. She would consider this ride her last act of freedom.
If only she knew how right she was.

With a toss of its glossy mane, the horse took off at a gallop. Etain clung for dear life as best she could, chiding herself for her foolishness. Without a proper harness, she couldn't control the wild beast. The landscape sped by her at a dizzying speed and at one point Etain almost slipped from his back. She cried out in fear, knowing the fall would mean her death. As she lost her grip, an unseen force seemed to right her. She squeezed her eyes shut in fear, wondering if the rich merchant might not have been so bad.

When the horse finally slowed to a stop, Etain opened her eyes. She was in an unknown field, nowhere near her familiar sea. Grassy mounds surrounded her and a large fire burned within a ringed enclosure. Cloaked druidic-like figures surrounded the blaze, while a figure in blue presided over a stone altar. Etain's heart beat wildly, wondering if she was to be a sacrifice as in the days of old, before St. Patrick brought Christianity to the isle. Hesitantly, she unclasped her clenched hands and dismounted on shaking legs only to feel a brush of fabric behind her. Spinning in defense, her eyes widened. Instead of the shining black horse, stood the lord, garbed in a strange swirling black cloak. Only his blue eyes remained the same.

"You…" her voice trailed off, forgotten legends of water horses springing into consciousness.

"Precisely," he laughed.

"Who are you?" she demanded, forcing more courage than she felt into her words.

"Lord of the Underground, the Goblin King, Riven… husband. I have many names," he finished softly.

Etain blinked.

"You rode me well tonight, Cariad." He leaned over her until his mouth brushed her ear. "Perhaps later, I will return the favour."

Etain swallowed nervously, her nerves ablaze, before the Goblin King lowered his mouth to hers.

Sarah tried to quiet her own nerves. This passage was bringing back so many vivid memories. She shivered under a remembered caress. Her hand brushed her lips unconsciously.

She hurriedly flipped through more pages.

Etain fled, her heavy skirts curling around her legs, threatening to trip her with every step. She had to make it to the small copse of trees. She prayed to Mother Mary for time. The approach of her pursuers drummed in her ears. With her strength failing, she crashed through the dense foliage. Frantically looking around, she spied a small tree, its trunk slightly hollow and just large enough for her to crawl within. Once inside, she held her breath and waited. The sound of the passing footfalls was nearly drowned out by the beating of her heart. After a moment's silence, Etain exhaled slowly, wondering if they had so easily passed her by. In answer, a gloved hand closed around her right ankle. Crying out in fear, she clawed at the tree trying to find purchase. She was dragged out to the
sound of amused laughter, her bloody nails leaving deep grooves in the hollow.

Sarah shut the book with a snap. She had crouched in that very spot, heart beating wildly… praying for escape. Morbidly, it was now a connection between them. And then another thought darkened her brow. He must have known about its location. Jareth could have taken her at any time. He had deliberately let her suffer, deliberately allowed her a false sense of hope. It was all a game.

Tossing the book back on the chair, Sarah quit the master suite and tore through the castle to the portrait gallery. Wary goblins dodged her as she passed. She scanned the paintings until she found what she looking for.

Riven, King of the Underground and his mortal bride, Etain

Like the other portraits, the border was done in a Celtic relief – wild horses. Sarah couldn't deny the beauty of the painting. A striking man and a lovely young woman stood framed by the backdrop of a wild Irish sea. Riven was indeed handsome, his white blonde hair was blowing freely in the wind and had interwoven with Etain's dark locks. The contrast was quite poignant. His blue eyes echoed the ocean behind them and seemed just as fathomless. Sarah could see where Jareth got his fine features. But she could see something of his mother in him too. Etain smiled enigmatically down from the canvas, the same woman that had rocked the babe in the nursery. She was garbed in a pale blue gown. The colour was a lovely foil to the darkness of her long hair and the nearly black eyes that bespoke mischief.

"One from each," murmured Sarah softly.

She studied the expression on Etain's face. "Were you happy in the end? Did you love him?"

As expected, she received no answer. Her eyes dropped to the plum in Etain's hand and Sarah frowned. She turned away only to lock startled eyes with her own. The cursed painting was back and in perfect condition.

Sarah couldn't help a crazed laugh. "Even the bloody decor is against me!"

When she approached the canvas, malicious intent etched upon her face, she felt the eerie sensation of watchful eyes upon her. She turned back to look at Jareth's mother.

"What would you have me do? Just give up?" she demanded. Again, she was met with silence.

Sarah eyed her own portrait in indecision. When she lit upon the peach in her likeness's hand, she made a quick decision. With a flick of her wrist she produced a crystal. With another flick, it became a golden peach.

Sarah smiled darkly before disappearing, her voice echoing in the empty chamber. "Time to return the favour."

Chapter End Notes
Just for clarity's sake – market day used to happen once a week. That is why there is a span of several days between it and the night before Etain's wedding.

The song Riven sings to Etain is taken from the Irish poem, The Dark Man by Nora Hopper.

Riven's ability to turn into a horse (while applying to Labyrinth canon – Jareth's owl form) is based on the Celtic mythical creature, the Kelpie. Thankfully, Riven carries her off as a wife instead of riding into the sea to drown her.

The image of Riven's light hair and Etain's dark hair mingling in the wind is an ode to/inspired by Lord of the Rings – The Return of the King. Faramir and Eowyn's hair does the same as they stand on a tower in the houses of healing.

Celtic brides used to wear blue on their wedding day, hence Etain's dress in the portrait.

Cariad = Welsh term of endearment.

Grainne is pronounced graw + nya
Strokes of Change

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part XXIV

This is the night
They say,
Everyone wants a dream.

This is the night
They say,
Nothing is as it seems.

Dreams are More Precious, Enya

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The amphitheatre door shut behind the Goblin King with a definitive click, adding to his growing sense of unease. Although pleased to be spared the company of the probing harlequins and their eyeless stares, he was more than a little disquieted by the blinding darkness in which he now found himself. Very few elements of this unknown Labyrinth had truly unnerved the Goblin King, but this was proving to be an exception. In the oubliette he'd been aware of the earthen cavern around him. This darkness was unrelenting, more like a void than a mere absence of light. He felt the solitude keenly.

Groping for the door, his hands met empty air. In fact, he could feel nothing save the ground beneath him as he stumbled forward. His footsteps made no sound. Walking without sight or sensation was like learning to walk all over again. He could well imagine how idiotic he looked, shuffling about with arms outstretched. Without a point of reference he couldn't be sure he was even walking in a straight line. If there was any justice in the world, Sarah would not be watching him right now.

Jareth began counting his steps to keep his focus, but as the time stretched he soon lost focus. The characteristically sanguine Goblin King was beginning to wonder if he had somehow ended up in a realm outside of the Underground. Self-doubt soon followed. Perhaps this was the end of existence. Perhaps he'd already lost and this was the punishment; he certainly had no frame of reference. But then where was Sarah? Surely she would have appeared, ready to crow at his defeat. Roles reversed and he would have been there wearing a smug smile – perhaps nothing else. Forced levity could not distract him, and the oppressive emptiness began to take its toll. The Labyrinth was all about reactions, decisions and choices in the face of unknown stimuli. How did one react to nothing? Wherein lay the choice?

These saturnine thoughts were interrupted by the onset of a faint swishing noise, like a brush sweeping over canvas. As it grew louder Jareth moved towards it intuitively. To his relief, the vague outline of trees began to appear. Massive trunks and spindly branches were slowly taking shape out of the sea of black, as though through magic. He might have thought it an illusion, save for the sharp smell of wood that suffused the air. Above, he spied tiny lights against a dark backdrop. The Goblin King had emerged from endless nothing and into an ancient forest. The tiny points of light proved to be stars filtered through a dense canopy of leaves. Before him rose a large oak with a black hollow at
its base. A hollow that looked disturbingly familiar. Cursing, he spun about in anger. He must be back in the Tara forest and it was already night.

So he had lost then.

The Voice would be waiting in the ringed enclosure to proclaim his failure and undo everything.

She had defeated him twice.

His eyes burned wildly in the starlight. If any goblins had been in proximity they would have fled in terror. There were worse punishments than the bog. Sarah may have won but she would meet him a dark mood. She had cast him as the villain and he would duly shatter her fairy tale.

And then his dark expression fractured. A traitorous voice suggested that maybe he merited defeat. That maybe his actions had earned him this loss. To Jareth, the voice was as insidious as it was unwanted, but still it wriggled through him like a worm through a peach.

Had not other Goblin Kings done the same, if not worse? Was that not their nature?

… Things change.

I had plans. The girl ruined everything.

Remnants of Sarah's memories shot through Jareth, casting his mind into a frenzied turmoil. The shadow of her essence threatened to pollute his purpose.

He was the Goblin King.

How could he possibly allow a mere mortal to bring him low? But she had and now he felt pity for her. He highly doubted she would afford him the same sentiment.

Jareth envied his ancestors. Certainly none had ever been dealt a bride like Sarah.

Had…

By now she was nothing to him. He would never leave her in peace though, not until her dying day and not even then. They were a part of each other. He would suffer through the indignity of losing because it would not be the end. Pride should always be the last virtue to die. His dealings with the girl were not over. She had cost him a crown. He would charge her a lifetime.

You will lose her.

Jareth stilled and allowed himself a moment to focus. Something wasn't right. And then his eyes widened. The forest was only half-finished. What had seemed like shadows were actually pockets of emptiness; holes in the fabric of reality. The faint swishing noise, momentarily forgotten, was now all around him. Jareth tensed. Intermixed with the trees' dense growth were a handful of small patchwork-like creatures. From afar they resembled young goblins wearing odd assortments of multi-coloured clothing. On closer inspection, the random patterns of colour proved to be their mottled skin and hair. It was nearly impossible to tell them apart or whether they were male or female or both. The speed of their movements made the Goblin King's senses reel.

They did not pause in their work to acknowledge his presence, but continued to move in a colourful blur amongst the spots of darkness – darkness that was rapidly changing into something else entirely.

They were painting.
Dumbfounded, Jareth watched as the creatures literally drew the very life around him out of nothing. Both trees and creatures were crafted into existence by simple brush strokes made by tiny hands. He wondered at the source of their paint until one paused long enough to add detail to a particularly gnarled oak. The colours seemed to flow unceasingly from their fingertips and into their brushes. The void from whence he'd come was now alive with life. With a gloved hand he gently brushed the oak. Through the fine leather he could feel the rough textured bark, dry to the touch and very much alive.

The sight of the diminutive painters at work was beautiful and terrible. Jareth hesitated, wondering if he was witnessing something he shouldn't, something beyond even him.

They were almost out of sight before he found his voice again. "Wait!"

A few of the painters paused, regarding him with kaleidoscope eyes.

"What manner of goblin are you?"

The creatures made a sound that may have been a laugh, but was more akin to music. "We are not goblin," they answered harmoniously. Jareth felt, more than heard their voices.

"Then what sort of subjects are you?" he persisted.

"We are not subjects, Goblin King."

Jareth frowned. He was unused to lacking power over anything, least of all over creatures that seemed to possess powerful magic of their own. "Where are you from then?" he demanded.

"We are from nothing," they intoned in melodic voices.

"What are you then?"

The creatures eyed one another before answering, their eyes continually changing colours in a dizzying display. "We are the artists."

Jareth was quickly losing patience with their enigmatic answers. "But what are you?"

"We are the beginners and enders of everything."

The Goblin King betrayed a small twitch, his skin prickling with the phantom sensation of a thousand tiny brush strokes all over his body. "But everything is already. The Labyrinth alters by its own will. Or by mine," he added.

"Everything is changing." Their voices grew faint and Jareth was once again having trouble distinguishing them from their surroundings.

"But why haven't I seen you before?"

They exchanged meaningful glances before answering. "Everything is changing," they repeated, their voices barely above a whisper.

He flashed back to the image of the mask with its long fragmenting crack, but before he could ask anything else they were gone.

The Goblin King frowned. They had failed to mention whether or not the change was due to his impending success or failure.
Jareth had been walking in circles, he was certain of it. The dense canopy of trees, despite the starlight, afforded him little help and the fact that it was well past sundown worried him. While he was clearly still in the Underground, the remainder of his time must have passed. He began to recount his steps, trying to estimate how many hours he had spent in the Labyrinth already. He stopped short when he tripped over the same root for the third time, swearing loudly.

"Hrmph! Eh… what was that? Such language from such a small thing." The voice had the timbre of creaking wood, the admonishment clear.

"Who said that?"

"I did. And with better manners than you, I might add," came the gruff response.

Jareth scanned the forest with narrowed eyes but could spot nothing save trees swaying in the wind. A wind he did not feel. "You're trees…"

"And you're rude. Now the introductions are over," replied another voice, the tone equally terse. "We were sleeping."

The Goblin King was no student of humility, but he had become accustomed to how many of the labyrinthine creatures acted when faced by a hapless visitor. He ignored the insolence. "Where is this forest?"

"Midnight," yawned a particularly weathered oak.

"I asked where not when." His voice was heavy with vitriol.

"And we answered. You are in the Forest of Midnight."

"Unfortunately for us," added an ash. "Now go away."

"I'd like nothing better," replied Jareth dryly. "That, however, is proving to be difficult. You all look so much alike."

"We feel the same about you goblins." A faint peal of laughter creaked from the limbs above.

"I am not a goblin."

"You smell like one," replied an alder, clearly unconvinced.

Jareth's lips thinned. "Where is the castle?"

"How would we know? We never go anywhere."

Again he could hear tittering through the leaves. He would send an army of axe-laden goblins with his regards later. He knew of at least one that had developed a strange penchant for wood. For now he required their aid. "How do I get out of this forest?"

The oak snorted, "Well that should be obvious, goblin. The Vale of Morning is right behind you."

Jareth turned and was only mildly surprised to see faint sunlight streaming through the trees, where none had been before. With a few simple steps the Goblin King crossed from midnight to morning.

Gone were the ancient giants, replaced instead by slender silvery birches. Dew dripped from their
leaves into an impossibly clear pool, broken here and there by lush reeds. The morning sunlight flickered across the surface of the water like white flame over glass. Life-like stone naiads were posed at its sides in various states of naked abandon. The whole effect was altogether utopic. Jareth was anything but immune. Never had the air been so sweet. Never had anything looked quite so inviting. And never had he felt so unclean. He could think of little else.

Jareth quickly divested himself of his stockings, waistcoat and gloves. He debated losing his shirt and pants but decided they could benefit from a wash as well. He would be damned if he would confront Sarah in his present state of disarray. She would get no further satisfaction from him.

With a deep breath, the Goblin King dove into the clear water, his form barely disturbing the smooth surface of the pool. The water was cool, but soothing against his skin. He could feel his muscles relaxing and his concerns ebbing with each undulating stroke down. Preparing to return to the surface, he opened his eyes towards the filtered light above. Shadowy figures peered back at him from the shore. And then they followed him into the water.

By now he really should have known better.

In seconds, the formerly inert statues were upon him, pushing him down to the sandy bottom of the pool. What had once been cold stone was now warm flesh - soft, supple and unrelenting. Slender forms circled him, their nude bodies arching enticingly, while swirling tendrils of long hair coiled themselves around his arms and legs like silken cords. A pert breast grazed his chest. He could feel the taut nipple through his thin shirt. A hand brushed against the juncture of his thighs in a scintillating caress. He shivered involuntarily. His lungs were on fire but his body ignored the pain, locked in the heady sensation. He vaguely remembered reading a story once that had described drowning as sweet. He'd dismissed the notion at the time, but he was beginning to understand the exquisite torture of the mortal coil.

Sarah…

He began to struggle against their arms, his fingers viciously ripping the entangled hair from his limbs. Dark eyes locked with his, stilling his movements, and he felt the brush of soft lips. A pink tongue slipped into his mouth delivering a small breath of air to relieve the burning pressure in his lungs. Another pair of arms wrapped around him from behind, the hands slipping into the opening of his shirt.

"Stay with us, Goblin King." Their voices rippled together in the watery depths.

"Just breathe," they whispered. "And everything will be right again."

The answer seemed so very simple, Jareth wondered why he hadn't thought of it before. Just breathe.

"You have lost your kingdom. We will make you a crown of our hair." The tendrils began to slowly wrap themselves around his limbs.

"You are weary. We will make you a pillow upon our breast." A naiad slowly slid down his length from above, pausing to cradle his head against her chest. Jareth's lips parted and she pressed her nipple into his mouth.

"You are unwanted. We will welcome you." The naiad parted her legs, wrapping them around his waist. She rubbed against him sensuously. Offering.

Jareth's chest began to constrict painfully and lights danced behind eyes. His weakened body was throbbing, while his lungs screamed in agony. It would be so easy… Just breathe.
"Take a breath and stay with us," they begged. Their caresses became more insistent, their movements frenzied.

Jareth raised his head towards the sunlight as another shadow broke the surface.

The end he thought.

And then the naiads were screeching in fury, teeth bared and movements savage. In a moment he was free and then small hands tugged on his shirt. Jareth managed a burst of strength to kick off the bottom towards the surface. Dark hair swirled around his face as he rose.

He coughed water onto the grassy bank and looked up into cold green eyes. "Oh Gods…” he groaned.

"Now why does that sound strangely familiar?" replied a snide voice.

Jareth rose to his full height, unwilling to meet his adversary, now benefactor, on bended knee. "Sarah… you have me at a disadvantage,” he drawled, forcing levity into his raspy voice.

Sarah snorted in derision, but her eyes unwilling flitted down his dripping body. His pale shirt was nearly translucent and clung to every inch of his lithe torso. She followed a rivulet of water as it trailed down his breast bone, over the flat planes of his stomach and disappeared beneath his waistband. She stopped at the bulge in his pants.

"I'd say they had you at a disadvantage, Goblin King," she replied hotly, jerking an arm in the direction of the statues.

Jareth did nothing to try and hide the evidence of his desire. He would not defend his actions to the thorn in his side anymore than he would admit those stone-bitches had nearly had him.

"I am a male, as well as a king, Sarah. Shall I remind you?" His eyes slid down her body suggestively. She'd get no words of gratitude from him, though he was thankful for her timely intervention. He felt cleansed and more poised than he had in a long while. He was far from unarmed.

"I know exactly what you are." Sarah's tone left little doubt that she was not thinking anything favourable.

Jareth canted his head, a slow grin spreading across his pale face. "Why Sarah, you almost sound like a jealous wife…"

Sarah's face suffused with colour. She couldn't quite explain what she'd felt when she'd peered into the pool. She'd almost turned away and left him to fate, but something had stopped her. Impulsively, she dove in and pulled him to the surface. She wanted him broken and defeated, not dead.

She couldn't explain why she wanted him at all.

The Goblin King waited patiently for a response, a look of amusement on his face. He leisurely took in her wet appearance, eyes lingering on her breasts. Her shirt was near transparent, clinging to her damp skin.

Sarah felt her nipples tighten betraying. She wrapped her arms around herself, picturing Moira and then the naiads. Her face deepened in colour – from embarrassment to anger.
"And what an unfaithful husband you are proving to be." With a flick of her wrist she was once again dry. She did not afford him the same luxury.

Jareth had not expected that response. He could not even take delight in her use of the word husband, however scathing the tone. The mistrust and hatred in her voice was palpable and for some reason it stung deeply. He wanted her to feel the same. "An unfaithful husband for a cold wife," he replied cruelly, all traces of seduction gone from his voice. "A fitting match."


If Jareth was surprised, his face betrayed nothing. "I see you've enjoyed the library."

"I enjoyed nothing. Your father was as much a bastard as you are. Or did you really think I'd find the story romantic? I'm not 15 anymore."

"No… you're not. And what a pity. At 15 you were far less narrow-minded."

Sarah blinked at the unexpected barb, but said nothing.

"Yes, my mother was unwilling. And no doubt my father was a bit of a bastard. But if you had bothered to finish the tale, you would have seen that my father loved my mother, and she him. Unreservedly. You see only what you want to see, Sarah, and only what you expect." The words flew from his mouth in a cold torrent. Jareth wasn't sure if they were accusation or confession, or both.

Sarah's retort stuck fast. Though she could readily lay a litany of sins at his door, she could not deny the truth in his argument. She flashed back to the smiling woman holding a baby and she faltered. Just as quickly, the woman changed to the girl in blue holding a plum. Goblin fruit…

"I brought you a gift," she said softly, pulling the peach from her vest.

Jareth's eyes widened in surprise, before narrowing on her face. "Tsk, tsk, Sarah. You play with things you don't understand and I am no foolish child."

"It's just a peach, Goblin King. Surely you're not afraid of something so insignificant." Sarah stepped towards him.

"I am afraid of nothing, girl, but you should fear the forces you meddle with. Dreams are dangerous, as well you know," he cautioned with a raised finger.

Sarah took another step towards him until they were almost touching. She could smell the spring water on him and the lingering scent of female.

"But you were so willing to sample their sweetness," she whispered. She held up the small globe between them. "Why not mine?"

Jareth's eyes immediately dropped to her lips, but he made no move to take the peach. "I've tasted you before, Precious, and I will again," he promised with conviction, "but I will not eat the fruit."

Sarah sighed, "Fine. We'll do it the hard way then."

She raised the peach and quickly took a shallow bite, allowing the juice to pool on her lips. Before the Goblin King could do more than furrow his brow in confusion, she closed the distance between them and brushed her mouth against his. Her arms entwined around his neck to hold him still. Jareth parted his lips in surprise.
Later, he would remember how warm and soft she had felt against his damp body. It was the first
time she had ever willingly kissed him.

Sarah released him and stepped back. Jareth swayed before gently falling to his knees before her, his
eyes struggling to stay focused on her face.

"You did say I was ripe fruit," she said softly.

Jareth threw his head back and laughed before everything turned to stars and midnight blue.

Chapter End Notes

The black void was a nod to The Neverending Story, though it is far less insidious in
my story.

The Forest of Midnight was a nod to the Ents in LOTR.

The "Oh Gods" reference was to the beginning of chapter 11.

The wet shirt reference was a definite ode to the A&E version of Pride and Prejudice
with Colin Firth. By far the best Mr. Darcy ever and a wet shirt scene that even Austen
would have appreciated (had she been born in another century).
Part XXV

You have lost yourself in dreaming, I have lost myself in you.
Now we lie beneath the sky, stars, and midnight blue.

Stars and Midnight Blue, Enya

"Everything's dancing," she whispered.

A solitary figure stood on the crest of a hill, overlooking a calm night sea. The evening breeze was fragrant and thick with mist. The sky overhead was a canopy of midnight blue and the full moon cast a silvery sheen over everything, turning the figure's pale hair to starlight - a contrast to the stark black of his simple clothing.

Jareth rubbed his eyes absently; his mind shrouded and his purpose lost. He had a strong sense that something wasn't right, that he should be somewhere else, but his thoughts were as scattered as the stars above. He felt drunk on the sensation.

And then he caught the faint hint of peaches… and something else.

Sarah.

As the mists cleared, Jareth could make out a woman standing in the sea's shallows, the spray darkening the pale blue hem of her dress. She was facing the far horizon, her profile obscured by long dark hair dancing in the wind. She was humming a song quietly - the tune both familiar and achingly distant. It drew him across the beach, silver sand dulling the high shine on his boots. When he was almost to her side she turned away and began running along the surf, black stands trailing out behind her. She was almost out of sight before he thought to follow.

The beach seemed to stretch for miles, but no matter how fast he pursued Jareth could not close the distance between them. Her laughter echoed back teasingly. Mockingly. A flickering light shone ahead in the distance; sinuous shadows twisting all around it. The girl was swallowed by the soft glow. As he approached, he could hear rhythmic music played with ferocious fervour and the distinctive crackle of a bonfire. The shadows became dancers; their wild faces bathed in firelight while their feet kept time to the sounds of fiddles, drums and whistles. They danced with abandon, as though driven by some primal force, and without warning Jareth was enveloped by their fold. Their movements were dizzying; the smell of the fire cloying.

Jareth licked his lips.
Sarah.

Familiar faces flashed by him in the dance. Memories surfaced momentarily only to drown beneath rhythmic beats. There were two women, twins, with their arms entwined as they spun in a reel. A grey-haired man sat carving, tapping his foot to the music as he cast wood shavings into the fire. A babe dressed in a distinctive red and white-striped jumper bounced to the music. Jareth reached for him as though by instinct, but he disappeared between the legs of a dancer with a giggle. He followed, but found instead a pair of young lovers locked in an intimate embrace. The boy had worked his hand under the girl's skirt and her dark head was thrown back in delight. She caught his stare and smiled wickedly, winking before returning to her tryst. A crown of ivy graced her brow. Something stirred in the back of his mind, his brow furrowing, but then someone handed him a tankard of ale. He took a sip and tasted peaches… and something else.

Sarah.

A woman grabbed his hand and pulled him into a frenzied dance, her green eyes alive with invitation and mischief. Her red hair glowed in the firelight and for a moment he remembered dancing with her before. She had worn a mask. But the sliver was gone as quickly as it came. She pouted prettily as he disentangled himself, before melting back into the fray.

Jareth spied a flash of blue through the dancers. He thrust people out of his way hurriedly, only to stop at the edge of the bonfire. The blue-clad woman was twirling around the flames languidly, her eyes closed and her arms outstretched. He grasped her hand to draw her near, his gloved fingers tipping her chin up gently.

"Sarah…"

The firelight danced in her obsidian eyes. Jareth dropped his hand in confusion. Soft laughter rippled over him like water when she smiled. She turned and flung herself back into the dance but a man garbed in black stepped forward to catch her. The girl pulled away, resisting, and Jareth found himself stepping forward to intervene. Piercing blue eyes locked with his own and for a suffocating moment Jareth thought he was looking into a mirror. The stranger raised an arched brow – the gesture so familiar it made Jareth ache. The dark-haired girl laughed again, before grasping the man and pressing her lips to his neck. She led him back into the dance.

It was a game and Jareth had no idea how to play.

He turned, feeling the circle close around him. Dancers pressed against him from all sides and his head began to throb. He was out of place and off balance, and all the while the fire seemed to grow warmer. Flames licked at his hair as the music built to a wild crescendo. The drums were making his head spin. He was being consumed. The pale-haired stranger caught his eye again, suddenly spinning the blue-clad girl wildly away from him.

And then the music stopped.

Everyone froze as if in anticipation. The carver was the only one unconcerned, the sound of his knife on the wood as rhythmic as the now silent drums. The dark-eyed girl turned and turned and turned, her blue skirts and mane flying wildly. She landed in Jareth's arms, her hair a mad tangle in her face. He raised a hand to brush it away and looked down into twin pools of green fire.

Sarah.

The Goblin King felt his world tilt. Before he could make sense of anything, Sarah had grasped his hand and they were dancing, the music beginning anew. Her eyes were locked on his face and for a
moment he was lost again in a memory – of a different time and a different place. Their movements were natural and wholly unconscious, as though they had always been dancing and had never stopped.

The same figures flashed by him as they turned. The twins were whispering to one another furtively, mirrored smiles on their faces. The sultry red head had found another partner and was lost in their dance. The girl with the ivy crown winked at him again. This time her belly was swollen with child; her young man beaming. The carver continued his work, his movements methodical and unhurried. The blue-eyed man had his arms around the girl with obsidian eyes. She glanced over and he thought he heard her humming a child's lullaby over the music.

Jareth stared down in confusion at the blue-clad woman in his arms, but Sarah merely smiled.

It didn't reach her eyes.

Everything was wrong and right at the same time. It made his stomach churn. The striped babe was bouncing a crystal globe in his tiny hand. Jareth frowned at the sight, but Sarah was already drawing his face back to hers with a soft hand. Her tongue darted out to wet her lip and he knew himself lost.

The taste of peaches.

She smiled slowly. Knowingly. His heart matched the drums as they circled the fire, but his limbs were lax and un-resisting. He felt the girl leading him around and around endlessly. He couldn't find the energy to care or stop.

And then an auburn-haired musician arose and began singing. The music changed tempo – the tune chilling and soft. Strain as he might, Jareth couldn't make out the words. The girl had slowed as well, her false smile fading. As they twirled around the fire again, the wood carver held aloft his finished piece, blowing the remaining shavings from it. Jareth stared at it, his mind beginning to clear as he felt a surge of raw power ignite his numbed limbs. His fingers flexed experimentally against Sarah's back. The girl had turned towards the old man as well, all remaining colour drained from her face. The carver held a figure of a man with the head of an owl, a crown atop its head.

Sarah looked up into the Goblin King's eyes and he smiled slowly. Sanguinely. "I did warn you… dreams are such dangerous and fickle things."

Sarah couldn't tell if his tone was mocking or compassionate.

And then everything changed. The world reeled and everything was falling…

-----------------------------------------------------------------------

When Sarah opened her eyes she was back in the opulent crystal ballroom of her memory. Abandoned masks littered the floor and cracks lined every wall, as though the room had been pieced back together shard by shard. The ceiling was left open to the elements, crowned by the myriad stars above.

She should be somewhere else…

Everything felt wrong, but she couldn't force order out of chaos. She caught her reflection in the cracked glass. Silver ball gown and hair entwined with crystal.

"No…” she whispered.
"Isn't this what you wanted?" demanded a bodiless voice. It resonated through her body. "Didn't you want to look beautiful for me?"

She closed her eyes, praying she would wake up once again to a classroom full of students, embarrassed but safe… untouchable. Praying she would wake up before she hit the ground. She licked her dry lips. Peaches… and something else.

Jareth.

Crystalline music began to play and she felt something brush lightly against her bare shoulders. Her eyes shot open in fear. A sea of lavishly-dressed dancers surrounded her. At first glance, she thought the men were wearing masks. She shuddered when she realized her mistake. Each male had an animal head rising from his shoulders where his own should have been. Their partners were unconcerned, dark hair elaborately coiffed atop heads thrown back in ecstasy. A lone carver sat whittling in the corner, focused on his work.

Jareth.

Sarah wound her way through the dancers in a daze. A snake-headed man hissed at her as she passed, his tongue flitting across her cheek in a stinging caress. His partner watched her impassively, an apple clutched in her tanned hand. Sarah recoiled, backing away until she bumped into something solid. She spun to face a snarling dog-headed man. His partner was laughing at his antics, a pomegranate cradled against her pale breast. A grey wolf twirled past her, followed by a golden falcon. Sarah's heart beat wildly in her chest. Many of the dancers were locked in lascivious embraces, hands and mouths and teeth tangling. Sounds of fabric ripping. Cries of pleasure… of hunger. Beasts and prey draped in silk and jewels. Sarah cringed at the sight.

She turned to flee and stumbled into a couple. Blue eyes in an equine face stared down at her intently. The man huffed deeply, while his dark-eyed partner laid a gentle hand on Sarah's arm. She hummed a lilting lullaby as she took a bite from a ripe plum. The juice dripped down her chin and throat. Red against the white.

Sarah pushed past them, running until she met one of the fractured walls. She began beating her arms against it wildly, trying to deepen the cracks. A great slab of the crystalline mirror slid down, shattering at her feet. Sarah threw her arms up protectively, but was only hit with a spray of white feathers. The ballroom did not dissolve and she was wide-eyed, staring out into the the castle. She could see a large fireplace and stone walls, the great oak door and the carpeted floor a few feet below her. Portraits on the walls… a gilt frame surrounded the opening…

Her hands fisted in the folds of her dress until her knuckles bled white. She was inside the damned painting.

The dream had changed again. Everything had changed. Sarah slammed her hands against the unyielding barrier and closed her eyes to stave off tears. When she opened them again a woman was standing in the gallery. She had paused in front of the portrait. One hand rested against her pregnant stomach. Sarah choked back a sob as she recognized her own face, her own hand smoothing down her flat torso instinctively. A smiling Goblin King had come to stand behind the other Sarah, one hand entwining with hers over the child within. With the other, he stroked the back of her neck.

Sarah sucked in a sharp breath when she felt a gloved hand brush the hair softly away from her own bare neck.

"What a lovely sight."
Sarah squeezed her eyes shut, unwilling to see the face behind the voice. But the hand at her neck gently turned her and her eyes snapped open defensively. Jareth, unchanged and perfect, regarded her with wry amusement. His midnight blue frock coat reflected the starlight above...

…and she could taste peaches.

Wordlessly, he pulled her into the dance, past the wolves and serpents and hounds, his eyes never leaving her face. Sarah was lost to the movements. She followed him through a throngs of beasts and stolen brides, all the while wondering if this was her dream or his. As the thought flitted through her mind, an auburn-haired musician rose and began singing. Sarah strained to make out the words of his song, her steps faltering. Jareth stiffened, his hand pulling her closer, as though he feared she might be torn away.

Sarah swore she could smell the sea.

The silent carver stood, blowing the shavings from his piece once again. He held aloft the perfect likeness of a clock with thirteen numbers. Distantly, she heard Jareth curse viciously.

And then the walls of the ballroom collapsed, consuming the dancers within and shattering into crystal shards that rose to meet the stars.

The girl and the king stood alone on a cliff overlooking the dark sea. Seated on a stone outcropping were the carver and the musician. The king and the girl were dancing, neither knowing the direction, neither taking the lead, while the musician began to sing.

Much later, both the king and the girl would wonder from whose dream it was drawn and who was really singing to whom.

The words of the song rose above the wind with haunting clarity.

Breathing in the night
There's nothing else I'm needing now
The wind is at my side
And so are you
And together we will rise

Above all these word and promises we couldn't keep,
Together we will fly

Above it all now
But sometimes we will fall...
From the light
But it shines on us tonight...
And together we will rise

And surely it's a sign now,
That everything's in tune to some kind of higher plan
Yes surely it's a sign
That you were right...
And there's the secret line
That we've been denied...
And we're crossing it tonight  
And together we will rise

The song rose in intensity until both the girl and the king thought they'd be lost within it. A force was drawing them together, like a cord tightening… binding… uniting.

Sometimes we will fall,  
from the light
But it shines on us tonight  
And together we will rise

Pass this line  
That we're crossing here tonight  
And together we will rise

The music began to soften again, sinking beneath the rising wind. The dancers stopped, hands clasped lightly. Their movements had taken them to the very edge of the cliff, the sea stretched far below them. The girl was certain the king was going to kiss her, as certain as she was that she was going to kiss him back.

But then the carver rose again, blowing dust from his final creation. In his hand he held a perfectly formed peach. With a sad smile he tossed the peach high into the air. It struck the moon and broke it into a thousand crystal shards. The stars began to fall like rain. The girl and the king tightened their grip on one another, both opening their mouths to speak.

But the world turned in on itself and the cliff slipped away. The girl and the king found themselves torn apart, falling towards the dark waters below.

Their words were lost in the wind.

Sarah awoke slowly to a familiar masculine scent once again. Her head throbbed and her thoughts were hazy. Groaning, she burrowed down into the feather pillow. A pillow that moved. Her eyes shot open. She was cradled against the side of a very warm Goblin King, his arm draped lazily along her back. They were sprawled on a grassy embankment, next to the sparkling pool. A peach lay forgotten beside them, a shallow bite missing from its ripe flesh.

Sarah held her breath as she looked up towards his face, dreading the mocking gaze. His eyes were closed, however, his chest rising and falling rhythmically with each breath. All traces of the usual arrogance were absent. His thin lips were parted gently, no trace of cruel laughter in them. He looked almost… vulnerable. Unable to stop herself, she brushed a lock of hair from his face. Sarah winced when he sighed softly, his bare fingers flexing against her back, but he did not waken.

Very carefully, she extricated herself from beneath his heavy arm and rose on unsteady legs. He shivered for a moment and Sarah remembered that he was still damp from his time in the pool. Biting her lip in indecision, she eventually flicked her wrist. The Goblin King was once again dry, if not immaculately garbed. She would question the wisdom of her actions later.

She stared at him a moment longer, conflicting emotions furrowing her brow and then turned away with determination. He would sleep right through the final strike of the clock. That or he would awaken and forget. Forget about her and forget about everything. Until it was too late.
Either way, time was growing short and soon enough it would all be over.

Sarah vanished leaving a crackle of magic.

She never saw the devilish smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

Let the dreamers wake. Let the sleepers rise.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Chapter End Notes

So there you have it. The dream. A few old characters make their re-appearance, including the ill-fated Finn – albeit in fantasy form and a cameo from baby Toby. Hope you were able to follow it. Slight stream of consciousness (as befits a dream sequence). Also a bit of a shorter chapter than the last few but it has served its purpose.

The dream song used is called Rise and it's by the Frames. I urge you to find it online and listen to it. It's a beautiful song and I thought it really fit the characters and their relationship. I've been waiting to use it since this story’s inception. The violins in it are haunting. It was also my wedding song (so I may be biased).

The line "their words were lost on the wind" was a paraphrase of a line from Chris de Burgh's The Tower.
Hunger and Craving

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part XXVI

Straddle the line in discord and rhyme.
I'm on the hunt, I'm after you.
Mouth is alive with juices like wine
And I'm hungry like the wolf.

Hungry Like the Wolf, Duran Duran

Jareth opened his eyes slowly, the hint of a smile still visible on his pale face. It deepened as he smoothed a hand down his dry clothing.

He had very carefully schooled his features when he had felt the girl stir beside him. It had been a surprise to awaken with Sarah so closely pressed against him - a surprise and a relief. For a moment he had simply savoured the sensation, her wicked claws sheathed for a change. It was amazing how soft and warm she could be when she wasn't fighting him at every turn. When he'd felt her breathing change, he'd been careful to mind his own. It was too tempting to see what she'd do. If she had kissed him he would have 'awoken' in a timely fashion, but she was too wary to do that, even with him at a disadvantage. He'd wager she'd thought about it though. For now it was enough that she hadn't fled. His body had been aware of every blessed inch of her. She had felt so ridiculously right he could almost forgive her everything.

Almost.

The dream was not forgotten. Hardly. Every moment of it was burned into his conscious mind. Even now he could smell the sea; feel it rushing up to meet him with a frightening finality. Jareth flexed his hand, remembering the sensation of being torn away from her. He had never felt so cold. Jareth shivered again despite the warmth.

He had warned her not to tamper with things she didn't understand, not that he had expected her to listen. She never listened. And they had both been laid bare because of her foolish machinations. For them it would always be a power struggle. The dance would never end.

Together we will rise…

But the beat was changing. He could hear the echo of the song even now. She had been on the point of kissing him, of that he was sure. The dream stole that moment from them, just as the wind stole her words from him. It begged the question, what exactly did the inestimable Ms. Williams really want from him?

The possibilities fueled an inner fire. It had been in danger of dying. Now that fire was spreading.

The Goblin King rose, leisurely brushed the grass from his clothing and retrieved his gloves and vest from the water's edge.
Poor Sarah. She always underestimated him. She really should have learned from his mistake by now.

He would teach her. Soon.

Adjusting his gloves, the Goblin King exited the vale.

"Stop calling me that!"

"Calling you what?" asked a confused voice, its owner cowering.

"That name!" Sarah was well aware that her voice was reaching a dangerously shrill and particularly childish level, but she didn't care.

"Shh!" cautioned one goblin to the others assembled. "The girl who ate the peach and kissed the King is in a bad temper."

Sarah shrieked in frustration.

"Maybe the King didn't like the kiss," suggested another helpfully. "She only has the one tongue after all."

He barely avoided the chicken that flew past his head. His companions were not as fortunate.

It had started the moment she had returned to the castle, and probably beforehand. Appearing in a cloud of glitter outside the throne room, a startled goblin had blurted out her new title in a high pitched squeak. It had not gone over well. And like anything that did not go over well, the goblins embraced it wholeheartedly.

She'd heard it a dozen more times before she made it to the throne. The more she denied it, the more she seemed to hear it. She couldn't even be sure how they knew. None had given her a straight answer, though they all seemed more in awe of her than before. One goblin had bowed so lowly, he'd lodged his horned helmet in the stone floor. He'd had to bed down for the night. Sarah couldn't decide what was worse – the fact that they all knew or that fact that they seemed to like her more because of it.

Resigning herself to the fact that she would find no peace, Sarah stalked out of the throne room and turned down a hallway blindly. She was restless and agitated and only part of it was due to the pint-sized terrors that plagued her.

Biting the peach had been an act of pure impulse; a desire to spite him and a thrill to shock him - a difficult feat at the best of times. Having him fall to his knees before her had been sweet justice. For once, she had truly tasted the power that lay between them.

And then everything turned to ashes.

He was right. Dreams were not games at all. She had hoped to teach him a lesson, to finally pay him in kind. Instead she was left feeling weak and confused. She didn't even notice the walls now shifting around her, leading her towards a destination of their design.

Sarah turned another corner and froze, all her anger forgotten. She had wandered into the room. The
room she had often dreamt about. The room she thought she had destroyed. Sarah exhaled slowly. Once more, stone staircases surrounded her in their dizzying defiance of impossibility. Everything was as it had been; untouched, as though the space still held an echo of their final moments. She bent to pick up a lone white feather, before memory assailed her with haunting clarity.

"You have understood nothing," Jareth told her. "You have answered none of the Labyrinth's riddles. You don't even know what the questions were."

"That wasn't our bargain."

Jareth threw back his head and laughed. "There, just as I told you. You have understood nothing."

"You are wrong. I have come to understand one thing very well. You are just putting on a show of confidence. It doesn't take me in anymore. You are frightened, Jareth."

"So are you."

"Yes."

For a few seconds, they were watching each other's eyes.

Sarah shivered. She felt restless and anxious and feverish. Most of all, she felt like a frightened little girl again – and that bothered her. When and if she ever willingly thought about the final confrontation with the Goblin King, it was usually with a bittersweet satisfaction. Jareth had always known how to disarm her; how to put her off-balance with his captivating presence and enigmatic smiles intended to mislead. Denying him had been vindication.

...maybe even absolution.

But his maddening lies always contained some vestige of truth and therein lay his poison. The truth was she wasn't sure she had ever really understood the Labyrinth at its heart, even after defeating it. She had certainly never understood its perilously seductive king and his ability to beguile.

"You are cruel, Sarah. We are well matched, you and I. I need your cruelty, just as you need mine."

She had dismissed those words at the time. Youthful naiveté. Bravado. All of the above.

Sarah stared at her hand and shivered again. The mark on her palm tingled. She could still smell the sea.

Why did dreams always end before the good part? She touched the hand to her lips before she realized what she was doing. She shook her head in denial, but the thought was immediately followed by others; ones that whispered how alone she had felt when they were ripped apart, ones that reminded her how right it had felt to awaken against him.

Ones that promised hope.

Together we will rise…

Sarah turned her back on the room and stepped into the corridor. None of it really mattered anyway. He would forget everything and it would soon be over. She would return home just as she wanted.

What she had always wanted…

Sarah repeated the mantra with more force than conviction. She absently tucked the owl feather into her shirt.
All stories must have their proper ending.

Jareth was being followed and had been for while.

The Vale of Morning had given way to the Fields of Midday and soon afterwards the Hollows of Dusk. The path he now followed had narrowed to such an extent that in some parts Jareth had to turn sideways to pass through the rocks, but so far he had met with no ill or calamity. In fact, he had met no one at all along the way.

But he was being followed.

Without power he might be, but even Sarah couldn't undo centuries of experience. Something was stealthily tracking him and he could sense its magic. The hair on the back of his neck had risen to attention and he could feel the faint vibration of movement in the air. Jareth rounded another narrow corner in the path, his skin prickling in awareness. He turned back the way he came. Five sets of luminous yellow eyes blinked at him. Five more sets then repeated the process.

Jareth caught the scent of something feral and wrinkled his nose in distaste.

"I'd offer a scathing comment on the rather pungent odour, but considering my… reduced circumstances, I will refrain. I must be feeling uncharacteristically empathetic."

The eyes blinked again.

"Such a funny Goblin King," purred a voice.

"Such a funny Goblin King all alone," purred another.

Out of the gloom stepped what could only be described as ten overgrown tabby cats. Their fur was a mottled reddish brown with darker markings. They had long, tufted ears and very pronounced whiskers. Their eyes were large and kohl rimmed and tracked his every movement. He noted the length of their unsheathed claws and the glint of their teeth. A few jumped onto the tall rocks beside him. He felt one swipe lightly at the tips of his hair.

"I'd rather you didn't do that," he warned. "Another vicious little cat has already managed to butcher it more than enough today."

The cats continued to watch him intently, their tails swishing.

"Funny, funny Goblin King," purred the tabby to his left.

"Funny, funny Goblin King has lost his feathers," purred the one to his right.

Jareth narrowed his eyes. He'd never cared for cats and these were something else entirely. Their yellow eyes never strayed from his face.

"Indeed," he offered briefly and then turned away from the tabbies to continue through the pass. A sharp swipe across his face stopped him. He touched a hand to his stinging cheek in surprise and then watched as the blood seeped into the dark leather of his glove.

"That was unwise," he said, his voice deathly quiet.
"No, that was tasty," objected the tabby, wholly unconcerned. It carefully licked the blood from his paw.

"You know who I am." The low statement was full of menace and promise.

"Tasty, tasty Goblin King," purred the offending tabby.

"Tasty, tasty Goblin King has lost his magic," they purred together.

Jareth schooled his features to betray none of the thoughts that were running rampant through his head. "That was very foolish. I had always thought cats to be smart creatures."

The tabby nearest to him cocked his head to the side and allowed his long tail to run its length up Jareth's arm. It sniffed the air. "And I thought all owls could fly away."

"Foolish, foolish Goblin King," they purred.

"Foolish, foolish Goblin King has lost his wings."

Jareth swatted the tail away. The tabby spit at him, narrowly missing his face with its paw. "Nasty little owl," it hissed.

"Get on with it," he bit back, all vestige of manufacture patience lost. "What test do you have? What pedantically profound lesson are you here to teach me?"

If cats could grin, they did so then. "Poor owl, we don't want to teach you," they purred. "We just want to eat you."

The tabbies had begun to coil around his feet, weaving between his legs in practiced motions. Their oily fur tickled his bare skin. He felt a tongue lick his calf, tasting. His skin burned at the rough sensation. Another licked his injured cheek, the stinging action breaking the wound open again. He was surprised by the sharp pain. They were toying with him. Magic or no, he had predatory instincts too.

In one quick movement, he grabbed the nearest tabby by the scruff of his neck and flung it as far as he could and kicked another as he darted between the rocks, taking off at a run. He smiled with vicious satisfaction when he heard the sickening thud and the angry yowls that followed. The smile vanished as he caught sight of the shadows soon dancing along the rocks beside him. The confusion hadn't lasted long and the cats were already at his heels. Their eyes followed him like little orbs in the darkness and he could almost taste their musk with every breath. He felt the back of his shirt shred through his vest and the warm trickle of blood drip down his spine.

The soles of his feet were raw from the harsh ground and his ribs were bruised from squeezing through some of the rocky outcroppings. He stumbled twice but managed to lash out at the tabbies as he did so. The pain only seemed to fuel their chase and heighten their hunger. The sky was growing darker and for a moment he wondered if he had somehow completed a circuit and was now returning to the maddening Forest of Midnight. He half hoped the cats had a taste for wood.

The path ahead had narrowed to such a degree that Jareth feared he'd be stuck like a pig on a spit. He paused, looking around wildly for another exit. Rough stone, almost black in the gloom, enclosed him on all sides.

Ten pair of eyes watched him expectantly, their pupils little more than slivers.

"We've had fun playing, little owl," mewled the tabby from the rock above him. It batted at his hair.
again. "But we are very hungry now."

The Goblin King smoothed his hair free with one hand. "I'm not inclined to play the victim. I lack the scope. Despite his injured cheek and shredded clothing, he looked the very epitome of a predator in the deepening darkness. His eyes flashed and his teeth glinted sharply. He could feel his adrenaline rising. "But the villain..." He breathed.

The tabby swiped at him again, but Jareth was too fast.

"You should keep in mind," he hissed, as he grabbed the offending feline by the throat, "that owls often eat cats."

The rest of the tabbies spit and growled, their tails flicking like whips and their long ears flattened. But none made a move, as though confused by the turn of events. He flung the large cat to the ground and pushed his way into the narrow passage.

A split second later the ten cats lunged as one.

Sarah rubbed her wrist, frowning at the dull pain that spread. She touched a hand to her cheek in confusion. Magic tugged at her centre.

She resolutely ignored it.

Jareth emerged alive, if not unscathed, from the hollows and into a maze of familiar sandstone walls, their hue almost red in the late day's sun. He had never loved the sight so much. Turning about he could see that he had stepped through a wide stone archway, no evidence of the narrow passageway on the other side, save for the large tabbies that milled angrily in the entryway. One was yowling ferociously, its ear torn.

"We've heard quite enough out of you, Fluffy!"

Jareth spun towards the unexpected voice. A gnomish woman was seated before a small table in a round tent made up of vibrantly coloured scarves. Her patch work dress appeared to be of the same material, her long and course grey hair bound in a like manner. A crystal ball sat before her. Decidedly old, and very bent as a result, her orange eyes were still surprisingly clear and were currently directing a shrewd look in his direction.

Jareth raised a brow. "His name is Fluffy?"

The old woman cackled, "Not likely. I just call him that because he doesn't like it."

From the hissing Jareth could hear, the tabby agreed with her statement wholeheartedly.

"Oh be off with you now. This one is not for you and no one has time for one of your fits."

The tabby shot Jareth a baleful look, but surprisingly followed the woman's crooked finger and stalked off in the other direction. The rest followed suit, tails twitching in the air haughtily.
"Delightful pets you keep," he remarked drily.

"Pets?" the woman scoffed. "Not likely. Only a twit would want a Cravling for a pet."

"Cravling?"

"I know," she sighed. "I prefer Fluffy myself, but they're called Cravlings for better or worse. Likely worse," she added after a moment's consideration. "You're very lucky." She gestured at the chair that had appeared before her.

Jareth found himself sitting down before he could consider otherwise. He glanced down at his ruined clothing and winced when his back made contact with rough wood. "That is not the word I would have used."

"You're right. Fortunate has a better ring." She plucked a piece of charcoal from within her dress and scribbled something down on a piece of parchment. Both vanished back into her ample bodice.

Jareth noted that the tent was strung with all manner of odd human things - thimbles, spectacles, marbles and even a ruined tube of lipstick. A tarnished fork dangled from one of the woman's ears. She caught his look. "Not many make it through the Cravlings. They are... ever hungry."

Jareth touched his marred cheek. The scratch had hardened and pulled on his skin painfully. It cracked open every time he smiled. "They had their fair taste, I'd say."

The woman chuckled throatily. "A taste is never enough. They are born of pure desire. Well, maybe not pure," she paused. The paper and charcoal appeared again. "Base desire. They act on impulse and need. And they take advantage of every weakness. They hunger and they crave and they can smell those same urges in others. It draws them. Their lot devours." She glanced at him pointedly. "You should understand that better than anyone."

Jareth found he had no response. He wanted to deny the comparison, to chastise her for the presumption, but his tongue stuck fast in his mouth.

The woman noted his discomfort and grinned broadly to lighten the mood. Her eyes swept him from head to toe. "Not that I blame them. You are a rather tasty morsel," she added with a leer.

Jareth flinched slightly.

The old woman laughed aloud. "You're safe. I'm married."

"Pity," he smiled wainly.

"Oh, I agree. Dreadful bore. And he snores," she sighed. "Though his hat is entertaining enough."

Jareth blinked.

"Enough about that though. Shouldn't you be off?"

Jareth couldn't help a look of surprise at her abruptness. He glanced down at the crystal ball. "Aren't you supposed to tell my fortune?"

The woman followed his gaze. "What, with a paper weight?" she asked with a laugh. She grasped one of his gloved hands before he had time to pull it away, her grip surprisingly strong. She ran a withered finger over the tiny gold ring lodged on his pinky, her orange gaze piercing. "I think we both know that we write our own destinies." She released his hand.
After a moment's silence, Jareth rose. He started to walk through one of the stone archways, but then paused. He turned and inclined his head slightly. "You are far wiser than your husband."

The old woman chuckled fondly. "Most wives are. See you remember that," she added with a sage wink.

He turned back towards the castle, its spires so tantalizingly close. His mismatched eyes seemed to spark with an inner fire as he stepped through the archway.

The Goblin King was off to conquer a crown.

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Chapter End Notes

The two passages in italics are taken verbatim from the novelization of the movie by A.C.H. Smith. Ergo, they are not mine. Don't sue me.

Together we will rise… a reference to the song from the last chapter by The Frames.

The Cravlings were an ode to (inspired by) the Tarrie Cats in Clive Barker's novel Abarat – a fantastic read. They were also a nod to Neil Gaimen's Sphinxes in the movie Mirror Mask – another very cool creation.
Portraits and Portents

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part XXVII

We are the music-makers
And we are the dreamers of dreams,
Wandering by lone sea-breakers,
Yet we are the movers and shakers
Of the world for ever, it seems.

And out of a fabulous story
We fashion an empire's glory:
One man with a dream, at pleasure,
Shall go forth and conquer a crown.

Ode, Arthur O'Shaughnessy, 1844-1881

Sarah stared at the proffered article with mounting panic and thinly-veiled distaste. A series of impolite, albeit entirely fitting, responses ran through her head, starting with the succinct "There is no way in hell I'm ever wearing that" to "Thanks. Now, would you terribly mind flinging it into the Bog?"

In the end she merely smiled. Thinly.

The goblins, feeling contrite for her new nickname or possibly just plain nasty, had contrived to offer Sarah an olive branch.

An olive branch in the form of a crown. Of sorts.

When she had returned to the throne room, still unnerved by her visit to the room, her 'loyal' subjects had immediately and rather dramatically thrown themselves prostrate on the ground. The one with the horned helmet was still stuck fast, so in his case the effort required was marginal. He was just happy to be part of the group again. Her initial surprise had given way to amused relief at the uncharacteristic peace to be had. That relief had been quickly replaced by a growing sense of unease. Goblins were never ever quiet.

Muskul, the one with the splintered mouth, had spoken first. "We made you something to say sorry. For throwing rocks and stuff." He nudged his companion roughly, who in turn pulled from behind his back the ugliest crown, or possibly a stylized punch bowl, that she had ever seen.

Sarah blinked and then blinked again, dearly hoping it was the latter. And that it came with fortifying punch already in it. "Ah… it's so… so…"

"Pretty?" offered one.

Sarah stared at the rusted and misshapen metal.
"Spectacular?" offered another.

Sarah stared at the dents and dings.

"Stupendous?" offered a third.

Sarah stared at the dubious stains. She paused, ",….unique?"

The goblins cooed in approval. Then they held the lump out expectantly.

Sarah promptly sat on her hands. "Oh… er, thank you, but I don't want… punch right now?"

They goblins looked at one another and then back at the hunk of metal in their hands.

"It's a crown," Muskul corrected helpfully. He was picking his teeth with one of his splinters as he spoke. Once finished he carefully jabbed it back into his lip for later use. "I even put the bite marks in it myself."

"Oh. Oh, of course. My mistake," Sarah replied. "But you know… I really don't need a crown."

The goblins seemed to find her statement very amusing.

"Yes, you do. All queens need crowns," a greenish goblin replied sagely. The others nodded in agreement.

"But I am not a queen," she countered carefully, not liking the direction of the conversation at all.

"You just don't know that you are because you don't have a crown."

Sarah frowned, trying to follow their logic. "No. I'm just not a queen."

"Uh huh," they disagreed.

"No, I am not."

"Yep."

"No!"

"Definitely!" The goblins looked as though they would happily continue the debate for hours.

Sarah decided to try a different tactic. "Is Jareth a king?" she asked innocently.

"Of course! Stupid question!" they immediately cried in unison. It was followed by murmurs of "not the brightest, that one" and "good thing she's pretty."

Sarah groaned. "But he doesn't wear a crown…"

"That's because He's a king." She was now on the receiving end of pitying looks.

She bit down her frustration. If she didn't know better she might have deemed Jareth a saint for putting up with them. "But how do you know he's a king if he doesn't wear a crown?"

"Because everybody knows He's the King," they nodded solemnly.

"Why do I need a crown then?" Sarah paused, still in denial about what she was about to say. "Couldn't you just know that I'm a…a queen?"
The goblins didn't even hesitate before answering. "Oh, we know. It's so you'll know."

Sarah just blinked.

"So you'll know that you're the Queen," Muskul pointedly eyed her 'borrowed' pants, "and not the King."

Sarah put a hand to her temple. "But you see I am not officially the queen. Yet!" she added hastily as they looked ready to resume the debate. "Why don't you just hold onto it until then?"

"But you will be soon," they insisted, pushing the crown towards her again.

"Well, we don't actually know that," she reasoned, firmly keeping her hands beneath her.

"But that's why you need the crown!" Even the goblins appeared to be losing patience at this point.

"He might not win."

There was a collective gasp. "Oh, He will win," they answered quickly. "He always wins!"

"Always?" Sarah mocked, gesturing to herself - only a little self-righteously.

"Well, mostly," they conceded petulantly.

"So then maybe not this time?"

"Yes, this time."

Sarah frowned at their unflagging conviction. "Look. Remember how I gave the king that peach-"

"You mean when you ate the peach and kissed the king?" Their faces were the epitome of false innocence.

"Ah… yes, well anyway," she huffed, "I'm afraid that he won't win this time either. Look." Sarah conjured a crystal and held it out triumphantly, preparing to show them their about-to-lose-again-ruler. She snatched it back in shock. Sarah shook the crystal like a magic eight ball and tried looking again. Her heart promptly stopped beating. The Goblin King was approaching the castle at an alarming rate. There was little doubt that he would easily reach her in time… with some to spare.

She only absently noted the blood on his pale cheek and the viciously shredded clothing, dark patches crusted on the fabric. He looked far worse than when she had left him. In fact, she almost wouldn't have recognized him had it not been for the look of determination etched into his sharp features. She'd worn a similar expression nine years ago – right before she had felled a kingdom.

Sarah shot to her feet in a panic, the orb vanishing as it slipped from her grip. She stared wildly about the throne room, her mind strangely detached. Goblin faces stared back in expectant confusion.

"I… the King… how?" she mouthed desperately, unable to form a coherent sentence. A series of mumbled expletives followed.

Beady eyes blinked at one another until a few grins began to slowly form. They spread like wildfire. Their King was coming home.

The gleeful laughter that followed rocked Sarah into action. "Stop that!" she shrieked.

The goblins turned astonished faces towards her. The crown fell to the floor with a clatter.
"Don't you have a job to do?"

The goblins stared at one another and then back again at her.

"Like go distract him? Fire some canons? Throw some livestock over the wall?" Sarah's voice was now more of a reedy wail than anything else. "JUST STOP HIM!"

The very idea of trying to stop the King, let alone daring to do so, was an entirely alien concept to the goblins, but they were bound by the rules of the Labyrinth. In jumbled unison they leapt to their feet, sort of scurried back and forth, generally causing more mayhem than order, before they finally formed loose ranks and marched out of castle.

Sarah perched on the edge of the throne and looked around the empty room, her nerves strung tightly. As soon as the command had left her mouth, Sarah knew it for an empty gesture. The goblins would fail.

No doubt spectacularly.

She was asking them to commit what amounted to treason – she couldn't imagine they would do so gleefully, let alone with any proficiency. Against her they had been no better than bumbling idiots. Sarah frowned. But this was not the Labyrinth of her experience. Her expression lightened momentarily. Jareth had made different choices and met with more danger - the angry wound on his face, the dried blood staining his shirt.

Sarah wrung her hands in indecision, the frown returning. She must not take anything for granted. He had underestimated her and then she had done the very same thing. She banged her fist down on the stone arm in frustration. Had Jareth also dreaded the inevitable nine years ago? Had he wrung his gloves together in indecision? She was so damned tired of feeling helpless, so tired of not knowing what to do. She had no power…

… no power…

Sarah fled the throne room, instinct taking over before reason had a chance to find its voice. Her heeled boots rang out across the stone floor. She never saw the dwarf watching silently from a shadowed alcove, his blue eyes glassy with guilt and resolve.

Sarah was out of breath by the time she reached the room, intuition and need alone guiding her through the twisted hallways. Peering through the doorway, Sarah was assailed by the same sense of vertigo she had experienced the first time. It was only years later that she had realized she'd won the moment she had entered the castle. That had been the issued challenge. Their final confrontation had been nothing more than smoke and mirrors – his desperate attempt at distraction. She had defeated the Labyrinth and won back her brother the moment she pushed open the castle doors.

She had defeated Jareth when she had chosen Toby over him.

Chewing her lip in indecision, Sarah took a few steps and tentatively leaned forward until she could see the stone floor far below. The circular opening gaped like a foreboding black hole in its centre. There was no longer a baby in need of saving, no Toby precariously perched on its edge to drive her, but desperation can be powerful too.

Sarah closed her eyes, and with a muffled prayer and a curse, she jumped, prepared to destroy a kingdom for the second time in less than a decade. The air was violently forced from her lungs when she landed abruptly, her legs collapsing beneath her. She opened watery eyes and wheezed. For a split second she panicked, as she had so many times as child, until her lungs filled with blessed air.
Coughing, she glanced around balefully. The room was annoyingly intact, just as she'd feared it would be. Magic must have somewhat buffeted her fall, or she would now be dead, but the landing had been less than forgiving. She had been punished.

Her right ankle screamed in protest when she forced herself to her knees and crawled to the edge of the void. Unlike before, there was nothing within but swirling mist.

It reminded her of a familiar cloudy sky in greys and steel blues.

She had once been terrified that Toby would fall into the abyss. Now it looked like salvation. Hesitantly reaching a hand within, she felt nothing but a strange coolness, like damp air. Wincing again as she stood, she paused, self-preservation screamed at her to reconsider.

You have understood nothing.

You have answered none of the Labyrinth's riddles.

You don't even know what the questions were.

Surely the Goblin King was preferable to the dangerous unknown. Surely he was better than the very real possibility of death. Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad. Sarah could not deny that part of her had never left the Labyrinth… or him. She allowed herself a dangerous moment to consider life with the Goblin King, but she had spent so long denying anything and everything that it was hard to think clearly. Sarah let out a shaky breath and stepped away from the hole, but her shift in weight caused her ankle to buckle again and she went down on one knee.

"Goddamn this place!" Her voice echoed hollowly throughout the room. Her eyes returned to the hole in the floor. Fuck it. She had already come this far, she thought savagely. Whatever lay within, it was not death. She was putting her faith in the magic – his magic to save her. He would never hurt her. Much. It was that strange conviction, bordering on trust, that lent her the confidence… while causing her the most unease.

Sarah jumped.

For a brief moment of elation, she thought it had worked. There was a bright flash of light and then everything went dark. She felt solid ground beneath her, her palms slipping through damp earth. She caught a faint whiff of burning embers from a fire, mixed with the familiar scent of rot. Her eyes widened in hope. And just as suddenly, it was gone. A firm tug on her wrist and she was falling all over again.

She landed in an ungraceful heap on the Goblin King's bed.

The once-again-perfect portrait over the fireplace stared back at her.

Sarah screamed in frustration and beat the mattress with her fists. She was tired of making these grand gestures if nothing fruitful was ever going to come of them. For a long moment she allowed herself to enjoy the tantrum and wallow in her misery. Her entire body ached and she felt worn out. Her stomach was banally reminding her that she hadn't eaten anything all day. A rueful voice wondered if the Goblin King would afford her a last meal before he murdered her for the trouble she'd put him through. She shuddered to think what else he might afford her. The thought only angered her more and she swung her legs over the side of the bed. She would be damned if she'd allow him the satisfaction of returning to the castle only to find her sprawled in his bed like some sacrificial offering. A sacrificial offering with a growling belly, no less.

She limped to the window and tried to see down into the Labyrinth below, but could spot only vague
movement. With a twist of her wrist she produced a crystal. She marvelling at its perfection, savouring the surreal feel of it in her hand. How many people ever got to hold a physical manifestation of pure power? She remembered the first time she'd seen one; how easily he had manipulated the delicate thing with his long fingers - a not entirely unsuccessful attempt at bewitching her. That's when she had first discovered that hands could be beautiful.

It's a crystal, nothing more.

But if you turn it this way and look into it, it will show you your dreams.

"My dreams…"

Pulse racing, Sarah closed her eyes and thought of home. She imagined Toby, Karen and her father sitting around the dining room table enjoying a family dinner. She could smell the roast beef and Yorkshire puddings. A place was laid for her. She pictured her old room with all of her toys and costumes – now a bizarre, untouched shrine to her childhood. Her antique music box was playing. With those images firmly cemented in her mind, Sarah spoke loudly and clearly, "I wish I was home. Right now."

Almost instantly, the air around her crackled and sparked. Sarah felt tendrils of her hair lift, her body oddly weightless. She smiled in relief, only to double over in pain, eyes flying open. Her wrist was burning. She tugged the sleeve of her shirt back and stared in horror at the snake-like silver markings, now glowing angrily around her wrist and forearm. She rubbed at them, trying to quell the sensation and erase the marks. Angry tears slid down her cheeks, though the pain had already receded, replaced by a general numbness. She watched dispassionately as the silver finally vanished beneath the skin.

"It's not fair," she whispered.

Jareth had made it to the edge of the Labyrinth's inner sanctum. All that stood between him and the end was a few more twists and turns, and then the Goblin City. He paused to savour the sight with satisfaction, but stopped short as he hissed in pain. His wrist burned as though on fire, the unpleasant sensation overshadowing all of his other complaints. He pulled away his torn shirt sleeve and peeled back the edge of his glove to reveal a silver glow. His smile returned.

Trying to leave so soon? If anything strengthened his belief in his impending success, it was her fear. For a moment he revelled in her desperation; it tasted like justice after all he had been through.

His enjoyment was tainted, however, by a wholly uncharacteristic emotion: pity. It was becoming increasingly common, he thought resentfully.

A part of him reminded that even when he won, he would not be greeted with open arms and a soft smile. His wrist lent merit to the reminder. Nothing would ever be easy between them. He couldn't change his nature or how the game was played, but seven hells if the girl didn't make him want to try sometimes. She had put him through sheer torment and still he spared concern for her happiness and welfare. And she would never thank him for that generosity… No, not bloody likely. Jareth scowled. Even on the cusp of victory, she tried to poison his triumph. She wasn't playing fairly.

But she would still fail.

He glanced up at the topmost tower and allowed a slow smile, neither cruel nor mocking, to lighten
his features. He'd worry about the future later. Right now he could think only of a warm bath and a glass of wine.

And of Sarah.

"Your Majesty?"

Jareth turned in mild surprise, the smile still lingering on his face. "Ah, Hogshead. Come to cheer me on? You know, there might be a knighthood in your future yet," Jareth laughed. "For services rendered."

Hoggle winced but stood resolute, not even bothering to correct his name. "Thank you, your Majesty."

"Oh, why so glum? It's almost over." Jareth chucked the dwarf on the chin, noting the downcast expression on his face. "It will all work out for the best."

"I didn't want to do nothing to hurt her," Hoggle mumbled brokenly. He fingered the bracelet on his wrist again.

"Neither did I," Jareth replied honestly, his face turning serious. "And I don't plan to. Much."

Hoggle winced again and then swallowed loudly, clearing his throat, "The goblins have mustered to defend the city."

Jareth barked in laughter, "Is that all? Don't worry your wrinkled head over it. I have enough time to deal with them, and somehow I suspect I've already made it past the worst." He flexed his slashed cheek.

Hoggle shifted his eyes. "So you don't mind that the city will be destroyed again?"

Jareth frowned. He had not considered that. It was an added nuisance - as usual. There was, of course, always the possibility the goblins wouldn't fight at all, but he'd had plenty of experience to tell him that loyalties were clearly not what they used to be. Time was also running out. He eyed the dwarf. "What are you suggesting?"

"A back door."

He raised a brow as the dwarf almost immediately lifted a hidden wooden door and propped it up against a wall, just as he'd done in the oubliette. Jareth looked down at his torn clothing and his lost boots. His feet were remarkably dirty. They looked alien to him. He'd never seen them dirty before. Not since he was a child. What a grand entrance he would make. Jareth shot the dwarf a piercing look. "Why are you doing this?"

Hoggle swallowed again. "Sarah is my friend."

Jareth weighed the sincerity of his words, remembering the unguarded look of joy on the dwarf’s face when he'd told him that Sarah would stay forever if he won. He finally pointed at the door. "You open it this time."

Hoggle unlatched the door with a trembling hand and stood back.

Jareth could make out a shadowed corridor. It struck him as vaguely familiar. He lowered himself until he was eye level with the dwarf. "You had better not betray me. We both know what the consequences will be. And it won't be the bog this time."
Hoggle mopped his sweaty brow and nodded, already retreating.

Something niggled at the back of his mind, but Jareth dismissed it. The door clicked shut behind him.

Hoggle collapsed against the nearest wall, his stout legs finally giving out. He glanced at the castle. "I made it right, Sarah. I finally made it right."

Sarah looked up, startled out of her sullen trance by the tentative rap on the door. For a split second she panicked, supposing it to be the Goblin King – possibly feeling murderous. She contemplated a very suicidal attempt at climbing down the tower, but decided he would probably cut the bed sheets himself. She even entertained the idea of hiding in one of the armoires, but nothing would be more ignominious than being found sitting on a pile of unmentionables - especially if they were his. When the tap came the second time, she shook her head in derision. Of one thing she was certain, Jareth would never knock on his own door, break it down maybe, but never ask permission.

Sarah cleared her throat, "Enter."

The door opened a crack and a winded and rather portly goblin poked its head in. He seemed very nervous, opening and closing his mouth like a trout, with only a few gurgling noises slipping out.

Sarah sighed, "Well? What is it?"

The goblin squeaked at her approach and backed up a step. "The King…"

She stiffened, her heart fluttering strangely.

The goblin waited for a reaction but when she said nothing he continued more slowly, as though speaking to a child. "The King you kissed after you ate the peach-"

"I know who! What about him?"

The goblin squeaked again, "He's gone."

"Gone?" Sarah mulled the unfathomable word over. "Gone where?"

The goblin blinked. "…Away?"

She suppressed the need to throw something. Like a goblin. "Away where?"

A shrug. "Not here?"

Sarah frowned in disbelief. "You mean you managed to stop him from entering the Goblin City?"

The goblin shook his head with an emphatic 'no'.

"…So shouldn't you still be guarding the city?"

"From what?" he asked, scratching a particularly large wart.

"From the bloody KING!"

The goblin retreated another few step until he was well into the hallway, his voice now a nasally
whine, "But he's not there!"

Sarah looked blank again.

"He's gone," he reminded her helpfully.

"Then… how? What..." she began, shaking her own head in confusion. In doing so, her eyes fell to the fireplace. The portrait was missing, a blank wall in its place. Sarah looked back at the goblin in disbelief, before she quickly conjured a crystal and looked within. Her expression changed from pure shock to something indefinable. She said nothing at all for several moments.

"Er... so should we still guard the city then?" The goblin asked nervously.

Sarah had almost forgotten him and answered distractedly, "I guess not." She looked back at the empty space on the wall. "Go do… whatever goblins do," she finished finally. She slipped past him into the hall.

The goblin grinned widely.

"But no taking babies!" she added as an afterthought, before disappearing around a corner.

The goblin's smile drooped.

Jareth crossed the short corridor quickly. Doubt snapped at his heals, even as the sconces flared to life in invitation. He pushed against the door at the end and stepped out into an open space. The door shut behind him. He blinked in surprise at the fading sunlight, the hair on the back of his neck beginning to rise. He was still in the Labyrinth, but more disturbing than that, the castle no longer lay ahead of him. Before his mind could process anything, he heard a slight gasp behind him. He turned slowly, his pale face draining of all remaining colour. "Wha-"

"Don't look at us, we're as surprised as you!" exclaimed the top red guard, glancing down at his twin in shock.

"I guess the girl really was better than you," remarked the blue guard, shaking his head almost sadly.

"Let me back through," demanded the Goblin King quietly. Despite his lack of powers, the air around him sparked violently. The guards cowered behind their shield, all pithy remarks forgotten.

"We can't. The doors have already opened once for you," whispered the bottom red guard.

"You've already made your choice. Those are the rules. Your rules," added the blue, before ducking down again.

Jareth snarled, his cheek tearing open again, and pushed against the red door. He followed suit with the blue; neither budged.

He looked at the castle, no bigger than a child's toy. Even without his powers, he could feel the ebb of time and everything it promised to with it. He had been so close. He would never make it if he had to follow the same route again.

"What must I do? I will NOT let this be the end," he seethed, the words slipping between clenched teeth.
"Go back," the guards answered in unison, pointing at the opening in the far wall.

Jareth cast a vicious look at the doors, but with a final glance at the castle he turned and disappeared through the opening.

He wanted to kill himself for his own stupidity and vanity.

He wanted to kill the dwarf even more.

Sarah quickly made her way to the portrait gallery. Once again the sconces and fireplace flared to life as she entered the silent room and still eyes shadowed her every step. She could feel their accusation. Her heart fluttered when she passed the portrait of Riven and Etain. When she stopped in front of the empty space beside them, she had already known she would find. She scanned the rest of the room for confirmation. The portrait was gone.

It was several moments before she turned away. Her expression was vacant. She'd loathed the portrait, with its almost human-like penchant for foiling her, but the room was unnervingly empty without it.

Victory?

She tasted the word like a foreign dish. It was sickly sweet and caught in her throat. She had not thought it possible; had in fact, almost resigned herself. She couldn't fathom what happened. She should be elated, and she was to a degree, but she still couldn't wrap her head around it. Everything was surreal and her mind was abuzz with questions still begging to be answered.

She turned towards the door, but stopped before Etain's portrait, her eyes rising to meet the doe-like brown ones. She glanced at the sea in the background before returning to the girl's face. "Er… Goodbye… and… I'm sorry." The latter she'd added as an afterthought and she'd immediately felt foolish, chastising herself for the contrariness and weakness. But the sentiment had been genuine. The lights flickered out as she exited the room - no direction in mind.

When she happened upon the throne room, Sarah paused outside and listened to the noise within. The Goblins were singing. It sounded more like drunken laments than the usually bawdy ditties they favoured. They would hardly appreciate her presence if they'd realized their king had lost, or would soon. At least she hadn't destroyed their city this time around. She moved on, feeling somehow more out of place than she had when she'd first arrived.

With nowhere to go, she returned to the tower. Her hand trailed along the carved wooden door of the nursery as she passed – she snatched it back as soon as she realized what she'd done. When she entered the master suite, a decanter of wine and a single glass were set on the small table before the fireplace.

A victory toast.

She allowed herself a half-smile and poured a glass, bringing it with her to the window. She perched herself on the stone ledge, setting the glass down beside her. The Labyrinth looked impossibly vast and beautiful spread beneath her. She took the opportunity to admire it with unfettered eyes - ones no longer concerned with winning and losing… or clocks and peaches… or Goblin Kings and lost dreams.
The setting sun was warm on her face and the air was soothingly fragrant, but she couldn't stop the unexpected ache that came with knowing it was very likely the last time she would ever see it. Regrets trailed the ache: She should have used her time more wisely. She should have sought out Hoggle and Sir Didymus. She should have found Ludo and his rocks. She could have explained everything – made amends. She could have said goodbye properly. Instead she had flirted with the enemy, flexed her hand at revenge, and foolishly played at dress-up. All her focus was Jareth. And now she had won, but she would be leaving just as soon. She imagined what Mrs. Whelan's face would look like when she returned. She pictured Declan's sad smile and hardened hands.

Sarah tried to trace her first trip backwards through the Labyrinth. Through the Goblin City, past Agnes and her baubles, past the sparkling ballroom, past the bog and Firey Forest… past the knockers, past the Wiseman with his hat and useless, cryptic advice… Sometimes the way forward is the way back… past the cleaners and the oubliette, past the door guards, past that friendly little worm (tea would be a comfort right now), past the great doors and Hoggle's pond… over the hill top and past the ticking clock… back into the nursery and straight to the wishes of a spoiled 15 year old girl.

…but what no one knew was that the Goblin king fell in love with her and gave her certain powers…

Sarah sniffed loudly and then laughed at herself. Far too late for regrets. To the victor goes the spoils, she reasoned defiantly. He's the one that failed, not her. She had not asked him to do anything she had not been made to do before. She traced the invisible pattern along her wrist as he had done, imagining what it would be like when the silver cord severed. Would she feel it? Would he? She wondered if she would see him again once the stone finally whisked her back to Tara. It was difficult to picture his reaction. She suspected he would not prove to be a gracious loser this time around.

Smiling somewhat ruefully, she cheered the vista below and took a sip of wine. It tasted of victory and loss in one. She watched silently as the sun dipped lower in the sky.

Jareth was running, the soles of his feet torn and bleeding. And still he ran...

Blood marked his path back.

"Time up yet?" asked one voice.

"What time?" asked another, his horns firmly lodged in the floor.

"His time, idiot!" barked a third.

"Well, excuse me if being stuck in the floor for hours leaves you out of the loop!" sniffed the second.

"It will be soon," offered a fourth, his ears drooping dejectedly.

"He'll be sad," sighed the first.

"He'll be mad," shuddered the rest.
Those that were able removed their helmets and bowed their heads, their eyes on the empty throne.

Tick, tick, tick…

Sarah watched the ornate clock with unwavering eyes, while emotions warred within. The full glass of wine was forgotten beside her. Her fingers furled and unfurled rhythmically on the orb in her hand. She was sorely tempted to watch him fail; tempted to witness his final moment of defeat, and yet she couldn't bear to see it again. She would afford him his dignity, if nothing else. The crystal remained obligingly clear.

It was far safer to just stare at the clock and forget to breathe.

Her easy mood had vanished in those last surreal moments. She might have wondered why she was shivering so violently, despite the warmth of the room, and she might have questioned her motives, but all her attention was trained on the second hand. It approached the thirteen with finalizing swiftness.

Almost over.

All stories must have their proper ending.

Her body thrummed in time to the mechanical movement. The long, elegant hand stretched for the twelve.

"Tick," she whispered softly.

"Tock," finished the amused voice behind her.

Chapter End Notes

The lines "you have understood nothing," Et al… is taken from the novelization of the movie by A.C.H. Smith.

The line "but what no one knew was that the Goblin king fell in love with her and gave her certain powers" is taken verbatim from the movie script.

The "throw livestock" comment was a complete and utter shoutout to Monty Python. *points finger* You know which movie and if you don't, well there's your homework.

The name Muskul, as always, belongs to Brian Froud. I just borrow him and make him eat guitars and such. He doesn't seem to mind.

Just in case anyone didn't get the reference, the void in THE room and Tara are connected. 'nuff said.
"Tock," finished the amused voice behind her.

Sarah jumped up, the crystal in her hand falling to the floor with a faint ringing. She clutched the glass beside her almost guiltily and gaped at the figure before her in mute shock - the flight or fight debate occupying all of her faculties. He appeared as he had in the orb: worn, exhausted, battered and bruised. His face wore an enigmatic expression – a strange mix of triumph, relief and something else altogether. In his torn and blood-stained clothes, hair wild, he looked raw - almost animalistic.

Entirely unpredictable.

For a moment they merely watched one other; the tension palpable.

Sarah lowered her eyes first in nervous surprise as the fallen crystal began rolling across the stone floor. It came to rest against a pale foot. When nothing happened, she exhaled slowly.

Until the current in the air heightened and the crystal opened. Swirling mists arose from within and began to twine themselves up a well-defined calf and around a finely-muscled thigh. The tendrils rose higher still, as they coiled around a lithe torso, dipping into the folds of tattered clothing and weaving through tangled hair; intimate as a lover's touch

Sarah followed their path with wide eyes.

His never left her face.

The mists spread across his skin like black ink, solidifying until they formed tight trousers, a dark shirt -open to the waist, and tall boots buffed to a high shine. The ugly gash on his face began to fade, as the skin knit together and smoothed to unblemished alabaster. His knotted hair lengthened and smoothed, gleaming silver in the early evening light. As the remaining mists cleared, the crystal rose into his gloved hand. He expertly manipulated it once, something akin to reverence flashing across his face, and then allowed it to vanish. A small smile curved the corner of his mouth.

Sarah automatically took a step back in panic. It was Toby's room all over again. The Goblin King was back in all of his glory.

Though her nerves were shot, she couldn't help the slight shot of relief. A very traitorous - and wholly superficial - part of her was pleased to see that his trip through the Labyrinth hadn't permanently ruined his irritatingly perfect features. It was strangely… right that he should always be
resplendent, however dangerous an effect he had on her. She had enjoyed the rare opportunity to toy with him, to watch him stumble and fall, all because it had been so forbidden. She had known that it could never last and that it wouldn't.

It hadn't.

And it did nothing to dull the bitter taste his impossible victory left in her mouth. Though apprehensive, she was undeniably curious as to what he would do. Sarah studied him warily.

Jareth still hadn't looked away from her face or spoken, and aside from the lingering half smile, his expression had not changed. The last time she had seen him in the flesh, she had awoken pressed against him, her head on his damp chest and the steady tempo of his heart in her ear. A betraying blush began to creep up her cheeks and it angered her to no end.

It drained when his eyes flicked down and he took a very determined step towards her. She retreated ungracefully until she felt the stone ledge of the window press against the back of her thighs, tipping her off balance. She floundered, hindered by the sharp sense of vertigo. In that time he closed the distance between them - whether to save her or speed her free fall from the tower, she wasn't sure.

He did neither.

Sarah's gaped as he calmly plucked the forgotten glass of wine from her hand, saluted the general space between them and promptly drained it in a single sip. She opened her mouth to speak, but he had already laid a gloved finger across her lips. He handed the empty glass back to her silently. Her shock increased tenfold as he stretched languidly, turned his back on her and walked to the bed, proceeding to collapse on top of it. He spread his long limbs out in a graceful sprawl and closed his eyes with an audible groan of contentment.

Sarah remained rooted to the spot, her lips still forming the unspoken question 'how'. She blinked twice in confusion before closing her jaw with a click. Of all the scenarios she had ever entertained this had certainly not been one of them. That certainty was further cemented by the deep breathing and soft exhalations emanating from the bed.

The Goblin King was asleep.

Sarah gnashed her teeth, her left hand forming a tight fist at her side. All of the fear, anxiety, morbid curiosity, and even the slight thrill of anticipation she fervently denied feeling, ebbed in an instant as she contemplated the slumbering male before her. In their place roiled pure and unadulterated fury, unfettered by any form of logic or coherent thought.

How dare the bastard just fall asleep!

After all of the hell he had put her through, even after the hell he had been through himself, that was the climax? That was the grand finish? It was almost too surreal for words. No hard-won babies, no crystal dreams, no declarations of love, no threats or recriminations, no seduction and no ravishing. It was just so… so… damned banal!

It galled her even more to admit that she was on some level disappointed.

Once again, Jareth had managed to be predictably unpredictable, the bastard. Sarah felt like a bow string that had snapped after being pulled too taut - effectively useless, but full of pent up energy. She scanned the room wildly; the childish need to throw something suddenly overwhelming. Remembering the empty glass in her hand, she raised it slowly. It never occurred to her that there was actual caution behind the old adage, 'don't wake the dragon'. With an impish smile she splayed
her fingers and mouthed a silent 'oops'. The resulting shatter echoed satisfyingly throughout the stone bedroom.

An airborne pillow traveling at high velocity immediately connected with her head, cloaking her rather smug smile in a spray of feathers. An exasperated sigh accompanied its arc. The tone managed to convey the requisite 'tsk'.

The sigh finally did it.

The ignominy of being hit in the head aside, Sarah never could abide condescension. After nine years of wondering, her trip to Ireland ruined, and ten odd hours of sheer psychological torture, it was the sigh that set her off. She fist the soft material in her hands, her eyes narrowing, and before any sense of self-preservation could find voice, she crept towards the bed.

Though fuming, Sarah was struck again with how different he could look in slumber. Nothing would ever change the haughty caste of his features or the arrogant laze he always managed to exude, but everything was tempered by sleep. Long lashes feathered his cheeks. She couldn't help wonder what the king of dreams dreamt.

Jareth shifted, and her eyes flew back to his face in embarrassment. The triumphant smile had returned, playing at the corner of his slack mouth. All tender thoughts vanished. He was probably savouring his victory.

Smug bastard.

Without hesitation she bent forward, intent on pressing the pillow over his self-satisfied face.

She really should have expected the gloved hand that immediately shot up and wrapped itself around her wrist, but she yelped anyway and vainly tried to pull away. The iron grip did not slacken.

Mismatched eyes narrowed on her face. "Cruel, Sarah. Very cruel."

Still imprisoning her wrist, the Goblin King tugged her even closer. The atmosphere in the room crackled. Sarah swallowed nervously despite her anger. She could feel the warmth from his body only inches below her; his breath fanning her face.

Jareth plucked the pillow from her grasp and placed it beneath his head. "But kind of you to see to my comfort." Her wrist was released and he closed his eyes again.

Sarah exhaled slowly and stared in disbelief at the man before her. Perhaps someone (or something) other than the Goblin King had returned in his place. There were many strange things in the Labyrinth and nothing was ever as it seemed afterall. But sweeping her eyes down his lean form she dismissed the idea - there was only one Goblin King. And she was mortified to find that his disinterest in her was really starting to irk. Clearly, she had eaten too many enchanted peaches. Clearly, she had read too many sordid paperback romances, because rules were supposed to be followed! Reasonably, she should have been relieved at the turn of events. Reasonably, she should have been ecstatic that he hadn't immediately swept her into his arms as he'd done on Tara.

Reason had never played a part in any of her dealings with the Goblin King.

When she heard his deep breathing resume, she knew without a doubt that she was disappointed. It felt like manipulation; he somehow tricked her into expecting his attentions.

It really pissed her off.
Retreating to the safety of the foot of the bed, she spoke loudly, "So you're just going to sleep? Just like that? How do you know I won't just leave?"

Jareth swore softly, raised a hand to his brow and remarked to the ceiling, "Having a wife seems to be a lot more trouble than I expected. I'm not sure I'm overly fond of the idea anymore."

Sarah's eyes widened in disbelief, before narrowing in anger. That anger was magnified, if misdirected, when she realized she was actually wounded by his statement. "You sanctimonious son of a b-

"Little girl..." he interrupted warningly.

"Stop calling me that. It's demeaning!"

Sighing in resignation, Jareth sat up to face her. He rested his arms on his bent knees, casually clasping his gloved hands between them. He studied her face for a moment before speaking, a touch of amusement in his voice, "You're right. No little girl is capable of such malevolence." He arched a brow. "But a pillow? I thought you had more imagination than that."

Sarah had taken a step towards him, intent on inflicting serious bodily harm, when she spied the faint smile. He was baiting her into losing control. She took a steadying breath, reminding herself that she wasn't 15 anymore and that attacking the Goblin King in his bed was not in her best interests. He'd relish the opportunity, tired or not. She regarded him coldly. "I should have left you in that puddle to drown."

Jareth laughed, eyes flashing in the low light of the room. "A more enjoyable way to die, to be sure." Watching the emotions play across her face, he was sure Sarah was remembering how those nubile female forms had entwined themselves around his body. The temperature in the room dropped accordingly.

Sarah chewed the inside of her cheek to stop herself from delivering the waspish retort she knew he was angling for. She glanced around the room to gather her thoughts. The lingering light from the dying sunset had painted everything rich, warm carmine. It was almost beautiful. Almost. The colours were too vivid, too unearthly. She returned her attention to the bed and spoke seriously. "If wives are so much 'trouble', you could always let me go."

Something powerful flashed behind his eyes. "But I won."

His expression gave Sarah pause. Her instinct was to demand 'how', but instead, uncertainty and fear returning all at once, she asked hesitantly, "What do you plan to do?"

"Do?" he quirked a brow. "I had planned on sleeping, but it's proving to be difficult, despite the fact," he gestured at the space around him, "that I conveniently find myself in a bed."

Sarah bristled. He was dismissing her again, as though she was just a weak little girl that had finally lost. She hated his confidence almost as much as she hated losing to him. "How do you know I won't just leave?"

The Goblin King smiled with false innocence. "Are you able to leave, Sarah?"

Instinctively, she glanced down at her wrist, remembering the burning pain and desperation. She tried to manifest a crystal. Nothing happened.

His smile deepened. "Then you will still be here when I wake up." Eying her mulish expression, he added provocingly, "I wouldn't be much use to you anyway right now."
Sarah's face immediately shot red. "I-I don't know what you mean!"

"I'm not going to throw you down on the bed and have my wicked way with you, not that the thought hadn't crossed my mind," he paused to catch her eye, "and not that you wouldn't enjoy it."

Sarah snorted indignantly.

"Lie to yourself, though you might," he winked.

She opened her mouth to vehemently protest, but he held up a leather-clad finger. "I doubt I could muster the energy anyway; I can't even manage a decent leer," he allowed his eyes to drift over her figure, "despite you looking ever so fetching in my clothes, mouth all agape."

Sarah shut her mouth with an audible snap.

"Therefore," he continued unfazed, "I think we can both agree that rest is of the foremost priority." His eyes glittered in the low light and Sarah automatically stiffened at their intensity. She tried not to notice how his shirt had conveniently fallen open, exposing more of his smooth chest. Just as she did her best to ignore how his bent limbs stretched his pants tighter than usual, defining the muscles in his long legs and everything in between.

The Goblin King smiled at her resolute expression. He patted the spot beside him innocently, "You are, however, more than welcome to join me..."

Sarah glared in way of answer.

"Ah. I thought not. Pity." He stretched with feline grace and collapsed back on the bed.

A moment later, she heard his breathing deepen again. The visceral part of her wanted to rail at him, demand to know how he'd won, demand to know what happens next, but reason prevailed; She wasn't ready for the answer. Emotions still roiling, she wandered about the room in frustration, before scowling back at the bed. Sleeping was most definitely not an option, and she'd be damned if she would just sit there and wait patiently for him to awaken. She might not be able to leave the Labyrinth, but she could at least put some distance between them.

She was halfway to the door before she realized there wasn't one anymore.

"Son of a...!"

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"Did you hear that?" asked one voice.

"Hear what?" asked another.

"A shrill sort of scream," replied the first.

"Maybe a chicken?" offered the second.

"No... too noisy," said the first, twitching a rather mottled ear.

"A chicken getting run over by the cleaners?" suggested a third.

There was a general quiet as all listened intently.
"Nope. No crunching," reasoned a fourth.

"Or squinching. There was a lot squinching noises last time," nodded another.

They all bowed their heads in a moment of respect.

"But you know what screaming always means?" chirped one excitedly.

The goblins eyed one another in confusion, before their faces broke into toothy grins. "The King is back!" Helmets and some of the smaller goblins were tossed into the air.

"And the Queen is some mad," added one goblin sagely, even as he bent to pick up a discarded crown.

Hoggle shuddered, his blue eyes glassy as he cast a worried look at the tallest tower of the shadowed castle.

He had failed. He had failed to redeem himself… he had failed Sarah.

And His retaliation would not be swift and painless.

Sarah ran her hands over the stone, her jaw clenched tightly, as she tried to find evidence of the non-existent exit. She thumped her fist hard on the wall in frustration. The lack of objections coming from the bed indicated that either the occupant was in a very deep sleep or choosing to ignore this latest outburst. She suspected the latter.

Casting a wary glance at the bed, Sarah sank into one of the chairs by the fire and watched the dying embers from beneath heavy lids. Her stomach growled. She shoved a few grapes from the bowl of fruit into her mouth and chewed dispassionately. Though starving, their sweetness was completely wasted. She half-heartedly stifled a yawn. Glancing at the discarded history of Riven and Etain, she recalled Jareth's harsh admonition at the naiad's pool:

'You see only what you want to see, Sarah, and only what you expect to.'

Frowning, she picked it up and absently flipped through the worn pages. Moments later her eyes drifted shut.

Sarah startled at the sound of the book hitting the floor. The fire had almost completely died, leaving the room in deep shadow. Slight movement from the chair next to hers made her spin defensively. Glossy black boots gleamed in the dim light. She slowly followed them upwards to a pair of lean legs. A leather-clad hand rested on the arm of the chair, long fingers thumming rhythmically. She spied a strong jaw and fine features through wisps of pale hair. Sarah automatically looked to the bed, but it was still occupied. When she turned back nervously, a pair of startling blue eyes met hers.

"Riven…"

The figure slowly smiled. "Sarah."
Fire flared to life in the grate.

"How… I…" she stumbled over the words.

Riven's smile deepened as he gracefully placed a grape into his mouth. He leaned towards her and Sarah instinctively shied away, but he merely retrieved the fallen book from the floor. He ran a long finger across the cover, almost reverently, before returning it to her lap. Sarah directed another worried look towards the bed.

"He sleeps," Riven offered evenly.

She turned back and studied his face, noting the similarities and differences in the aquiline features and lean frame. He was cold and beautiful. Sarah was captivated.

His elegantly raised brow at her frank scrutiny was so reminiscent of Jareth that Sarah blushed.

He grinned at her discomfort. "No need to be coy. I am terribly handsome."

"And terribly modest," she remarked dryly, though her cheeks remained stained.

"Come now, Cariad. False modesty is never becoming."

"A trait you've passed onto your son."

"Mmm, he's rather handsome too," he remarked slyly.

Sarah huffed and was on the point of correcting him when she noted the all too familiar smile lying in wait at the corner of his mouth. She bit back her retort.

He leaned towards her again and Sarah forced herself to remain boldly still.

"You're rather lovely, Sarah Williams," he observed after a moment's consideration.

She said nothing but shivered when he swept a gloved finger gently along her jaw line and then lightly threaded it through her mussed hair. Etain never stood a chance.

"And rather cruel," he added, but without any hint of censure.

"So are you," she accused softly.

He smiled briefly, withdrawing his hand and staring into the flames thoughtfully. "So I have been told."

"And rightly so," added Sarah archly.

The smile returned.

"Your son is…" She trailed off.

"Many things," he finished.

They both lapsed into silence, watching as the flames consumed the wood.

Sarah's brow furrowed several moments later. "This is just another dream, isn't it?"

"I wonder what will happen when you finally decide to awaken."
Sarah's eyes flew open at the sound of a book hitting the floor. The room was cloaked in shadow, the fire long dead. The fleeting feeling of disorientation was immediately replaced by shock when she realized where she was.

Why is it always the damned bed!

She carefully turned towards the figure lying beside her, her breath hitching. She relaxed slightly when she noted the lowered lids. Her initial instinct was to immediately remove herself from the bed, but she stilled. Had she somehow moved herself? It was a rather disquieting thought. She cast a suspicious glance at the male beside her, but still he did not stir. She was on the point of gently easing herself from the bed, when a warm breeze lifted the curtains and bathed the room in moonlight. The wind carried forth the faint scents of the Labyrinth below … and something else.

His smell, indefinable and unique to him, made her skin prickle in awareness. She hadn't realized until now that it hadn't been quite right when last she had seen him; that it had been missing something – some elemental part of who he was. Unable to refrain, she inhaled deeply, embracing the strange sense of comfort it brought. At some point he had become disturbingly… right.

She wanted to stroke him, lace her fingers through his hair. It was like looking at a caged beast - an intelligent, cunning one. Sleep were the bonds and they would break with daylight. Then'd he be unpredictable again. Or perhaps predictable. Either way dangerous. It would be best to touch him now.

She tucked her wayward hands beneath her head.

'Many things' indeed.

Jareth lay awake, listening to the sound of her breathing change with a sense of embittered satisfaction. The warmth of her body beckoned, but he held himself still. Only feet apart and the distance was daunting.

Somewhere along the way the game had changed.

Canting his head to look at her, his expression darkened further. He was sure of one thing; he would never let her go. He couldn't. Not when he'd been so close to losing...

His side ached and still he ran. He was beyond the point of strategy; his mind everywhere and nowhere at once, taunting him with a single word:

Defeat.

Rounding another corner, he froze; his face contorting in a mixture of inhuman rage and desolation. Gone were the twists and turns, replaced instead by an endless corridor of moss and roving eyes.

He was back at the beginning.

With a vicious snarl, he slammed his fist into the cobbled wall. Several brick shattered, as did several
bones in his hand. That was a new sensation, but if he noticed the pain, his expression betrayed nothing. He was entirely focused on the tiny gold ring now dented into his finger.

Sarah.

His hours in the Labyrinth flashed through his mind in a torrent of bitter images. The fortune teller with her foolish husband, the Cravlings with their unending hunger, the naiads' embrace, the caustic forest and speckled painters, the harlequins and their changing faces, the broken statues, the foul-mouthed knockers, the foolish Wiseman with his wise wife, the tunnels... he grimaced... the oubliette and the maddening door guards, the worm...

Jareth's eyes widened.

... 'Go left'...

Jareth probed the wall until his hands found the opening. Again he found himself in a dim stone corridor, wall sconces flickering to light. A wooden door waited at the end of the hallway.

It would either lead to his destiny or his defeat...

It had led to Sarah.

Jareth smiled despite his misgivings. He would savour his victory slowly. Just as he would always treasure the expression on her face when she'd realized he'd won. Wine had never been so sweet and Sarah's fear had never been so enticing. Nor had her uncertain defiance. He stole another glance in her direction, lingering on the softness of her features in the moonlight and the gentle curves of her body. Something else to savour. She would be all teeth and claws in the morning.

He hadn't lied; he was exhausted, both in mind and body. He'd longed to do more... he deserved more.

But there had been some satisfaction in provoking her – in shaking her rigid expectations. Time enough to live up to them later. Oh the possibilities.

When he found sleep, a smile lingered on his lips.

The wind lifted the curtains again. Neither dreamer had noticed the lack of portrait over the fireplace.

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Falling Slowly

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part XXIX

So you think I'm dressed to impress you,
Say I walk a little too tall?
I think I may caress you
And show you how I fall.

I am Divine, David Bowie

Everything comes in threes.

Sarah awoke for the third time that night to the distinctive sound of something hitting the floor. Biting back the gruff curse born of shock and exhaustion, she jolted upright and scanned the dark room from beneath heavy lids. Moonlight from the open window cast long shadows that writhed and danced along the walls. She blinked away the bleariness, hands pressed hard against her temples. The heavy curtains billowed, their weight causing them to drag noisily across the stones.

Sarah exhaled noisily. The wind. Sometimes it is only the wind.

Jareth, to her dismay and relief, slept on beside her; his pale face turned away. She watched him for a moment, her expression clouded, as his lean torso rose and fell with each measured breath.

Though removing herself from the bed was undoubtedly the wisest course of action - morning would be awkward at best - Sarah found that her tired muscles showed little inclination. She was in the process of offering a few strongly-worded cautions to her defiant body when a flicker in the wardrobe mirror stole her full attention. Childhood fears of ghosties and ghoulies immediately ran rampant. But it was the realisation that she had unconsciously moved closer to the man beside her, seeking a measure of comfort or protection, which really unnerved her. After another nervous look around the room revealed nothing extraordinary, she shifted away and allowed herself to relax.

Marginally.

It was rather difficult to be prosaic when one had been dragged into a fantasy world. Twice.

And she could only imagine what manner of monsters dared lurk under the Goblin King’s bed. They would have to be of the decidedly evil sort. Even then, she'd probably be safer under the bed than in it.

With a wry smile at her own foolishness, she reluctantly lay back down, trying very hard not to think about the fast approaching morning and the surrealism of her life of late. Perhaps she would now dream of 'mundane' things, like washing dishes or marking papers.

A moment later, a leathery hand clamped over her mouth, banishing thoughts of all things ordinary. Blue eyes bore beseechingly down at her, while a gnarled finger motioned her to be quiet. Sarah
nodded slowly and the hand covering her mouth was removed.

"Hoggle..." she breathed in wonder.

"Sarah," he replied sadly.

When the initial shock wore off, Sarah nervously glanced behind her. To her relief, Jareth had not stirred. She was not foolish enough to suppose that he would welcome a midnight visitor, especially this one. A quick glance at her friend's face revealed the fear to be mutual. She gently eased herself from the bed, cringing when she felt the mattress shift beneath her weight.

Once free, Hoggle immediately clutched her arm and began pulling her away from the bed. She opened her mouth to whisper a question, but the sheer desperation in his eyes silenced her. Hoggle was positively trembling. Without another word, he pulled her to the large mirror and stepped within, sinking beneath the quicksilver.

Sarah instinctively flinched when her hand met the cool, fluid glass - her eyes flying to the bed like a child caught mid-sin. With surprising strength and a choice epithet, Hoggle tugged her the rest of the way through and then abruptly released her. Sarah stumbled on the cobbled ground, her eyes adjusting to the change in light.

Distinctive ivy-covered walls zigzagged around her in all directions. Crimson creepers spread like pulsing veins across their stones, while vivid night blooms pulsed in the warm breeze, occasionally playing host to a flashing firefly or two. A long-neglected fountain lazily dribbled dark water in the centre of the space, its marble figure long since ravaged by time and elements. Beyond the enclosed walls, Sarah could make out the castle - impossibly far in the distance, its spires gleaming ominously bright in the starlit sky.

Hoggle watched her from a few paces away, his stance wary. His hands fidgeted with a worn plastic bracelet on his wrist.

Sarah caught the nervous gesture and immediately softened at the sight of the familiar trinket. Quickly closing the distance between them, she flung her arms around him. She frowned when he recoiled slightly - almost flinching at the contact - but a moment later he returned the embrace and smothered a low sob into her long hair.

Sarah pulled back when she felt the dampness on her neck. "Hoggle?"

The dwarf wiped at his face angrily and turned away. "We don't have much time."

"Hoggle?" Sarah repeated, plucking at his shoulder to turn him around. "What's going on? Tell me. I'm your friend," she pleaded softly.

Hoggle shuddered at the word, his twisted body spasming with emotion. He turned back slowly and Sarah noted for the first time how much older he appeared – an anomaly in a world where time was little more than a game.

Hoggle made no move to speak, but continued to pluck at the bangle on his wrist.

Memories dancing in her eyes, Sarah snatched his satchel of jewels and held them up playfully. "I'll give them back if you tell me…"

Hoggle smiled weakly at her antics.

Sarah's own faded. "Not going to work this time, huh?" She looked down, her hands now fidgeting
with the gaudy baubles. "I know I haven't been a good friend but-

Hoggle let out a small wail and clutched her hand. "Don't say that, Sarah. Never say that! You've been the best friend I ever had."

His face was so solemn that Sarah couldn't help but laugh.

Seeing her expression, he seemed to wither all over again, his voice gruff, "But I ain't no one's friend."

Sarah's face fell. She ached at the raw hatred she heard in his voice. "Hoggle if this is about helping Jareth, don't worry about it. I know and it wasn't your fault - at all." She laid a comforting hand on his shoulder but he recoiled as though burned.

"Not my fault?" he repeated incredulously, his voice cracking with self-loathing.

"Jareth's cunning and manipulative-"

Hoggle shook his head. "I was selfish. I... I wanted to keep you here forever. I ain't no better than Him. I ain't no one's friend," he repeated forcefully.

Sarah sighed and lowered her head again, searching for the right words. "Well... you're my friend, Hoggle."

His blue eyes hesitantly met her determined ones. They alone had not changed in the long years apart.

Sarah placed a hand over his wrist. "And I'm keeping you."

Despite his guilt Hoggle's felt his lips twitch involuntarily.

Sarah echoed the small reflex. For that precious moment, she dismissed the events of the past few days, forgot that she was now prisoner to a world she had once dearly loved, and was once again the girl on the cusp of womanhood with a motley assortment of unlikely companions, lost in the midst of an adventure.

"So where's Ludo and Sir Didymus?" she queried, eyes shining brightly.

Hoggle immediately sobered at her question, the easy mood vanishing, and threw his gnarled hands in the air. "Eaggh! We don't have time for this!"

"Hoggle!" Sarah protested as she was clumsily pulled to her feet. "What's going on? Where are you taking me?"

An incoherent mumble and a sharp tug was the only reply. She caught Hoggle's fearful glance at the castle and paled.

"Hoggle, stop!" Grabbing his arm, she forcibly turned him towards her. "What the hell is going on? I'm getting really - and I mean really - tired of being dragged around by everyone in the last few days."

Hoggle ignored her and began pulling on her arm again, his tone frantic, "Maybe I can still make it right. I will. I'll makes it right!"

"Make what right, Hoggle? I don't understand. At. All!" The desperation in her friend was catching and Sarah felt herself tensing, the hairs rising on the back of her neck and her skin prickling with
phantom sensation.

"I'll gets you someplace safe," he persisted, unfazed by her objections, "and then… and then I'll figure somethin' out."

Sarah stilled in sudden suspicion. "Oh my God, Hoggle. Are you trying to be my knight in shining armour?"

Hoggle's cheeks reddened, but he offered no denial.

"You little idiot," she murmured, not unkindly. She cast a wary glance at the spire. "He'll be really angry over this, Hoggle. We both know he won't take your interference well." Guilt coloured her tone. "Not after the first time."

Hoggle said nothing, but his limbs began to quake again.

Smiling reassuringly, Sarah straightened his vest with an almost motherly affection and did her best to speak lightly. "Maybe you should just take me back before he finds out. He's my…" she paused to find the appropriate word, "…problem. He'll never have to know."

"It wouldn't matter anyway. I got nothing to lose," Hoggle countered bleakly.

"Why not?" Sarah paled further. "What did you do, Hoggle?"

"I double-crossed him. Again!"

At the look of horror on Sarah's face, he continued quickly, the words spilling from his mouth in a deluge of guilt and fear - perhaps a small tinge of pride. "He was so close to the castle and I just had to make things right! I - I led him… away. Sent him all the way back."

He smiled ruefully. "I finally led someone back to the beginning."

Sarah released a shaky breath. "Oh Hoggle…"

"I did it for you, Sarah! But it didn't work. Jareth's too crafty. Should'ha known! That's why I had to try again." His tone softened. "And when I heard you scream…"

Sarah winced at his concern. "Hoggle, you're far too good a friend sometimes. But you still shouldn't have. He wasn't… hurting me."

She shook her head at his sceptical look. "Nevermind. How did you get into the castle? Does Jareth know about the mirror? How did you know about it?" As the question left her mouth, she recalled standing before it earlier that day, clad only in Jareth's pants and imagining all sorts of naughty and absolutely forbidden things. She coloured and shot a scrutinizing look at her friend.

"I knows all the secret ways. I can maybe keep you hidden long enough to find help." Hoggle sounded like he was trying to convince himself, as much as her.

At her look of doubt, he sniffed in irritation. "There are other magics than just His."

Sarah thought of the endless rows of books in the bedroom and of all the portraits in the gallery and tried not to let the patent disbelief show on her face. She should be elated that there was a possibility of escape, however narrow and unlikely… and rather poorly planned. She had always been an unfailing optimist.

Instead she felt confused and worried and, perhaps most disturbingly, torn. Everything was spiralling
out of control.

She glanced down at the little man that had risked everything for her, wishing she could erase the lines of self-hate from his face. His watery eyes were pleading. In that instant, she suddenly understood that he needed to be her hero more than she needed to be saved. This wasn't really about her at all.

Impulsively, she leaned down and lightly kissed him on the cheek. Both immediately held their breath, as though waiting for the ground to give way beneath them, and then laughed derisively when it didn't.

"Lead the way, Sir Knight," she offered warmly.

Hoggle clasped her outstretched hand, his cheeks now a brilliant red.

"And just - what -do we have here?"

Both figures broke apart, their smiles fading. They turned warily.

Jareth lazily rested against the leafy wall, his body almost indistinguishable from the darkness, his face shadowed. His expression was relaxed, almost bored, had it not been for the coldness in his eyes.

Everything in the garden grew silent. The air itself seemed to thicken and slow. Waiting.

And then, for the second time in less than two days, Sarah did the only thing she could think of:

She ran.

Hoggle barely had time to yelp before he was dragged through an archway, his diminutive proportions easily overwhelmed by her longer strides and iron grip. He faltered several times, remaining upright by Sarah's will alone. Both could think only of the other. Neither dared look back.

Sarah registered Hoggle's laboured pants, but couldn't force herself to stop; even the knowledge that her decision was futile, not to mention childish, failed to slow her.

All the pathways were unfailingly identical. Even the hedges were against them, tearing and scratching as they passed. More than once a wall appeared before them so suddenly that they stumbled and fell. They were running blind, even the stars had dimmed and refused to give off much light. Whenever they stopped, Sarah swore she could hear claws scrape against stone. Hoggle had turned a deathly shade of white.

No matter what direction she chose, the castle loomed ever near, flaunting her failure. How strange to be running away from a place she had once so fervently wished to reach. Bile rose at the morbid justice of it all.

Weaving through the twists and turns with mindless urgency, her sole goal was to find a relatively safe hiding place for Hoggle; she had already braced herself for her own defeat. She counted on Jareth's love of the chase to buy them enough time.

Her faith was sorely misplaced.

Rounding another bend Sarah stopped dead, a low shriek escaping her lips. Hoggle wavered and then collapsed beside her, his chest heaving in disbelief.
The fountain's spray sounded like laughter. The fireflies flickered with mocking applause. Jareth hadn't moved from the wall, even his expression remained unchanged.

The Goblin King was through playing games.

Sarah helped her friend to his feet and then stepped in front of him. She could feel Hoggle quivering against her legs. His fear lent her strength.

Jareth smoothly pushed himself off the wall with his boot and cocked his head to the side. "Finished, then?"

Sarah set her chin and stared boldly back, trying hard not to appear the errant child she felt. Swallowing dryly, she tried to think of something suitably pithy and Sarah-like to say. And failed.

Jareth approached slowly, almost lazily. "A little reunion, is it? A midnight tryst between old friends?" He stopped a handsbreadth away; eyes piercing. "Or is it something else?"

The tone was overly pleasant, almost saccharine, and Sarah was suddenly more apprehensive than she'd ever been on Tara.

Leaning forward conspiratorially, his breath cool against her warm skin, he whispered, "Could it be that you were trying to leave, Sarah?"

A bead of sweat slowly slipped down her neck and disappeared into her shirt. His eyes traced its descent.

Before she could answer, Hoggle wormed his way between them. "You leave her alone, you leetch!"

Jareth had him by the throat in an instant, his movement so quick that Sarah felt, rather than saw the action. He thrust the little man sideways against the garden wall, his demeanour entirely lethal. "I am quite certain I wasn't addressing you." Jareth's fingers punctuated the statement. "Yet."

Sarah saw Hoggle gasp in response, his short limbs flailing. "Stop it! You're hurting him!" she screamed.

Jareth squeezed once more and then released his captive. Hoggle collapsed on the ground in a fit of violent coughing.

Jareth glanced at the dwarf before returning his attention to Sarah, his tone dismissive. "I hardly think you're in any position to give me orders."

Eyes warily trained on the Goblin King, Sarah cautiously moved to Hoggle's side and helped him to his feet. "Just leave him alone. He was just talking to me. Nothing more."

Jareth laughed at her blatant lie. "Unlikely." He lowered himself towards Hoggle, propping his elbow on a black-clad knee. "Aren't we the uncharacteristically brave one? Did you think I wouldn't remember?"

Hoggle was shivering uncontrollably, his pallor waxen, but he managed to croak weakly, "I hads to do it, Majesty."

Jareth smiled thinly, the tips of his canines glinting, and lowered a hand onto Hoggle's shoulder. "And you know what I have to do."

Hoggle nodded.
Sarah's eyes darted between the two. "Wait! What? Do what?"

Jareth rose and regarded her impassively, his hand still resting on Hoggle's shoulder.

"I won't let you!" she railed, acutely aware that she was close to tears and mortified by it.

Jareth simply raised a brow at her near hysterics.

Sarah hugged her arms around herself at his continued silence, her voice softening until it was almost placating, "Please… he just wanted to help me. He's my friend."

Something snapped in Jareth, his body rigid as he hovered over her. "Friend?" He seemed to taste the word and find it bitter. "How easily you fling that title away." He gestured dismissively at Hoggle. "On the basest of creatures."

"Better a 'base'friend than a jealous villain!" Sarah replied acerbically.

Jareth's face flickered with emotion, before hardening again. He pointed at Hoggle. "Remove yourself."

Hoggle looked worriedly between the two, indecision wrought in every feature. His ingrained sense of self-preservation bid him take the temporary reprieve, but loyalty forbade it.

Seeing his determination, Sarah caught his attention and jerked her head in the direction of the archway, her eyes flashing warningly. "Leave," she mouthed.

He hesitated a dangerous moment longer before moving towards the opening, head bowed low and mumblings of self-abasement punctuating his steps.

"Oh and Hoggle?"

Hoggle paused at the king's surprisingly light tone. He raised his head uncertainly.

"Remember what I promised if she ever kissed you?"

Hoggle didn't have the opportunity to answer before the ground swallowed him whole, Sarah's scream and Jareth's smile accompanying his descent.

"Where is he?" she demanded, her eyes still trained on the spot where her friend had stood.

"Alive," was the indifferent reply.

Sarah opened her mouth and then wisely closed it. Alive was relative and by no means a permanent state.

An uneasy silence descended.

Sarah finally broke, "Well?"

Jareth's eyes glittered at her indignant tone. "Well what?"

"That was beyond cruel." She regretted the words as soon as they escaped her lips.

Jareth feigned surprise. "Isn't that how I'm supposed to act? Isn't that what you always expect?" He reached forward and traced her lips with a slim finger. It was the first time he had touched her. "What you demand?"
Sarah jerked her face away, hoping he hadn't caught the betraying shiver. "I don't do that."

"Don't you?" He folded his arms restfully. "You love casting everyone into roles; bestowing titles as your favours."

Sarah frowned. "I hardly think we should be examining my faults."

Jareth's laughter was hollow, almost strained. "Why not? We already know mine." He held up a hand and began lowering his fingers successively. "I took your mewling little brother when you asked, I took away your time when your ego demanded I up the stakes, I offered you goblin fruit when you were hungry." His voice deepened. "I tried seduction when your desires invited it."

Sarah felt an unsettling warmth creep across her skin. Another bead of sweat followed the first.

Jareth lowered his last digit slowly, insinuation heavy in his tone. "And then I came back for you." When he unfurled his fingers, a crystal was perched on their tips. Sarah realized she would never tire of watching him do that.

"I gave you what you wanted," he finished softly.

She dragged her eyes from the mesmerizing orb and returned them to his face, startled at the intensity in his expression.

"What I…?" She laughed nervously to cover her discomfort. "You're lying. I've never wanted anything from you."

"Pretty lies," Jareth admonished. "You wrote your own fairytale, Sarah. It was your choice to make it one without the happy ending."

"Who says I wasn't happy," she countered, tone truculent.

"Were you happy to give up your dreams?" He moved forward.

"I had to," she replied weakly, taking a step backwards. "Fairytales aren't supposed to come true."

"It was your choice to paint yourself as the martyr and me the villain. I am starting to wonder if you're capable of anything else."

Sarah felt like a prey being stalked, trapped by his beguiling words, lulled into surrender.

Her back was now against the garden wall, the heady scent of floral mixing with a more masculine musk. It was cloying her senses. "Stop playing games! This is my life."

"But I did stop," Jareth smiled slowly. "I won."

He smoothed a damp lock of hair away from her face. "And I didn't even throw a victory party," he added acerbically.

Sarah swallowed hard, remembering the streamers and music and dancing goblins. It seemed so long ago and so unreal - the elation, the slight pang of foolish regret for the one notable absence.

And then she thought of those last tense minutes in the tower: the emotions she had ignored, her damning disappointment when he'd simply gone to sleep.

Jareth was staring at her expectantly, daring her denial. She wondered how much he could read in her face.
"I didn't... I didn't want..." she repeated with more force than she felt and tried to forcibly step around him when words failed.

Jareth ensnared her upper arms, his breath fanning her face. Hers stopped altogether.

"Isn't it? Isn't it what you still want?" Electricity punctuated his words. "A dramatic confrontation with your villain?" The last word was nearly spat.

"I-' Sarah faltered, her will warring with the startling veracity of his words. Her body tensed.

Jareth's lips twitched at her obvious intention. "No more running. For either of us."

She pushed against his grip, wanting to be anywhere but the stifling garden.

Jareth obliged.

"Is this easier?" In an instant they were in utter darkness, the familiar smell of loamy earth replacing the garden's heady perfumes.

She knew where he'd taken her. For a moment Sarah simply relished the oubliette's damp; its coolness a balm against her heated skin, the blinding dark a welcome relief to her confusion.

Until Jareth's hands moved.

His grip did not lesson, but the leather-clad fingers slid slowly along her arms - her skin prickling in their wake - and around her back until they cradled as well as caged. Sarah felt lips ghost over her ear. "I so hate to disappoint..."

Their proximity betrayed her body's tremble. Sarah sensed rather than saw Jareth's grin. It was unnerving to be pressed so closely against him without the ability to see his face. The blindness made her vulnerable. Every touch and every movement seemed more pronounced – magnified – dangerous.

Sarah tried twisting violently to free herself. Jareth's grin deepened against her skin. He forced her against one of the rough-hewn walls, his arms buffering her from the impact. A lithe leg wedged itself between hers until Sarah was perched on a hard thigh. Unnerved by the contact and the involuntary gasp it provoked, she tried sliding off. Jareth merely snared her wrists with a nimble hand and raised them above her head. Sarah swallowed thickly; acutely aware of how her breasts had pulled free of the restrictive leather corset and were now pressed against his chest – the fine linen of her shirt the only barrier against him.

Jareth shifted his leg slightly and Sarah immediately stifled another gasp, the inhuman warmth from his body seeping into hers. Jareth ground his hips against her, letting her feel just how much he craved. His length pressed against her stomach. Need shot straight to her core. Instinctively, she clenched her thighs around his leg to heighten the sensation. Her nipples tightened and strained against the thin fabric, rubbing against his chest. Jareth inhaled sharply against her neck.

Sarah would have been mortified at her body's betrayal if she hadn't felt his response. It was electrifying. Jareth was always so cool and untouchable, having him affected evened the odds; made it possible to forget everything outside of the moment. It was empowering and thrilling and terrifying all at once. For a dangerous second Sarah wondered what it would be like to make the Goblin King lose control; to hold that power over him. The thought made her stomach clench and her throat go dry. She strained against his grip.

Jareth's free hand traced down her face and neck, smoothing across her collar bone; the supple
leather cool against her fevered skin. His touch was gentle, soothing. Almost reverent. A stark contrast to the latent power she knew lay beneath those finger tips. She swallowed nervously at the gentle caress. It stilled her struggles more effectively than any force could.

Jareth took full advantage of her small submission and dipped down to lightly lick the salt from the hollow of her throat, his sharp teeth catching on her sensitive skin. Sarah hissed at the pleasure-pain, her hands tensing against his in half-hearted resistance. Her body arched belyingly. She tipped her head back in invitation, imagining the mark that would blossom tomorrow. The thought excited her even more.

His hand continued its downward descent, slipping inside the open collar of her shirt and skimming across the tops of her breasts. When one leather-clad finger lightly brushed across a nipple, Sarah moaned. Heat was rapidly building in her core and she could feel the betraying dampness between her thighs. She wanted him to touch her. She was disgustingly close to begging, characteristic heaving bosom and all. Her breathing was shallow and erratic, her thoughts scattered. She was mortified at her own weakness and at how easy it would be to give in.

How much she wanted to. How overdue…

Sensing her conflict, Jareth's touch became more possessive, more fiercely demanding. His mouth burned a trail across her throat. His hips thrust against her, forcing her into the stone wall behind her. She automatically spread her thighs to better cradle him. When he felt the damp on his thigh, he couldn't stop a primal, almost feral growl. Sarah shivered in delight. At some point he had let go of her wrists and was now tugging her shirt free of the leather cincher with one hand while his other cupped her rear, pressing pelvis tightly against him.

Sarah's liberated hands came to rest on his chest. His heart thrummed wildly beneath her finger tips. For her. It beat for her.

She splayed her fingers across his smooth skin for a moment, just feeling, just listening, before she slipped them beneath the loose fabric of his shirt and over his bare shoulders, tracing the taut muscles of his back and chest; skimming his flesh with her blunt nails. She'd mark him too.

Without doubt, she would have lost herself completely in the darkness, in the place where it was so easy to forget, if Jareth hadn't smiled against her neck. Sarah felt the pure triumph in the bow of his thin lips, the victory in his embrace.

It was more effective than an ice water in winter. Mistaking her softening for surrender, Jareth had slackened his hold on her. Sarah shoved him backwards with all of her strength, nails raking his skin in the process, and swallowed the impulse to slap him. He stumbled back a step, more from shock than force, leaving Sarah teetering on unsteady legs. In an instant they were back in the garden.

Surprise registered on his face before being replaced with a flash of raw fury.

He took a moment to fastidiously re-adjust his gloves. When he finally spoke his voice was again maddeningly even. "Ever the tease, Sarah."

Her own breathing had not yet returned to normal and it bothered her that he could so quickly affect his air of supercilious indifference when she was still aflame. She was acutely aware of how her shirt clung to her skin, its collar splayed, and of her tussled hair, curling wildly from humidity and sweat.

Turning slightly, she readjusted her clothing as inconspicuously as possible, all the while aware of Jareth's penetrating gaze on her. Struggling with the leather cincher that no longer felt empowering,
but rather binding and restrictive and served only to remind her of the nature of their relationship, she pried it off and tossed it on the ground.

Jareth's lips twitched at her dramatics.

"I want nothing of yours touching me." She winced at the childishness of her words.

Jareth bit back a laugh. "Well then, I might mention that the shirt and pants should follow."

"Not a chance!" Sarah was aware that things were once again spiralling out of control, beyond reason, but she couldn't seem to get a hold of her emotions. Normally so driven, she felt distracted and uneasy.

"That…this," Sarah gestured vaguely, "was an accident. Nothing more."

Jareth coughed.

Sarah scowled. "I didn't want it. I didn't want you!"

"Perhaps you didn't."

"Don't. I don't," Sarah returned quickly.

Jareth tsked. "Always lies between us? We'll have to work on that." His eyes swept over her dishevelled appearance, lingering on her nearly transparent shirt.

Sarah immediately crossed her arms modestly. "I want to go home. Now!"

"I grow rather tired of your spoiled demands." Jareth's eyes glittered dangerously. "But... ever your slave."

Sarah found herself once again standing in the tower bedroom. The sun was just breaking the horizon, casting a warm glow over everything.

"That's not what I meant and you know it!" Sarah wiped her hands over her face in frustration, before wrapping her arms around herself again.

Sighing, he closed the distance between them, his height forcing Sarah to look up at him. He handed the discarded corset back to her.

Sarah wordlessly took it and slipped it on loosely.

For a long moment Jareth simply watched her, his eyes calculating. "Do you?" he finally asked quietly.

Sarah's brow furrowed. "Do I what?"

Jareth touched her cheek lightly. "Truly mean it."

Sarah opened her mouth defiantly, the word 'yes' forming, but froze as Jareth's hand gently slid down her neck and slipped inside the open collar of her shirt again.

Before she could protest, he withdrew his hand and held up a downy white feather. It glistened in the morning sun.

Sarah glanced at the owl feather before raising her eyes back to Jareth's, the lie withering on her lips.
His face was a disturbing mix of naked hunger and elation, and perhaps a touch of guarded vulnerability.

"Truly?" he asked again.

Chapter End Notes

I just had to have a little action in the oubliette despite the fact that it's been done before (ad nausea). It was simply too fitting to pass up and the darkness seemed a plausible excuse to have Sarah lose a little of her reserve. No big smut scene yet, but I am laying the foundation with peach coloured legos.

Just in case you were a little lost, the owl feather that Jareth pulls from Sarah's shirt was referenced in Chapter 26 – Hunger and Craving … "She absently tucked the owl feather into her shirt."
Part XXX

She took my heart,
I think she took my soul…

You keep on crying, baby
I'll bleed you dry…

Feel so good but I'm old,
2000 years of chasing taking its toll…

And it's coming closer.

Closer, Kings of Leon

--------------------------------------------------------------

It might have been a trophy. It could have been a lifeline.

Sarah's eyes wavered between the feather and the figure holding it; trapped between the present and the past and forever haunted by another choice.

… Look, Sarah. Look what I'm offering you…

Just a feather.

Her mouth opened and closed soundlessly several times before her tongue found purchase. She wanted to say 'yes'. She wanted to mean it even more.

"It's… it's not that simple," was all she managed in the end.

Jareth's eyes darkened until they were almost indistinguishable. "Coward," he hissed.

Without further word he turned and headed for the door. Sarah followed the feather as it drifted to the ground and then vanished.

Jareth paused in the open doorway, his tone that blend of coolness and perfunctoriness that irritated Sarah to no end. "No more lies. We have both earned an answer." He caught her eye over his shoulder and inclined his head mockingly. "Until tonight."

The door closed with a decisive click.

Sarah watched it for a minute, half expecting it to disappear again, and couldn't decide if she was relieved or disappointed when it didn't.

In the deafening silence that followed, his words roiled in her head like vipers. She bristled at their poisonous sanctimony. He spoke of truth as though it were a gift she was withholding. How dare he
glibly toss lies like accusations when their very foundation was built from nothing but.

She glanced around the empty room.

And how dare he always leave.


…Until tonight…

They would be back on Tara tonight.

The fire danced provokingly in the grate, lacing the air with ember. Its heat brought a flush to her face.

She shivered anyway.

Lost in the game, it was easy to forget that dues were always owed and debts always paid. The thought of Declan and the rest of them, proud and condescending - perhaps a few pitying, made her ill. Jareth claimed that he hadn't thrown a victory party, but what else would tonight be? Not for the first time, Sarah wished she possessed the power to stop time – slow it until she could palm every grain of sand. She'd polish each one until they gleamed like the clearest glass; learn their nuances and reveal every secret they concealed. Her fingers itched for what they'd lost.

Even now they thrummed with memory.

The Goblin King sank into his throne with a sinuous grace that many emulated but few could replicate. He took a long moment to savour its feel before turning his attention to the uncharacteristically quiet room.

Feathers floated freely in the breeze. The sour smell of ale and spirits was cloyingly sweet, more so than usual. And the occupants, who had been 'celebrating' ceaselessly since their monarch's reputed return, were now gleefully well beyond the stage of absolute intoxication and more or less littered the floor like perverse little lawn gnomes.

Jareth had never seen a sight more beautiful.

He could almost thank Sarah for this new, albeit forced, perspective.

Almost.

There were many things he would like to do to Sarah. He had a veritable list in the making. Thanking her was nowhere near the top.

And yet the resulting lack of chaos lent itself well to reflection. No goblins to abuse meant more time for introspection. Like perhaps he should have left the little termagant in the oubliette to stew for awhile, he mused darkly. Say for a month or two. Three at the most; he wasn't above pity. And he was quite sure that in all the long years it wouldn't be the first time a wife found herself thus.

Unfortunately, thoughts of dark, earthen rooms evoked thoughts other than punishment.

Beneath the anger and resentment, he could still taste her. He could smell her on his clothes. Her
desire and her surrender, however brief, still danced across his skin.

It undid him.

Avaricious by nature, a voice whispered that he should have just taken what he'd wanted. It had been offered after all. It was a measure of strength, of power and of right. He deserved it. It would have been so very easy…

… but not gratifying.

And not his style. A willing Sarah was worth a thousand not. It would have broken her. And playthings that were broken were not much use after all.

Or perhaps he was growing soft. For someone that was used to getting what he wanted, he was learning to be rather prosaic about losing. That was disturbing in itself.

Facts as they lay, his sometimes enemy, his long-time fascination, and the current thorn in his side was upstairs in his bedroom right now. And she had never felt so far away.

It was all very irritating, really.

The culmination of nine years of longing had led them to this impasse. Half truths, pretty lies and goblin fruit lay between them like hair-trigger landmines.

Jareth's head cocked to one side. Could it all be his fault?

He mulled the foreign notion over for a moment and then sniffed ever so slightly.

Not a chance.

Sarah was due her share of blame. He would have laid his world at her feet if she had only said a word - such a small admission, after all.

And oh the powers he had at his very fingertips. Oh the weapons at his disposal. Jareth flexed a hand unconsciously, idle digits twitched in frustration, sparked and then stilled, the hard lines of his countenance softening.

But he had let her be – rightly or wrongly. That much he had learned to do.

For woe to the powers she held too.

"Useless!"

Sarah yanked a few errant hairs out of her face viciously and glared at her reflection accusingly.

With the same 'come-on-feet' attitude that served her so many years before, Sarah had decided to face the unknown with fortitude. And in clean clothes.

The fortitude she could manage, the clothes were proving altogether less obliging.

After wearing several holes in the carpet, vainly trying to make up for the recent lack of sleep – the bed was far too intimate and smelled far too like its owner in a disgustingly, delicious way - downing
two cups of coffee and several buttered scones that had conveniently presented themselves in her
favourite flavour, Sarah had decided she needed to do something. Idle hands and all that.

The first order had been to assiduously scrub her body from head to toe. Despite everything, her
mind kept returning her to the darkness. She could still feel his hands upon her. Phantom finger tips
danced across her breasts and dipped below her naval until her legs quivered. She caught herself
tracing their journey, trying to find some measure of release. She'd cursed him, red faced and
wanting, for his mercurial nature. It was so bloody easy for him.

And beneath everything, she could still taste him.

He tasted like dreams. Hers.

It undid her.

Her skin raw and smelling like some nondescript flower, Sarah had hesitated and then tossed her
crumpled clothes out of the window in a fit of puerile pique. She wanted nothing of his touching her.
The scent of sin still lingered. It smelled like surrender.

There was also minute satisfaction in hoping they were his favourite shirt and pants.

But surveying her options in the large wardrobe gave her doubt. Donning a dress meant for a queen,
however beautiful and tailored to her tastes, seemed like a form of acceptance; of acquiescence with
a plan she'd had no part of. And worse, would she be fulfilling her fantasy or his?

It seemed silly and dangerous at the same time. Like playing dress up for keeps.

She'd have traded her right arm for a pair of well-worn jeans. Goblin Queens did not wear denim.

Eventually, she resigned herself to the most simple and most modest of the selection. Long, but
lightweight, the fabric shimmered in the sun—a blue the colour of the sea, a fact not lost on her. The
waist was high and the bodice decorated with bandings that criss-crossed delicately in the same
shade. The fitted sleeves were similarly adorned.

It was beautiful and Sarah found it hard not to like it, though she tried mutinously. Regardless, it was
that or continue wearing the towel that threatened to fall at any moment. Even the linens were against
her.

But fifteen minutes later, she was still not dressed and her reflection was advertising that failure. She
had very purposefully begun to dress away from all mirrors or reflective surfaces, even after
prodding the large one suspiciously. That lasted the first ten. Theatre productions and childhood
flights of fancy had not prepared her for the reality of this type of clothing. Laces went every which
way but together, the undergarments were a nightmare, and her arms were not designed to do three
things at the same time.

It might have been funny in a perverse way, if she hadn't already been on the verge of tears. They
crept upon her so unexpectedly that, she was surprised when the first slid down her face and
darkened the silk of her dress. She touched the spot in disbelief. The shock of the last few days had
finally unravelled her; undone by a few yards of silk. Without meaning to, she collapsed on the floor
heaving, breathing shallowly between the sobs.

Every time she tried to stop, tried to regain the strength she knew lay within her, she cried harder. So
hard it hurt and yet felt strangely good at the same time, like pent-up pressure being released. She
thought of her family and friends, of Toby, of Hoggle, of her thesis with her so-very human goals,
and of mundane things like her favourite china cup with the hairline crack and a pair of high-heeled
shoes still in the box that she hadn't worn yet. And maybe never would.

The tears rained harder.

So caught up in her litany of losses, she almost missed the soft touch of leather against the open skin of her back. She raised bleary eyes to the mirror and wiped her hand across her face with a wet sniff that at any other time she might have been embarrassed by; she had never been a pretty crier. As soon as her eyes met his in the glass, the tears began anew. These born from hate - at herself for being so weak and at him for seeing her thus.

A moment later she was enfolded in strong arms and drawn up to rest on warm thighs. At first she struggled violently and cursed him incoherently. She refused to take comfort from the root of her pain. Hatred was so much easier. For his part, he seemed to be content to let her hit him and did nothing to stop her or avoid the blows. It only registered slowly on her that he was rocking softly. When it did, she stilled instantly. Sarah couldn't remember the last time she had been rocked thus, perhaps by her father when her mother left for the final time. That memory brought a fresh wave of salt. She vaguely wondered if, like lost little Alice, she would cry a sea to wash them both away. She rather liked the idea of being swept away from it all.

His hand tangled in her damp hair, smoothing gentle circles into her scalp. Sarah thought it was ridiculous to be coddled like a small child, by him of all people, but she tucked her head against his chest anyway, her body sagging in a sort of relieved exhaustion that only comes after a good cry. His chest was warm and she could feel the beating of his heart – its steady rhythm as soothing as the hand on her head and its twin on her back. She surreptitiously wiped her wet face against his shirt, perhaps in rebellion. He pretended not to notice.

Sarah caught their reflection in the mirror and shivered. Her: red-faced, hair tousled and lost in a swathe of blue, him: clad in unrelenting black and arms stretched around her like raven's wings. His hands were now bare. She thought them beautiful. Jareth's eyes were shadowed, staring over her head at the window, but they held a severe look she'd never seen before. Guilt? Regret? The alienness of it on his face unnerved her. So long at odds, she didn't know how to deal with this Jareth. Something indefinable began to bud within her.

Clearing her throat quietly, she lifted her head and tentatively pushed back. For a moment his hands tightened possessively, as though loathe to let her go, but then they fell away completely. Sarah inched off of his lap as gracefully as she could manage, settling the skirts around her and looking anywhere but at his face.

A finger tipped her chin up gently and then cupped her cheek. "Tears do not suit you, Precious."

She might have been insulted by the potential barb, if not for the uncertainty latent in his soft tone.

She laughed brokenly, "I suppose they don't." She met his eyes, her own still glassy. "I'm not a very gracious loser apparently."

He flinched and dropped the hand from her cheek. They lapsed into an uneasy silence.

"I wasn't either," he offered, so lowly Sarah almost missed it.

"What, you cried yourself into a fit, wearing a rumpled blue dress?"

They both laughed but the sound was hollow and terribly brief.

"Not quite," he conceded, his eyes growing serious, "but I bled as you do. Bled for things lost."
Sarah sucked in a breath at the pain underlying his tone. But then she hardened. "And yet you got what you wanted in the end."

"Perhaps," he replied enigmatically, almost sadly, watching the anger twist her features.

He reached for the hand on her lap, but she withdrew it immediately, her heart thrumming madly in her chest. "I don't want your pain, Sarah. Never that."

She looked away. "And yet you're a purveyor of it. Some might say a connoisseur."

She expected a pithy rebuttal, but nothing came.

"Hoggle, most recently," she pressed, not liking his silence.

His face darkened dangerously for a moment. "I will not debate the dwarf and what he's owed for the treachery we both know he committed." Then his eyes met hers again and they softened. "But he is free." He waved a hand in the air, the gesture hinting that something somewhere happened.

Sarah's mouth opened in disbelief and suspicion. "Wh-why?

"Because it will make you happy," he breathed roughly, startled by his own veracity.

A tear slid down her face, her brow furrowing in confusion.

He brushed it away before she could object, and then tasted it. She found the act all the more unsettling for the lack of leather between them. Her skin tingled.

Another joined the first and this time he stole it with his mouth. Sarah turned her face into his to share the taste. With immortal speed, he wound his hands into her hair again, cradling her head almost reverently, while he hungrily, desperately, violently, met her lips with savage force. They tasted like salt and everything she was. Sarah matched his fervour, gripping his shirt to hold him to her. She was surprised at herself and how little she cared. Nothing mattered and nothing registered. She angled his head to deepen the kiss, however impossible. He groaned in response and tugged at a bruised lip with his own.

It was nothing like the night before. There was no caging, no traps, and no artifice. They were both laid bare, both seeking something intangible from the other, both finding escape. It was more innocent and more wanton at the same time. When his hand brushed along her collar bone, Sarah pressed into the gentle touch and ran her tongue along his teeth, embracing their unnatural sharpness. When his bare hand dipped into the open back of her gown to trace her spine, Sarah arched obligingly and trailed her own fingers down his neck and over the lean muscles in his arms. They spasmed under her touch.

Reality, like breathing, made its presence known slowly. Sarah pulled back slightly and inhaled deeply. She was still quivering. Jareth rested his forehead against hers for moment, though Sarah suspected he did not need the air. He released her without argument, but kept her hands in his, long thumbs kneading her skin gently. She let him. The look on his face was so open and unguarded that for a minute Sarah was lost within the emotions.

"Why?" she asked again, her own voice raw with emotion.

Jareth grinned crookedly. It was almost boyish. Almost. There was nothing boyish about the Goblin King.

"I wasn't lying when I offered you everything." He traced the hint of a smile on her swollen lips.
"Either time."

It took a moment for his words to register. She paused, her eyes searching his again, and then rose to her knees and tentatively cupped his face. His hands covered her wrists encouragingly.

"Then let me go," she pleaded in a tremulous whisper.

His grip tightened so suddenly Sarah gasped at the pain, his face losing all traces of its earlier softness. The mask was back in place and ever as terrifying.

"Never," he hissed.

Sarah wrenched her abused wrists free and cradled them against her chest protectively. Then changed her mind and slapped him across the face as hard as she could, wincing at the sound.

His head moved only fractionally, though a very red welt blossomed almost immediately. He gingerly touched the spot and smiled saccharinely, his eyes black holes in his pale face.

Sarah stilled at the look in them and immediately turned to scramble away. He yanked her back by the hair.

He hauled her up into a standing position, using her gown as leverage – a blessed relief to her scalp. His face stopped an inch from hers, breath scalding her cheek. "Did you enjoy that?"

Sarah trembled at the tone, but remained defiantly silent.

"I'll take that as a yes, little cat." The smile deepened. "Allow me to play too then."

Before Sarah could process anything, he swept her into his arms and tossed her on the bed with such speed and strength, the breath was nearly forced from her lungs. As soon she regained sense, she flipped over and tried to crawl off the far edge, not caring that her skirts were around her thighs. He caught her by the ankle and dragged her backwards, her gown now tangled about her waist. She was immensely thankful that she had managed to find underwear.

She started screaming when she was forcibly turned over and his weight settled over her. She tried to knee him in the balls and would have succeeded had he not possessed that stupid grace she so loathed.

He clucked disapprovingly, and slung a heavy leg across her bare ones. "That's twice you've tried that move, sweetling. Careful or I might not see the humour in it next time."

"Get off me, you bastard!"

He tsk'd. "What, I'm not allowed to unleash my claws too? Hardly fair, really."

"If you force me, I'll never love you! NEVER!" Her voice was a mixture of hatred and desperation.

"You don't love me now," he countered, "though recent actions suggest otherwise." He trailed a finger between her silk-clad breasts provoking and his voice dropped menacingly. "It would be so easy. So very easy..."

Sarah swallowed thickly, fresh tears pooling.

Jareth sighed, much of his anger ebbing away. "But I have no intention of forcing you." He eyed her lips pointedly. "Not that I think I would have to in the end."
Tugging her skirt down in one fluid movement, he slid off of her and stepped away. Sarah stood on shaking legs and edged around the bed until it lay between them.

Jareth watched her from beneath hooded eyes and then wandered to the window, his attention on the vista below. "Ever the villain..."

Sarah had to strain to hear him and when she did she felt the knot within her unravel more. She approached him cautiously, her anger and fear now fading too.

"Please..."

Jareth turned slightly, but did not look up. Sarah counted her heart beats until he answered.

"No."

Her face fell at the tiny word, so ridiculous in its brevity and yet so powerful in meaning.

"Why?" The question was patently stupid, but she couldn't help it.

Jareth turned back to the window. He opened his mouth several times, sampling several answers and finding none of them right. Hesitating, he closed the distance between them and held her before she could move away.

"I can't," he answered finally, the words harsh and broken. "No more tears... please." He tried to stroke her cheek again, but she flinched and pulled free. He turned and left as quietly as he'd entered.

Sarah found herself staring dejectedly at the closed door once again.

She absently noted that at some point he'd finished tying her gown.

It brought a lopsided smile to her face that ended as soon as it began. Dropping into one of the leather chairs, her legs grateful for its support, her red-rimmed eyes fell upon the leather bound book fallen open on the floor. Part of her wanted to toss it on the fire, but it was not her story to destroy. She picked it up more out of habit than interest, but paused when her thumb caught on a meticulously folded back corner. There had been no marked pages when she'd skimmed through it before...

She began to read, her eyes flying across the page. Moments later, she was on her feet with a cloak around her shoulders. She slipped from the room, closing the heavy doors behind her.

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Jareth wandered with little direction or purpose and so was surprised to find himself before the doors of the portrait gallery. It was an area of the castle he very rarely visited, if ever. For many years it served only to taunt him with a sense of inadequacy and failure. He found those feelings difficult to understand and obliquely unpleasant; he generally avoided them.

But they seemed entirely appropriate today. The doors opened obligingly.

His ancestors witnessed their descendant's entrance with as much surprise as their oil and canvas faces would allow. He in turn eyed them morosely. More so than ever the long line of ethereal couples drove home his singularity. And yet, they also hinted at the only conclusion ever possible. The end would always justify the means. He was proof of that. Perhaps he ought to bring Sarah here
to illustrate that point.

He stopped before the likeness of his parents.

And to show her what could be.

He still couldn't fathom what had driven him to release the dwarf. It had been pure reaction. He wasn't lying when he'd said he didn't want her pain, he didn't. Her tears were the most potent poison. When he'd looked into a crystal, driven by something he could never define, he'd felt something crack. There was no pleasure to be had in a victory like this; no glory. Before he'd had time to debate, to plan, to question, he was at her side.

It was weakness. Because she'd needed that from him.

...But he couldn't let her go.

Staring at the couple in the painting, he wondered what Sarah saw when she looked at them. He touched their joined hands lightly, studied the look on his father's face and the one on his mother's: the first proud and imperial – used to getting what he wanted, the second softer, but with hidden depths to match the sea behind. They had been happy, more so than most. That was irrefutable. He understood the look on his father's face as well as he wore the same. But his eyes kept drifting back to his mother.

"I won't let her ruin this for me," he promised defiantly.

"Maj-jesty?"

Jareth startled at the voice and spun towards the door. "What?"

The goblin squeaked something inaudible at the look on his lord's face and retreated down the corridor as quickly as he had during the Great Sacking of the Goblin City.

Jareth swore in exasperation born of long-suffering. He was halfway to the door before he felt the strange chill seep into his skin. A log crackled and broke in the grate, sending sparks into the air. Eyes narrowing, he stalked past the portraits, pausing beside the one of his parents.

And then the Goblin King froze, paling at the empty space on the wall.

Chapter End Notes

Remember the missing portrait at the end of Chapter 28 – The Road Ahead? What about when Riven *nudge* picks up the book Sarah drops? No? Well, it was months and months ago – my fault.

I didn't have this in mind when I wrote it, but when I read through the chapter again the whole tasting the tears bit (which I personally like – feel free to disagree) suddenly reminded me of a scene in the movie "Cry Baby" with Johnny Depp. It's a love it-or-hate-it campy movie that I get a kick out of it. If you have no idea what I am talking
about it, go watch it – but preferably on a free site so you don’t begrudge me the rental if you absolutely loathe it.
The Knight and the Lady

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part XXXI

If you were a king up there on your throne
would you be wise enough to let me go?
For this queen you think you own
wants to be a hunter again.

The crown you've placed upon my head feels too heavy now
and I don't know what to say to you but I'll smile anyhow,
and all the time I'm thinking, thinking…

I want to be a hunter again.

Hunter, Dido

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Hoggle landed in the murky pond with a spectacular splash, nearly draining half of it. Coughing up
muck and scummy water, he actually cracked a grin when he took stock of his surroundings. He then
tried to hug a hapless faery, who in turn promptly bit him. The pain barely registered.

Never before had he been so happy to see the little buggers, even if he was immersed in water he'd…
personally contributed to for years. Living was a good thing; he wasn't about to split hairs. Because
he shuddered to think of what could have been. Would have been.

And he knew who to thank. That stole the grin from his craggy face. Jareth would never have let him
go. Sarah had somehow had a hand in it and he wasn't fool enough to hope she'd somehow
overpowered the Goblin King. He just prayed the price of his release had not cost her everything. Or
what little she had left.

Hoggle eyed the distant castle dolefully.

It was always his fault. He was a damned fool.

Hauling himself upright and shaking himself off, he slipped inside the great doors to the Labyrinth.
As he navigated the stone passages, he echoed his friend's thoughts on the gross lack of fairness in it
all, while trying very hard not to feel a little bit happy that she was going to be staying.

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Jareth stared at the empty space on the wall, all traces of his earlier softness vanishing; eyes burning
through the stone. A moment later he appeared in the master suite, his face hardening further at the
similar absence over the fireplace.

Something else was notably absent as well.
With inhuman speed, he snatched the decanter off the table and viciously hurled it against the wall, taking no satisfaction in the shatter.

"Damn her!"

He was on the point of vanishing when a tentative knock echoed through the room.

Sarah slipped through the castle and out the main doors with surprising ease. She paused on the threshold and shaded her eyes against the bright morning sun. The goblin city held its own sort of maze-like madness, the haphazard dwellings defying both logic and reason. Still, she would be lying if she didn't admit that it was strangely pleasing to see is standing, despite her best efforts of years past.

Pulling the hood of her cloak over her hair until her face was well-shadowed, she navigated the twisted streets as quickly as possible. To her amusement, several boulders still dotted the buildings, now well-ennmeshed in the architecture by vines and moss. They reminded her of the shaggy friend that had called them. It left a bittersweet taste in her mouth.

The residents, for their part, took little notice of the hooded figure as they conducted their daily business. Nor did they suspect she was the girl in the monument commemorating the Great Sacking. Taller fey often visited the city at the centre of the Labyrinth when needs of a goblinesque nature arose. And no one would ever dare suppose the Lady of the castle had escaped the King. Again.

As such, Sarah managed to make it to the gates of the city with no fanfare and once in the Labyrinth, she breathed a little easier. By no means confident she would be any more successful in her clandestine efforts than Hoggle had been, leaving the confines of the castle unchecked was a feat in itself.

And in the end, what did she have left to lose.

She would simply ignore the alarming part of her that warned otherwise and begged to remain. Her hands clutched the book within them until her knuckles bled white.

Finding her way through would prove to be a more difficult endeavour. For this reason she found herself in an unknown part of the Labyrinth, at a crossroads and second guessing herself.

"Stop! Stop, I say!"

Sarah froze, her body going rigid. She tilted her head slightly, careful to keep her face mostly hidden, and eyed her chances of getting by checked.

"My… Lady?"

Her hood was thrown back almost immediately.

"Didymus! Oh, thank god!" Sarah dropped to her knees in front of the small fox, a wide smile softening her expression and relief flooding her body.

"My Lady!" the knight repeated reverently. He bowed gallantly, removing his hat, but was cut short by slim arms enfolding him in a rather undignified hug. He didn't mind a whit.
"My fair Lady, how come thee to the Labyrinth again?"

Sarah frowned, sudden doubt clouding her purpose. She had already risked one friend unfairly. Her fingers danced across the leather of the book in her hand.

"Didymus, how much do you know already?"

The fox beamed and proceeded to fall into a courtly bow again. "I know thou art more than a lady now, my Queen."

"Ah…well…as to that…" Sarah blushed and fidgeted.

"How happy we were to hear of thy return!" Sir Didymus continued unfazed. "A most worthy match for His Royal Highness."

"Oh god, not you too!" Sarah began pacing. "Why are you on his side? I mean you helped me beat him, remember? Doesn't that make you a… a rebel or something?"

The fox took a step back. "But…but that was before! My services were needed by a brave and worthy damsel. A rebel? Never!" Didymus squared his shoulders, with a huff. "I am a knight!"

Sarah held her hands up in mock surrender. "Sorry, sorry. Didn't mean anything by it. I just… you wouldn't be happy that Jareth tricked me, right?"

A look of horror crossed his face. "Not happy? Not happy that my Lady has returned? Not happy that thou art the companion of our great King? Not happy that thou hast found love?"

The fox growled. "Upon my honour, I am not such a disloyal villain!"

Sarah couldn't help smiling at his fervour and tweaked a whisker fondly. It lessened the overall dramatic effect somewhat.

"I have no doubt that you are still the brave and loyal knight I have always known, but Didymus, don't you understand that it wasn't my choice to be here?"

He blinked, his brown eyes widening earnestly. "Thou dost not want to be with us?"

Sarah's eyes watered at his tone. "That's not it at all. I'm so happy to see you again… and Hoggle and…"

"But thou never called."

The statement sat heavy between them.

Sarah looked into the face of her friend and saw no accusation, only sadness. Her own was full of regret. "No… No, I didn't. But I should have. If for no other reason than to see you."

"Thou did not need us."

"I did," she began slowly, "I just didn't realize that until now." Her eyes widening as she spoke. "I needed all of you."

"And we need thee."

Sarah smiled.
"Especially Him."

Her face fell. "I can't stay, Didymus. Please understand that."

"Thou dost not like it here?" He sounded incredulous and hurt at the same time.

"Oh I do. It's not that. It's… complicated," she gestured vaguely.

The fox cocked his head to one side. "Thou dost not love him?"

Sarah sputtered and fidgeted helplessly, "Ah… well… I…"

"Then stay."

The simple request shook her as much as any of Jareth's, more perhaps, because of its innocence. But Sarah suspected Didymus was as wily as his nature implied. He made it sound so easy. As though all the pieces would fall into place and she could be happy.

Be a queen. Play scrabble.

"I can't. Don't you understand that I can't?" she found herself saying again, this time for different reasons.

He nodded, though his expression said otherwise.

Sarah took a deep breath. "And I need your help. I think the Labyrinth led me to you."

Their eyes met for a moment before Didymus bowed again. "Anything for my Lady."

He turned his head and whistled. A shaggy sheep dog bounded into view, cowered for a moment when it saw company, and then licked Sarah's face sloppily.

"Ambrosius!" Didymus rapped the dog on the head with his staff. "Manners!"

Sarah giggled, slightly undone by the surrealness and familiarity of the situation, not to mention the slobber.

When she had recovered and thoroughly wiped her cheek on her sleeve, she reluctantly flipped open the book in her hand and passed it to her companion, reminding herself that she was making the right choice. It had to be.

"I need you to guide me there. I know you can do it."

Didymus, who had watched her initial actions with interest, scanned the page and then raised alarmed eyes to hers. "My Lady…"

"I know you can do it, Didymus," she repeated firmly.

Etain leaned against a stone wall and closed her eyes, letting the afternoon sun warm her face. If she kept them closed, she could pretend she was home, pretend that rolling green hills lay beneath her feet, not sandstone, and that her mother and sister were waiting for her at the house, gossiping before the hearth fire maybe.
She breathed deeply and opened her eyes. It never quite worked though. No smell of salt in the air.
No sea, just walls and gates with twists and turns that still terrified her at times, though she had
learned enough of their secrets to find her way through.

She closed her eyes again, willing herself to wake up from the nightmare that would not end. Had
not ended for more than a month now, she wasn't sure, the days stretched into one another. At least
the sun was warm.

Etain spared a glance for the spindly castle.

Perhaps not a nightmare.

Never had she dreamed of being a queen. Even a rich merchant's wife had, for a time, been beyond
her expectations... however undesired.

She should have listened to her grandmother.

The sun dipped lower in the sky. He would come for her soon. A thrill shot through her, in spite of
everything.

He always came for her.

Husband. The word rolled over her tongue strangely. Lover. That too, even stranger.

Maiden still, but not untouched.

Skilled hands and fervid lips had awoken strange feelings and wicked desires in her. Etain hugged
her arms around herself tightly. She half wished he had just taken her as most men would have by
now. Instead he was stoking her fires slowly, until she began to crave him. And all the while he
would smile knowingly. Soon she would forget herself completely and beg like a wanton. Then she
would be lost. And he would laugh. Even now the thought of his mouth on hers had her heart racing.
She could almost hate him for the power he held over her, so much more sinister than the magic she
could see.

At first she had cried and screamed and kicked to go home. He had merely sat back with arms
crossed restfully and let her tire herself out. She was almost embarrassed by her actions now. The
tantrums she had thrown.

And worse still, those first escape attempts. How his twisted creatures had frightened her. The
Labyrinth had foiled her over and over again and every time he would be waiting for, vivid blue eyes
dancing with suppressed laughter at her failures. It was then that he had first pressed her up against a
wall and taught her how to put her frustration to better uses; taught her that anger was a passion of its
own. And just when she thought she'd just give in and let him have his deliciously wicked way, he'd
stopped and left her wanting more.

Wanting him.

Riven listened to every complaint or suggestion patiently and seemed to enjoy engaging her in
debate. He was even teaching her to read beyond the smattering she already knew, something no
self-respecting man of her world would ever do. She smiled more than she had in a long while. And
each day she found herself reluctantly delighting in something new and awfully wonderful because it
was so unknown.

Etain frowned. Each day more and more vines curled around her legs, binding her to her new life
with roots too deep to unearth.
He offered her everything she could want save one thing.

He wouldn't let her go.

Now she had stopped asking, which seemed to please him, but she still wandered the Labyrinth daily; a small defiance in its way.

And because she knew he would always come for her.

So lost in reflection, Etain didn't notice she was no longer alone nor the small creature until she was upon him.

"Oh, I beg your pardon!"

"'Twas my fault, fair Lady." The creature dropped into a low bow, removing his feathered cap with a flourish. "Sir Didymus, at your service."

Sarah removed the tome from the slack grip of her friend.

"I wasn't sure I would be able to find you," she offered tentatively, "but you can understand why I had to."

Didymus nodded briefly, his expression pained.

"When I read…well…I had no idea you were so old…" Sarah trailed off, brow furrowed.

Her friend remained silent.

"Did you know then… when I first came to the Labyrinth?"

He smiled weakly. "Know that thou wouldst return? No. I am just a knight, old and weary."

Sarah realised with regret that part of her had hoped he possessed some power; some magic beyond the scope of the Goblin King. But its lack saved her from feeling betrayed.

"Though I cannot say I am surprised in the end," Didymus continued unbidden, his roan eyes softening. "Or that I am not verily happy. I think it was always thee."

Sarah frowned at his admission, torn between annoyance and inexplicable joy. They made for odd bed fellows in her face.

"Thank you, I think," she offered after a moment. "And I won't forget you this time."

Ambrosius sidled awkwardly and whined, a response to his master's agitation.

"My Lady, I don't…"

Sarah held up a warning hand. "Please… just… don't say anymore. I have already decided." And I'm afraid of being swayed, she added mentally. "We have to leave now. I don't have much time."

Both companions glanced at the castle, neither voicing the other's fear.

"I need you," she intoned purposefully, regretting using what she considered to be underhanded
tactics with her friend. It seemed disturbingly Jareth-like and came far too easily. "I understand if you don't want to risk helping me. I wouldn't blame you after... well... but I have to try." She half-hoped he would deny her.

The fox growled. "Not help thee? A foul knave I wouldst be to deny a fair damsel! Come Ambrosius!" He mounted spryly, the gesture bringing a smile to Sarah's face. "I will protect thee, never fear!"

I hope, he added silently. For he knew all too well how it could play out.

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Although well accustomed to the varied inhabitants of the Underground, Etain was startled by a talking fox astride a very shaggy looking dog, no less. She couldn't help but be entirely charmed by his courtly affectation, however.

"Arise, Sir Didymus, arise! For I am no lady," she pleaded humbly.

The fox immediately bared his teeth and spun in a quick circle. "Treason! Who doth spread such viperous slander about our fair queen! I'll gut him."

Etain ducked out of the path of his wildly flailing staff. "Slow, sir knight. 'Tis no slander. I am a simple girl of simple stock." She pointed at her head. "See, no crown."

The fox snorted disbelievingly. "Thou art a Queen if He bids it be."

The unwavering conviction in the creature's voice caused Etain's smile to falter. If even a fox believed...

"My Lady! What ails thee so? My staff is ever thane to command!"

But Etain's thoughts were already far away. "I miss the sea."

Sir Didymus blinked, unused to saddened mortal ladies and uncertain as to their overall volatility. He patted her knee lightly. "There, there..." he spoke haltingly, wracked with indecision. He wanted her to smile again, but...

Etain turned her dark eyes towards him.

Didymus swallowed loudly. "I would gladly lead thee to the sea, for long have I wandered these fine lands and I know where it lies."


"Nay, nothing is impossible here."

And so she found herself, only half-believing, following the fox through the ever-changing twists and turns of the Labyrinth. He paused so often, as though arguing with himself, she expected to be led straight back to the castle. She did not expect to be led to a door.

The dark weathered-wood, for that is how it appeared, was intricately inset with spirals. They looked remarkably like those found all around her village and beyond, the ones older than St. Patrick. Again she was reminded of the stories her gran had spun by the fire. Opening doors could be dangerous.
Not daring to hope for fear of the inevitable dashing, she pushed against the wood gently. When she caught a whiff of salt through the cracks, her heart skipped a beat and her fears washed away, replaced instead with hatchling ideas.

Sir Didymus smiled at her expression, glad to have been of service. And yet seeing the zealous look in her eyes, he wondered if he was making a grave mistake; perhaps she didn't understand… or worse, perhaps she did.

"My Lady, thou must only look, for…"

But Etain no longer listened. She leaned her weight against the heavy door and fell into nothing. The scream had barely left her lips before she found herself standing upright on a cliff, strong winds buffeting the gown against her legs.

A midnight sea stretched out before her, tantalizingly real.

When she turned back, the Labyrinth, the door and Sir Didymus were gone. This caused only a momentary pang, forgotten as soon as she heard the waves crashing against the rocks.

It was the sound of home.

Peering over the edge of the bluff, she could see no easy way down. The water roiled, frothing white, some thirty feet below. Jagged rocks broke the surface intermittently like teeth, uninviting and vicious. She had to reach the glittering water beyond.

"… the sea, mo mhíle stór, is a passage between worlds – ours and the Others. No law is above it, no law below it, save that of Lir and his brood. And only the brave shall pass with blessings…"

Her gran's words rang in her head like bells, long forgotten and long unheeded.

Etain suddenly knew where she was.

She peered again at the raging torrent below, her hands gripping the edge even as the wind tried vainly to draw her back.

Her head whipped around at the distinctive sound of hooves.

A great dark horse was galloping towards her, its nostrils flaring and its mane trailing behind like a cloak.

It came to an abrupt halt a few feet away, rearing up in a volley of hooves. Etain threw her hands over head protectively. It was then that she noticed her right palm was once again bare, but she had little time to dwell on it.

The transformation was terrifyingly intense. In a swirl of black and silver the horse dissolved into shadows, threatening to consume her, until only the blue eyes remained the same - two orbs of ice in a face of unearthly beauty. The lithe figure was encased in armour of blue-black iridescence. A gossamer cape spread behind him like wings. His expression was cold and implacable. She had never seen him look like that, though she suspected he was in his natural element.

…He would always come for her…

A faint smile played about his lips, like he was amused that she had shown such gumption.

But Etain shrank away when strong hands gripped her wrists, pulling her to her feet.
"Etain…" he hissed, "you dance where you shouldn't."

"I…I just wanted to see the waves again."

Riven raised a brow. "So the fox informed me."

"Sir Didymus!" Etain's eyes widened at his mention. "Please, it was my fault…"

"Never in doubt. But he'll learn the error of his ways nonetheless." His smile held no warmth now. "Guarding the bog will be a lesson not easily forgot."

Etain sighed in relief and sagged in his hold slightly.

"Time to return, Cariad."

Riven began drawing her away from the edge. "I've been far too generous, I think. An error I'll have to correct. Perhaps I haven't shown you enough attention…" His tone was laced with promises that made her shiver.

But she pulled away from him, stepping back until her feet balanced precariously on the crumbling shale. "No."

Riven's eyes flashed dangerously, but underlying it, Etain could see a small vein of fear. It strengthened her resolve.

He reached for her slowly. "Have I not offered you everything? Saved you from a life you didn't want?"

Etain ignored him, though she could not deny his words. "I know what this place is. You have no power over me here. No magic works here. If you did you would have just whisked me away already." She held up her palm.

Riven said nothing, though the muscles around his jaw tightened.

"I know this is a passage, a crossing between worlds."

"And yet you do not know where the waters will take you, Etain. Don't play with things you don't understand. Now take my hand."

Etain stared at his face – beautiful and cruel and hers. She knew he spoke the truth; understood the danger of the unknown below.

"Then lead me home," she challenged.

Riven dropped his arm, eyes narrowing. "Are you sure that's what you really want?"

Etain wasn't but she answered anyway, "Honour my wish or I will stay here for as long as my heart beats."

Riven studied her resolve for a long moment. She knew he was searching for weakness.

"So be it," he offered finally.

Seconds later they were both falling towards the sea below.

Before the icy waters could do more than lick at her skin, Etain was standing on a beach. Riven was
silent behind her, a possessive hand warming her lower back. For once she was glad of his presence.

Everything looked familiar and felt different.

She stepped towards the hill that would lead to her house, but then hesitated, casting a wary glance at the dark lord. He made no move to stop her. Needing no further encouragement, she bounded up the hill, stumbling several times in her haste, only to stop short as her house came into view. The peat and stone dwelling had fallen into a state of wretched disrepair. The door was blown open, revealing nothing but dust inside. Roots had worked their way through the floor boards.

As if on cue, Riven appeared by her side, his arms crossed. "Not quite as you remember it, I take it."

She spun and tried to hit him, but he easily sidestepped her blow, catching her before she hit the ground.

"What did you do to my mother?!" she shrieked.

"Did you honestly think nothing would change?" he snarled back at her. "I have no interest in your silly mortal family beyond what I have already taken."

The wind picked up for a moment, blinding her with her own hair. When it died down, she was no longer on the hillside but in town, concealed by the shadows of a stone building.

"Wha…"

"Just watch." Riven wrapped an arm around her shoulders to hold her still.

A moment later several figures appeared in the open doorway. The protests died in her throat when Etain recognized her mother wearing finery they never could have afforded. Behind her stood her sister, Grainne, looking several years older, her belly heavy with child and another full grown at her side. A pleasant looking man held her arm. Their father brought up the rear of the party. Etain thought he had never looked so handsome, though his hair was full grey and well-thinned, his shoulders stooped with age.

She wanted to run to them, throw herself into their arms, but they were not the family of her memory.

"How?" she whispered.

"Time flows differently." Etain could feel the shrug in his body. "And I promised they would be well taken care of."

Her eyes traced the smiles on their faces. "They look so… happy."

"Indeed." One of his hands danced across her abdomen. "Your sister will name the child Etain."

She shivered. "So they… remember me then?"

"Oh yes," he breathed against her suddenly over-sensitive skin. "How could they forget the daughter that married the great English lord? Though saddened by your necessary removal to a far away land, your connection has allowed all of this to happen and they are thrilled that you found your... dreams."

Part of her bristled at his sanctimony, as though she had had choice in the decision, but she couldn't deny that they were better off than they had ever been.

"'Tis a lie," she argued defiantly.
He shrugged again. "Not entirely." His fingers drew patterns on the nape of her neck and she leaned into the touch instinctively.

She forced herself to pull away. "And if I choose to stay?"

The fingers stilled, before cupping her throat possessively. Both knew it to be her choice.

"Everything will be as it was."

Etain nodded. Her eyes ran over her family – a family that she had taken for granted, that she no longer knew and was better for that loss.

"It's all your fault."

"Yes," he agreed simply.

She nodded again and then leaned back against him, a faint smile on her face that was equal parts sad and equal parts content.

Riven released the breath he didn't know he was holding.

A moment later they were back in the castle.

Etain studied the renewed mark on her palm. There would be no going back.

Perhaps that was how it should be.

She didn't protest when Riven turned her and drew her close. She returned the embrace, though she trembled a little at the fierce hunger in his face.

There would be no going back…

Chaos had descended on the castle. The goblins, who had previously enjoyed the hospitality of the throne room floor, had awoken, either on their own or by the dirty feet of others trodding across their faces. Most clutched their heads and moaned piteously, while a few emptied their stomachs and then stared balefully at the shocking waste of good goblin ale. One, who had just finished guard duty, kept vainly trying to remove a pair of royal pants from the horns on his helmet.

All, however, were very aware of the mood darkening the castle and the Labyrinth beyond. Their heightened goblin senses told them that something was terribly wrong. Something had changed and was only getting worse. They expected Him to fix it.

The goblin sentinel who had tried to approach the king in the gallery and then again in the tower had promptly bogged himself out of fear and a misguided sense of duty.

Jareth was not celebrating his victory, nor was he deservedly punishing anyone for the tremendous mess. When he entered the throne room, all had gone silent under his black look.

His expressions and manner were mercurial, fluctuating between anger, which everyone recognized, and a sort of hollowness, which seemed far more deadly than everything else.

When his eyes lit on the mangled piece of metal by his throne, his expression changed again. At first
he seemed to be studying it, keen eyes noting the vaguely crown-like contours, but then he flung it across the room as though its very sight repulsed him. One goblin in particular watched mournfully as it sailed out a window.

A collective breath was held as they awaited orders.

They had not seen their lord so dangerously volatile since the girl had stormed the city and breached the castle's defences. What followed had been a dark time that none of them could forget, despite their tendency towards inane joviality.

When their king leaned out the window, eyes narrowing dangerously, they realized something grave was in play. It was confirmed when he crushed a crystal in his hand. He disappeared a moment later, expression lethal.

They released their breath with a shudder.

Wondrous sights were passed without notice and dangers untold avoided only narrowly, neither yet supposing why.

Sarah and Sir Didymus hurried along in uneasy silence. Even Ambrosius was not immune to the tension, his low keens punctuating their steps.

The knight wanted desperately to dissuade the lady, to warn and entreat her, but said nothing out of loyalty. The lady wanted to reassure the knight, to ask him about Etain and Riven, about his long life and their friends, about everything that had gone before. She said nothing out of fear.

Sarah needed no more excuses to give in.

And when they came to the door, the door in the story, neither were entirely pleased.

Sarah traced the spiral patterns lightly, before pushing it open enough to hear the waves beyond.

"You should probably leave now. Just in case."

Didymus said nothing for a moment. "If that's the way it's done, then that's the way you must do it."

Sarah smiled brightly at his levity; touched that he remembered words from so long ago… which were not long at all to him.

"And should you need us…"

Sarah nodded, unable to reply, and hugged him tightly.

The knight turned to leave.

"Didymus?"

He glanced back.

"I still owe you a game of scrabble."

Sarah waited until he was out of sight to let her smile fade. Now alone, she was reminded how
entirely powerless she actually was. As Riven had cautioned, she had no idea how to navigate the passage safely. She could be lost forever and Sarah had no delusion that forever could be very, very long. Staring at the glittering waves, she remembered the terrifying feeling of falling off the cliff, Jareth’s hand torn from hers.

She fingered the mark on her palm absently. Part of her was surprised that Jareth had let her get this far without interference. She found she was undecided as to how feel about that. She would certainly not admit disappointment.

The door would disappear once she entered and what if he was able to stop her, if the story was wrong? Or what if he didn't come at all? If she lacked the strength to jump alone?

…did she really want to…

Everything had become so confusing. Walls came crashing down, while new ones were built. But she had come so far. The page had been marked. She was the heroine, after all.

The winds howled through the open door, blowing it wide and sending a stinging spray to her face.

"Perhaps I was a little impulsive," she whispered nervously.

"We agree. Naughty, naughty little queen."

"Little queen all alone…"

---------------------------------------------

Chapter End Notes

Lines that are eerily familiar should be. They were taken verbatim (in most cases) from the Labyrinth movie script and were the addictive-genius of Henson, Lee and Jones respectively.

Mo mhíle stór – My thousand treasures (an endearment like darling)

The sea as a passage way between worlds is a strong part of Celtic symbolism and mythology. There was no law between worlds but that of the sea, hence why Riven can't force her back and why the binding mark disappears on Etain's hand. He cannot use his magic against her.

Lir or Llyr (for the Welsh) is often considered the god of the sea – thus Etain's grandmother's reference to him. The Lir in the famous story, The Children of Lir, fought Bodb Dearg for the kingship of the Tuatha Dé Danann, after they descended into the fairy mounds (just like those on the Hill of Tara).

Wooster: I say, Jeeves, is that smut on the horizon?

Jeeves: I do believe it is, sir.
Wooster: Capital, old boy! I believe that calls for a celebratory cocktail.

Jeeves: Right away, sir… though I draw the line at garish umbrellas.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part XXXII

No one knows what it's like
to be the bad man, to be the sad man.

And no one knows what it's like
to be hated, to be fated to telling only lies.

But my dreams, they aren't as empty
as my conscience seems to be.
I have hours, only lonely.
My love is vengeance that's never free.

No one knows what it's like
to feel these feelings like I do and I blame you!

No one knows what it's like
to be mistreated, to be defeated…

Behind blue eyes.

Behind Blue Eyes, The Who (c/ Limp Bizkit)

Sarah whirled around guiltily and then half-laughed, relieved and slightly disappointed that it wasn't Jareth.

Ten scruffy, cat-like creatures regarded her with cat-like interest, their tawny tabby tails twitching. A few nimbly balanced on the Labyrinth walls, while the rest lolled on the ground, occasionally batting at one another with remarkably lethal-looking claws. All had luminous amber eyes trained upon her.

Sarah's smile wavered. Though she had always wanted a cat, long resenting Karen for her allergies and general distaste of four-legged beings, at that moment she couldn't think why exactly.

Experience warned her these were not of the mewling lap variety.

Their musk alone was almost overwhelming, flooding her senses in waves. It reminded her of clubs, of rancid wine, of sex, of sweat and blood. Sticky summer nights. Carnality.

She wrinkled her nos. "How… cute…"

The tabbies tittered to one another, tails twitching again.

"Pretty, pretty little queen," purred one.

"Pretty queen all alone," purred another.
No. Not pets at all.

Sarah instinctively reached for the door behind her as one approached, its gait belyingly lazy, its eyes those of a predator.

It sniffed her skirts before raising its angular face towards hers. "We can smell you, little queen."

The rest yowled lowly in agreement. Dark tongues slithered in and out.

Her mind turned to Jareth, cool fingers on hot skin, the taste of tears, hands beneath her skirt, fabric ripping… surrender…

Sarah gripped her head against the onslaught of images, blood rushing to her face. "Oh… I… uhh…” she trailed off brokenly.

The felines sampled the air again and grinned like rabid cheshires, their movements more spastic, their teeth suddenly more pronounced.

"You smell like owl, ickle, ickle little queen," remarked one.

"And we don't like nasty owls," hissed another, flicking its noticeably broken tail.

Without warning, it wove between her legs, knocking her forward and away from the door with surprising force. Sarah landed hard on the ground, the uneven stone splitting her chin and gouging her palms deeply. She clutched them against her chest protectively as she stood, a cold sweat descending her spine.

The door swung shut behind her and vanished.

…Footfalls echo in the memory… Down the passage we did not take… Towards the door we never opened…

The leather book was an anchor in her dress pocket.

The Cravlings tasted the air again, reacting to the salty, metallic tang of blood like a drug.

"You smell like… hunger."

Several licked at the bloody stones, the deep rumble of their mews turning to fervid growls. Incisors glinted in the sunlight.

"Tasty, tasty little queen."

"Tasty, tasty little queen has lost her king."

Reality returned in a heartbeat. Sarah darted sideways, but they had coiled beneath her skirts and about her legs like serpents; rough tongues and teeth grazing her skin.

"… Yes… lost him," her tone desperate, "I should go find him. He'll be angry that I've been gone so long…" She trailed off as their clowing musk assailed her again. It made her head swim unpleasantly and for a moment all she wanted to do was lie down and give up. Blood dripped down her dress.

This game was for keeps.

Sarah couldn't help wishing she'd been the kind of pragmatic heroine that thought of keeping useful things into her pockets. Like a length of rope, a bobby pin, a rubber band, a pocketknife… cat treats.
Or better yet a pack of starving dogs.

When she tried to move again they spit waringly. "No more running, hungry little queen."

Their words hit too close to home and Sarah hissed right back at them. "You know, I'm really not in the mood for this." Her chin ached and tears pooled in her eyes. Another injustice joined her tally. "Not. At. All." She began ticking off grievances with her fingers. "I've had rocks thrown at me. I've been chased by just about everyone and everything, tricked, betrayed, groped, drugged, manipulated… you name it!" She released an angry breath. "And none of it was my choice!"

The Cravlings blinked, bright eyes flickering like oil-lamps. And then they advanced again.

Sarah held her ruined hands up. "You can't hurt me." He'd never let that happen, she reminded herself, unless he was the one doing it.

Rasping laughter filled the air. Nails on chalk boards. "Naughty, naughty little queen."

"Naughty, naughty little queen… all alone."

"Stop saying that! You'll be really sorry when he comes for me!"

Desperate times sometimes called for damsel-ly measures. And she realized she was entirely confident in her claim. So confident that she was wholly unprepared when one of the Cravlings sprang forward, landing on her shoulder nimbly.

Unprepared for its claws to sink deeply into the tender flesh of her neck, turning her scream to a gurgle.

"Too late, too late for little queen."

A dark red tongue darted out, sampling her from chin to brow. "The owl's away and we shall… eat."

Her last coherent thought was a stark realization.

He wasn't coming.

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Once alone, Jareth's dark expression vanished. Eyes widened, breathing fractured and skin paled to an ashen grey. Hands that were usually so assured and graceful in their movement, betrayed him now. He ran them through his hair to disguise the weakness.

Goblins on the whole were rather simple creatures, and as such, had simple expectations when it came to their monarch. They could name his mercurial moods by rote, sometimes using them to mark the time of day. They expected him to be jovial, licentious, perverse, arrogant, sometimes morose and regularly cross. They made study of these states with a sort of morbid fascination and an ingrained sense of self-preservation.

The face he wore now would have been entirely alien and thereby terrifying.

Goblin kings were never nervous.

Even when the girl had thrown the kingdom into chaos, the king had maintained a smug sense of feathery-self-righteousness that served as a pillar of strength - a sort of beacon in the ensuing
darkness.

So when the sentry had told him of the large areas of "black stuff" staining the Labyrinth like spilled ink, Jareth had been tempted to toss him in the bog for wasting time. But a flicker of unease had stayed his hand.

Having returned to his power and position, with a more than deserved and long awaited prize as his reward, Jareth had too easily slipped into old habits. He chose to forget the unsavoury and the undeniably humbling experience of his mortal run. When time could stretch beyond measure, unpleasant memories had to be boxed, shelved and forgotten, he reasoned.

Until they broke free in a bold swirl of colour…

We are the artists…

…like a brush's stroke.

…and everything is changing.

A cold dread formed in the pit of his stomach - a leviathan rising from the deep.

We are not your subjects, Goblin King…

Jareth had immediately gone to the throne room, mask firmly in place even as he'd felt his world beginning to crumble and fall… for the second time. And as he'd looked out the window, all thoughts of Sarah and errant portraits had slipped away, replaced with an aching void. Not for the first time, he wondered if he'd been meant to learn something while in Labyrinth.

And questioned if he had.

… We are the beginners and enders of everything.

He now stood alone, powerless and uncertain, as his Labyrinth unravelsled. He could feel its magic shifting erratically. Some of the walls were a frayed tapestry of stone, with gaping holes of… absolute nothing. Everything was blurred around the edges, like a painting not quite finished.

When he touched a wall experimentally, his hand sank into the bricks, the stone around his fingertips swirling and clinging to his gloves like oil. He jerked his arm back as though burned. The substance on his gloves immediately reformed into sandstone dust and slipped between his fingers.

Jareth wanted to laugh. As though it was all a farce that would be tidily resolved by act three. It died in his throat.

The Labyrinth was changing and he was seemingly powerless to change it back. He couldn't even fully grasp what was happening. Or why. And that unknown made him nervous.

For now the pockets seemed isolated to a few locations. But as the vast maze shifted, so did its barriers, those within and those without.

Despite appearances, the Labyrinth was highly compartmentalized - order within chaos. A few of its inhabitants had the full run of its twists, but only a marked few. The denizens born of its power were restricted to their select areas, for their protection and for the protection of others. Free to roam, terrible things would result.

Jareth's shoulders sagged ever so slightly. It was sometimes difficult not to feel crushed beneath the
weight of his world. Not to feel defeated by decisions past and present. His victory tasted rather sour, all things considered. And he could only partially blame others.

But Goblin Kings leaned on no one and duty was an ever present guest at his table. Sometimes he longed to share the burden. To place the yoke around another's neck…

A pained whimper broke his thought. Rounding a bend in the wall he stopped short, his eyes widening. A large, shaggy beast was violently writhing on the ground in obvious agony. One of its legs had blended into the stone in a blur of muddy colours. The creature's skin was stretching and pulling as it merged with the wall. Jareth could see the bloody marks where it had tried to rip its limb free.

It moaned again, a great bellow of rage and fear that seemed to shift the very rock beneath their feet. For a moment its dark eyes locked with the king's and then it began to claw its leg again, ripping hunks of flesh and fur away.

The Labyrinth was devouring the hulking mass like some macabre feast. Jareth was so repulsed by the sight, he wanted to leave and forget he'd seen anything, but the creature's wails and grunts were too pitiful to ignore. Conscience stayed his hand.

"Stop that," he ordered impatiently, crouching closer to the wall but still out of range of its claws.

The beast paused in its thrashing, its brow ridge perking hopefully.

Biting back a curse, Jareth reached into the swirling mass and pulled. The beast immediately began howling again. A sickening, wet sound like flesh being rendered followed. The creature collapsed onto his back, its great chest having in shuddering pants. The unfortunate leg had reformed, minus sizeable pieces of tissue and a few toes. It wiggled the remaining experimentally.

Jareth stood swiftly, grimacing as he fastidiously brushed a putrid mixture of skin, fur and stone from the dark leather of his gloves. The beast also rose, albeit shakily, pushing its ungainly weight up with its arms.

It wiggled its mangled toes again. Bits of bloody stone crumbled out.

"Rocks friends," it grunted accusingly.

Jareth, on the point of leaving, stilled, visions of great boulders descending upon the Goblin City filling his head. He spun, levelling a finger at the startled beast. "You!"

The beast bobbed his head, pointing at Jareth in imitation. "You."

The king's eyes narrowed. "If I'd known," he gestured to the red-stained wall, "I might have left you to your friends."

The beast lumbered closer, unconcerned by the monarch's ire, and bowed his head slightly. "Ludo friend." He lifted his leg clumsily and cocked his head to one side. "King friend?"

Jareth looked appalled. "Not even slightly."

Ludo 'oh'd and hung his head. "Sarah friend."

Sarah…

Jareth had completely forgotten her. Forgotten that she was not safely ensconced in the tower.
Forgotten she was somewhere out there roaming. A sliver of dread shot through his veins. It increased tenfold when the crystal he produced remained clear. Everything should have been easy. They were supposed to be on Tara tonight. The stone would seal everything. Sarah would accept the inevitable. Wrongs would be righted.

On all sides.

But even he couldn't fully buy that argument, however much he might like. Everything was changing. And he had no basis of comparison.

Ludo shuffled his feet, agitated by the king's sudden change in demeanour.

Jareth glanced at Sarah's former companion distastefully. How meddlesome they could all be. The dimwit and the knobby-kneed gnome especially.

And the other. The older one… He paused, unearthly eyes flashing.

Meddlesome…

Glancing at the beast again, he sighed in resignation. "At the very least you'll be a show of good faith, I suppose."

Ludo instinctively took an awkward step backwards.

Before he could question his motives further, Jareth gripped the beast's arm firmly. "If she has the bloody sense to see it."

The unlikely pair reappeared a moment later next to a startled fox and a cowering sheepdog.

"Didymus."

The knight recovered and dropped into a low bow. "Sire." He turned to Ludo. "And my brother."

Ludo beamed and tried unsuccesssfully to stroke the nearly paralytic Ambrosius.

Jareth dropped to one knee and levelled a calculated look on the knight. "You've seen Sarah."

Sir Didymus swallowed nervously but stood his good. "Y-y-yes, Sire."

Catching the faint trace of salt that hung over the fox, Jareth exhaled sharply. "What have you done, Didymus?"

"My-y-y duty."

Jareth raised a brow, a faint smile on his lips.

The knight paled. "The Lady asked me… she needed me…." He trailed off. "I-I tried to warn her."

Jareth whirled upwards, cursing. Ambrosius began a high-pitched wail and was immediately cowed with one dark look.

"But she had the book. She knew!" Didymus pleaded.

Jareth spun. "Yes, and you let her manipulate you. What?" His voice lowered dangerously, "Didn't learn your lesson the first time?"
The fox hung his head wearily. "I've failed her."

A look of pity, and perhaps guilt, flashed openly across the king's face before he quickly turned away.

"No more than… others."

The portrait… the Labyrinth… Sarah…

All things he no longer understood. He traced the faint silver lines on his wrist. She hadn't gone through the door.

He wasn't sure whether to be relieved or worried.

Feeling the eyes of the knight upon him, the Goblin King straightened, deftly adjusting his gloves. "Things are changing."

"I can feel it in my bones." The fox took in Ludo's injured leg. "But I do not know why. And I have not seen it afore."

Jareth nodded, eyes on the horizon. Tacit understanding passed between them. Without another word the king vanished.

Sir Didymus stared at the empty spot for several moments, his body suddenly heavy with the ravages of age in endless time. He quietly led his large friend towards home, wishing for all the Underground he shared Ludo's simple and unfettered nature.

The fire burned steadily on Tara, despite the unseasonably cold wind that had suddenly gained strength. The remaining watchers, steadfast in their devotion, huddled closer to the warmth.

Mrs. Whelan clutched her robe around herself, glancing at her twin. They both looked to the steely sky above.

"Changes," one whispered, her breath ghosting across her sister's face.

"Changes," echoed her reflection.

They lapsed into an uneasy silence, broken only by the rhythmic swish of steel against wood.

Declan's joints always ached fiercely in the cold, but he had not ceased. Every time he came close to finishing, he'd stop, examining his work with a frown and then feed the flames with his creation, nicked hands the only testament of their existence. The process would begin anew.

His latest joined the rest, this time with a muttered curse.

"When will you finish, Declan," one of the doppelgangers asked, a worried lilt to her voice. "You alone seem to be keeping the fire fed."

The carver paused, his fingers running over the veins in the virgin lumber, tracing a hidden pattern.

"When the battle's lost and won," he offered neutrally, honing his tool on a piece of leather. "For better or for worse…"
The blade sank into the wood.

Jareth smelled the blood, before he saw it. The air was thick with the metallic tang, beneath that, the sea and… something else.

Red spatters stained the cobblestones.

Beyond them lay Sarah.

Jareth's breath caught in his throat, his heart rang in his ears.

Her slack form was propped against a wall, skin pallid, matted dark hair obscuring her face. Once blue, she was now swathed in crimson hues.

The king sank to his knees at her side, an acrid taste in his mouth. With a shaking hand he brushed the sticky strands from her face.

Green eyes blinked opened and stared back at him. A second later a hand struck his cheek.

Jareth reeled backwards.

"You didn't come," she croaked.

Her hand crept to her throat. Jareth winced at the deeply torn skin. A rivulet of blood slid down the white column of her neck and disappeared beneath her ruined dress.

He raised unsteady hands and gently cupped her face, thumbs stroking softly. She jerked at the contact but let him continue.

"Sarah, what has happened?"

Her eyes narrowed. "You happened."

The words stung more than the slap. He dropped his hands and looked away, his gaze falling on the leather book.

Sarah's followed. "It's all your fault."

Their eyes met.


For a brief moment Sarah's eyes softened and he reached for her neck again. "You're hurt…"

But she pushed him away. "I'll be fine."

"The blood…"

Sarah frowned, as though seeing everything for the first time. A look of horror flashed across her face. She fingered her dress absently. "I think… most of it isn't mine…"

Jareth swore softly and then drew Sarah to her feet. "What happened here?"
She wavered for a second, before stepping away from him, her hand trailing to her neck again. "They were so hungry."

Jareth’s eyes hardened in understanding and he looked around wildly. The predator in him raged for the hunt.

How dare they touch what was his. After he’d already caught her.

He tugged Sarah back to him almost savagely, his arms wrapping around her. He tucked her head beneath his chin, trying to envelop her completely.

For a moment she struggled, clawing at his chest in protest. And then she sagged against him, shivering, relishing his warmth, his scent - the fact his dark shirt blocked out the world.

When she spoke again it was against his neck, her cracked lips dancing against his skin in a whisper. "But I made them go away."

And it was then that he recognized the other smell hanging in the air. The other scent radiating off Sarah, beneath the blood and the sea.

Magic.

As soon as the claws sank into her neck, Sarah felt her knees begin to buckle. Her vision wavered.

And all she could think of was Jareth and how nothing had gone right and how everything was changing.

And how she loathed cats.

As her knees hit the ground, the other beasts crouched, preparing to pounce. She clawed at the one on her shoulder.

"Just leave me alone!" she screamed.

Almost immediately she felt something jolt within her. Fire spread through her body, her skin crackled and lights danced behind her eyes. She imagined it was like being in the middle of a lightening storm on a hot summer night. She could smell the sea. Perhaps this was dying. It was wonderful and terrifying at the same time.

Soon she would shatter.

Far away she heard screeching and suddenly the pressure left her neck.

And then it all stopped. She collapsed against the wall, exhausted.

When she opened her eyes again she was alone.

The Cravlings were gone, blood spattered the ground and her dress was wet with it. She turned away and wretched, dry heaves wracking her empty stomach. This was not the Labyrinth of her memory, of childhood. This was… too real.

Sarah raised shaking hands to her face. They looked no different – they were clean, spotless. She
rubbed them anyway.

Hands that didn't smell right. Hands that smelled like Jareth.

Changes.

Jareth pulled Sarah closer to him, wrapping her hands within his protectively. Caging them.

His dark eyes were far away. His thoughts further. He was more afraid than ever to let her go.

And still the fire burned on Tara… waiting.

Chapter End Notes

Cravlings – I humbly direct you to Chapter 26 – Hunger and Craving, where the Cravlings are introduced and their impulses explained (in case you've forgotten all about them – and kudos if you guessed who they were).

Footfalls echo in the memory… is lifted from TS Eliot's poem, Burnt Norton. As a student of literature, it seems probable Sarah could easily pull it from memory.

When the battle's lost and won is pilfered from Macbeth and the inestimable Mr. Shakespeare. Not to mention Sarah rubbing her clean hands.

When Sarah says 'it's all your fault' and Jareth answers 'yes' – I direct you to the previous chapter. Etain's words to Riven.

Behind Blue Eyes: Pete Townshend (of the Who) wanted to do another "Tommy" (awesomeness) like rock opera under the title of the "Lifehouse Project".

It never came to pass but he wrote some awesome songs, including the one above. The song is actually sung by the 'villain' of his story and is, essentially, his feelings on being forced to play a two-faced role - branded a bad guy when he feels that he is ultimately good. How perfectly Jareth is that?
Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Part XXXIII

Every thing's gone white and every thing's gray
Now you're here, now you're away
I don't want this, remember that
I'll never forget where you're at

If I treated you bad, you bruise my face
Couldn't love you more, you got a beautiful taste…

I couldn't change though I wanted to
Should have been easier by three
Our old friend 'Fear' and you and me

Don't let the days go by…

Glycerine, Bush

----------------------------------------

Jareth's heartbeat was a steady thrum in Sarah's ear. It was strangely calming and for a moment she could almost pretend it was human. Normal.

And she was tired, so very tired. Her neck had stopped aching, but the dried blood pulled and made her skin itch uncomfortably. She was embarrassingly conscious of how disgusting she must look and equally disturbed by how much it bothered her; she really shouldn't care.

Jareth hadn't said anything in a long while; his body stiff and expression inscrutable. Distant even. But he seemed reluctant to let her go and that was fine with her. For now. She wasn't quite sure what she would do, left alone again. Not after…

Her eyes opened and she jerked slightly when she felt gentle fingers brush her collar. Jareth was inspecting her neck; his eyes dark and veiled. She brushed his hands aside in annoyance and turned away.

"Sarah…" he began softly.

A palm rose waringly. "Don't. Just don't." She wasn't ready to deal with everything yet.

His eyes narrowed, but he remained silent.

She stood and for several minutes merely paced along the walk, flinching whenever she crossed a splatter of blood. Jareth let her pace undisturbed. Her agitation was palpable. So was her weariness. And it wasn't long before her limbs stopped cooperating. She sagged against a wall, shivering. A warm cloak fell across her shoulders almost immediately, though hers still lay in a ragged mess on the ground. She fingered the fine, silvery fabric thoughtfully.
"You know, if I was home I would just get a sweater." She turned to face Jareth. "Or an afghan."

"A blanket," she offered when he looked lost. "Sometimes it's this horrible mix of really ugly colours, usually knitted by a grandmother. But it's warm and everyone has at least one stuffed somewhere." Sarah paused, her expression hardening. "I mean everyone normal. Everyone who works 9-5 and gets a little older everyday." Her eyes flicked over the Goblin King's otherworldly features. "And everyone who goes to bed knowing that stories are just fantasies." She took a menacing step forward. "Everyone who doesn't get what they wish."

Jareth opened his mouth and then closed it again thoughtfully.

"I liked being that person." Ignoring his patent look of doubt, she continued, "Maybe I wanted more, but everyone does. They just don't get it. They're supposed to escape through books and movies and then go back to just getting take-out and sleeping in on Sundays." Sarah knew she was babbling and had probably lost the point along the way, but she couldn't help herself. "I didn't like housework, but I did it. Because that's what normal people do!"

Jareth scoffed loudly, his patience wearing thin, "You say normal like it's something to aspire to." His eyes flitted over her knowingly. "And since when have you ever wanted to be normal?"

"Since right about now," she sniffed petulantly.

Jareth wanted to say something biting; something about spoiled little girls. He wanted to list his own grievances, but angry tears had begun to pool in her eyes and he'd already made her cry enough. How easily they soured his inclination.

Instead he took a steadying breath. "You saved yourself, that's something a so-called normal girl could not have done."

Sarah thrust her hands out accusingly. "But I didn't want this!"

"Neither did I," he whispered hotly. He would have liked to spare her whatever pains she'd endured. He would have liked to rescue her himself and be on the receiving end of her gratitude for a change. He would have liked to use it as a harsh lesson on why defying him was dangerous, even as he kissed every inch of her better. But most of all, in the most selfish and basest part of his being, he'd have liked to have kept her powerless.

Ignoring his words, Sarah stood taller, wrapping the cloak around herself like a shield. "I liked my life."

"Oh?" Jareth's lips quirked. "And you don't like it here? Where you can have anything? Do anything?" His voice lowered provocingly. "Not even a little?"

How easy it would be to say no, given everything that had happened and would happen still, but the words stuck in her throat and her eyes dropped. She felt rather than saw the smug expression cross his handsome face. It spoke volumes.

Angrily, Sarah bent and snatched the blood-stained leather book off the ground, slapping it against his chest. "I'm not your mother. And I didn't need rescuing."

"But you, you're just like him. Like all of them."

He didn't need to ask who and Jareth knew she intended it as an insult. He couldn't help the smile anyway. His father was legendary, amongst those old enough to remember, and he had certainly
always aspired to the… skills his sire had possessed. But he also aspired to the mortal love his father
had found. Sarah just didn't see it, couldn't see it, perhaps. And she was right, she was not his
mother. His mother would have given in by now. A much wiser woman.

Reading the expression on his face, Sarah exploded, "God, you don't even get it, do you? You're all
so proud of how easily you can selfishly manipulate everyone around you, you haven't bothered to
evolve in thousands of years!" She pointed to the book. "Still playing the same tired game of snatch
and grab. God forbid you actually had to try!"

Jareth's expression darkened warningly, but Sarah merely laughed, "It's really kind of pathetic if you
think about it."

The remains of his control snapped. Everything weighing on his shoulders, the Labyrinth, the
changes, Tara… all came crashing down like a house of cards. He grabbed her cloak and jerked her
forward roughly. She squeaked in protest, but her hands were still snared by the heavy fabric.

"Not try?" He breathed hotly. "I've done nothing but try, you insolent little brat. That's all you've
ever made me do. Not try?" His eyes were black holes in a pale face. The air noticeably chilled
around them. "No one has ever had to try harder. And for what?" he sneered cruelly.

Sarah was perversely reminded again of how horrible she must look, and worse, smell.

His tone softened slightly, "I thought we agreed no more running."

Her eyes fell to the book. "I had to try."

"And so did I." He pushed her away slightly. "Accuse me of many things, Sarah, but never accuse
me of not trying." His expression turned flinty. "I think you like running. And I think you like being
chased," he mused when Sarah tried to protest. His voice dropped an octave lower, mouth brushing
against her ear, "And I think a part of you, one you're not ready to face, even likes to be caught."

"So this is all my fault somehow?" She hated the way the words danced from her mouth.

"Oh no." Jareth grinned darkly, his hands tightening on her arms. "I especially like catching you."
His lips brushed her ear again. "I just wonder when you'll be content to stay caught."

Sarah stopped herself from leaning into his touch even as her eyes fluttered shut. She snapped them
back open. "And what if that never happens?" Though the question was asked to provoke, there was
underlying truth in its tenor.

Forever dancing on a cliff's edge.

The game must end eventually.

Jareth released her and forced a shrug. It was a fear that plagued him, more so now, but he wouldn't
let her see it. "Time is ever on my side, Sarah"

"What pretty lies."

Both Sarah and Jareth stopped and turned in unison.

"Oh, well spoken lies they are, not a doubt about that. Eloquent even; the way they glide off your
tongue. You are a consummate liar," the figure smiled widely, "both of you. But they are still lies in
the end."
If Jareth was surprised to see his father, his face betrayed nothing. Not one flicker of emotion. Sarah, for her part, rubbed her eyes rather stupidly for half a minute.

"It must be bad, for you to be here," Jareth remarked tonelessly.

Riven nodded, his smile fading to an implacable seriousness.

Sarah’s eyes darted back and forth between the two waiting for some kind of reaction, further explication even. But none was forthcoming. They both looked like stone effigies: alike in their otherworldliness and eternal youth. It was rather disconcerting to be caught between the two.

To be the human.

Seeing them so close, she could discern the subtle differences. Riven looked like he had seen everything, experienced everything. Jareth looked like he had enjoyed it more.

"What's bad?" The question was directed to Jareth, but her eyes kept straying to Riven.

Riven's mouth quirked. "Haven't told her yet?"

"I hadn't had the chance," Jareth frowned irritable, "having just… retrieved her again."

Laughing, Riven reached forward and gently brushed some dirt and dried blood from Sarah's face. "A little rough with the reunion, weren't you?"

Tired of being talked over, Sarah swatted his hand away roughly. She suspected Riven knew absolutely everything about what had happened to her and was simply baiting her.

He tsk'd her visceral reaction, "Though completely warranted, I'm sure."

"I liked you better as a figment of my imagination."

Jareth, who had been uncharacteristically silent during the exchange, laughed aloud at her quip, earning a surprisingly soft smile from Sarah.

Undaunted, Riven merely grinned. "And who says I'm not?"

Sarah scoffed and turned to Jareth for support, but he'd lapsed back into a reserved silence and looked disinclined to help.

"I thought you were trying to help me."

"Now, why would I want to do that?" Riven raised a brow.

"Do I look like one of your... charming followers? For a heroine, you're surprisingly callous with your friends." His eyes locked on Jareth's disapprovingly. "Luckily they seem to always find reprieve and even rescue."

"But…"

Riven waved his hand dismissively. "You like to run. You like to be caught. I was merely the catalyst." He smiled benignly. "And you both needed a push."

Sarah stared at him incredulously. One hand crept to her throat, the other clutched her cloak tighter.

"Ah… that I couldn't predict." He sounded genuinely contrite. Until he ruined it. "But don't worry,
poppet, I still think you're rather lovely, despite your current efforts to appear otherwise."

This time Jareth stopped the gloved hand that reached for her hair. "Enough baiting, I think."

Sarah automatically took a nervous step back. Both lords were radiating pure displeasure and neither looked ready to back down. She wanted to laugh at what amounted to an overgrown staring contest, but instinct told her far more than male pride was on the line. Something unspoken passed between them and after a painfully protracted silence, Riven inclined his head ever so slightly. Jareth released his wrist and nodded.

The general atmosphere lightened until Riven spoke again, "So what do you plan to do about this… mess?" Though the question was asked lightly, Sarah sensed the weight behind it. She could also read it in Jareth's reaction.

"I don't know. I don't... understand it. Yet." The last word was clipped and he flicked his eyes in her direction as he spoke.

"Mmm, this is different." Riven turned towards her as well, blue eyes narrowing. "Something has changed."

Jareth's shoulders tensed. He'd been hoping for answers, however unlikely they'd been.

"Changes don't have to be bad." Riven's face softened. "You WILL find a solution."

Jareth merely nodded, expression grave.

Riven turned back to Sarah and bowed mockingly. "Or should I say both of you."

She scowled.

His smile deepened. "You're a better king than I after all, I think. I'd have her declawed." And then he was serious once more, laying a heavy hand on Jareth's shoulder. Neither spoke for several moments, before the elder turned and began walking away.

"You won't see me again, dearest Sarah," he called back, "or at least not for a very long time."

Riven faded into nothing.

Sarah shuddered. "Well, I'm glad we won't have to have him for Christmas dinner." As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she wanted to take them back; horrified that she'd implied any future involving them as a plural, even glibly.

But if she'd been worried Jareth would capitalize on her slip, she was disappointed. He remained silent, expression stoically guarded.

After a moment she touched his arm lightly. "Was he real?"

"In a way… but not the way you think. A better question might have been was he here? The answer would then be no. He hasn't been here for a long time."

Though she didn't entirely understand, she nodded. "I saw him before… though I thought at the time he was just a dream."

"You should know better than anyone that dreams can be real."

Sarah sighed, "Why can't you just give me a straight answer?"
"Is there such a thing between us?" Jareth's brief laugh was horribly hollow. "There is certainly nothing straight within this realm."

"Why was he here? And why did he say things are different?"

"Because things are different." You're different.

Sarah looked down at her hands. "I'm not supposed to have magic, am I?"

"No. No, you are not. A measure of power yes. Everyone here does eventually. Magic like mine… no."

Sarah nodded, trying to process everything and failing. "So, are you mad?"

"Mad?" Jareth looked genuinely surprised by her question. "No. I am many things, several of them unpleasant, but mad – no."

Strangely pleased by his answer, she began to doubt her claim that they never evolved. Father and son were not the same person. She doubted Riven would have been so prosaic about Etain achieving any measure of power. She shelved the thought for later.

"And what did he mean by rescue my friends? Rescue them from whom?"

"The Labyrinth is changing, Sarah. In ways you can't imagine. Beyond my power. I can feel it. And so could he."

As he spoke, Sarah could almost swear she felt the shifting magics too. They licked at her very bones, tugging her in all directions at once. It was wonderful and terrible to be so connected, like being bound by the softest, silken cord. She wondered, but did not ask, if he felt the same.

If Jareth noticed her momentary lapse he didn't comment. "I should have seen it before. I did see it before, but I forgot. I'm not sure what it means yet, but I do know that things are in a state of flux right now and it must NOT continue as such. Something needs to be set right. Until then things are dangerous. Boundaries are gone. All rules are lost." He touched her face gently. Apologetically. "As you yourself found out."

"What were those things?"

"Cravings. They feed on emotion – hunger for it." Jareth eyes flickered for a moment and then darkened, searching her face. "Strong emotion is like an aphrodisiac to them."

"Emotion?" Sarah queried, unable to look away despite the instant warning bells.

"Needs and desires… like lust… like love." Hands, still cupping her face, tugged her closer. "They came after me when I wanted you." Lips hovered perilously close to hers. "I wonder why they came after you."

Sarah pushed him away defensively. He allowed her, only because it changed nothing. The seed of truth had been planted and they both knew it. Time enough for recriminations later.

She turned and gestured to vast maze around them. "So how do we fix this?" It was as much an excuse to look away.

"We?"

The word might have been a challenge and just as easily a question.
Sarah blushed regardless. "I… er… assume you need my help."

Arrested by the thought, Jareth paused. Blind fool that he was, it had not occurred to him that Sarah's change could be beneficial. Could be exploited.

More so, it might be connected to the other changes. He eyed her surreptitiously, so that they both could be reversed. She was far too powerful without magic and soon enough the shock would wear off and she would want to test her new found strength. He could not let that happen.

Jareth's sole focus had been discovering what in all hells was going on. And then his sole focus had become Sarah, and regaining her. Everything was happening far too fast and he found, not for the first time, that thinking clearly regarding Sarah was nigh impossible. Perhaps she was right – perhaps snatch and grab was all he was capable of. His baser instincts still cried out that he should just take her and be done with it. She was his by right. Won several times over. He'd already established that she wanted him. A few false protests were easily muted. There was such a fine line between love and hate after all. And she was off balance right now. Scared and overwhelmed. Vulnerable. Biddable even. He could make her forget. Afterwards, with her safely tucked away, he could deal with everything else. Few Goblin Kings would have hesitated. Riven wouldn't have.

In his mind's eye he saw it play out perfectly. Sarah laid bare, white skin and dark hair; her protests deepening to cries beneath skilled hands and lips. Bodies slick atop torn clothing. He'd have her on Tara, as they did in old; fey fires burning, with shadows dancing beneath a bower of stars. The wicked thoughts delighted.

It would be a benediction…

…it would be wrong. And it would solve nothing in the end.

Sarah watched the emotions play across Jareth's face with wary fascination. If she'd had any real idea of their nature she would have turned tail and risked her chances in the Labyrinth. Or maybe not.

But before she could ask and Jareth deny, urgent shouts drew their attention. A moment later a contingent of goblin guards stumbled upon them.

When the leader caught his breath he bowed perfunctorily. "Your Majesties."

Sarah's lips thinned but she said nothing. Jareth motioned for him to continue with thinly veiled impatience.

"The orchard, Sire… the fruit…" the captain trailed off nervously.

"What of them?" Though the question was asked calmly, Sarah noted the stiffening of his shoulders.

"They sp-sp-sp-spoil… all of them…"

The resulting silence was deafening. Collectively, the horde took a precautionary step back.

"Do they?" Jareth breathed; his eyes hooded by a silvery fringe of hair. "But of course they do."

Sarah cleared her throat to break the tension.

Ten goblins thought about kissing her in thanks. Ten thought better of it when they saw the expression on their monarch's face.

"I think the girl would like to rest. Perhaps bathe and change. Escort her to the castle."
"What! No!"

Both Jareth and Sarah were surprised by the vehemence in her voice.

"I mean… I don't want to go back. I want to stay."


"What I MEANT was that I can help. We both know I can."

When Jareth remained unmoved, Sarah continued, "And anyway, seems rather foolish to leave me alone again." She flipped her hand nonchalantly. "Who knows what I might get up to now…"

Jareth waved the guards away – all of them happy to take the reprieve. Once alone again he circled her slowly, a finger tapping against his chin. "I wonder why you want to help. Do you think to buy your freedom?"

"Could I?" Sarah countered.

He paused behind her so that the words brushing against her neck. "The question is do you still want to?"

Maybe. Not sure. It's hard to think with you so close. "And if I do?"

The warmth withdrew. "Then no, you can't."

Sarah whirled around, but Jareth was already rounding a corner, leaving the small courtyard without glancing back.

After a moment's hesitation she hurried after him, only too happy to leave the tainted place, and found herself in the midst of a vast orchard.

Trees stretched out in all directions, seemingly without end. She could no longer see any walls or the castle's spires. Verdant grasses danced around her ankles, roiled by a non-existent wind.

Despite all that had happened, the Labyrinth's blatant disregard for the laws of physics was still unnerving. Especially now that she could feel its power flow through her every time it changed. It was a heady experience for someone used only to the effects of alcohol.

The air itself was thick with the smell of magic. It was something intangible she had long associated with Jareth, but the more time she spent in the Labyrinth, the more she came to realize it permeated nearly everything to some degree. Here, it was almost overwhelming. And with it was the sickly, sweet smell of overripe fruit.

The trees were full of them – every kind she could imagine and some she couldn't.

…took their gifts both choice and many,
Ate their fruits and wore their flowers
Pluck'd from bowers
Where summer ripens at all hours…

They made her mouth water and her hand was halfway towards plucking one before she hastily pulled it back.

…Their offers should not charm us,
Their evil gifts would harm us…
Their fruits like honey to the throat
But poison in the blood…

The pear fell from the tree anyway and landed at her feet. Almost immediately, it withered until it was no more than a dried husk. More followed suit, dotting the ground like little shrivelled corpses.

...Her hair grew thin and grey;
She dwindled, as the fair full moon doth turn
To swift decay and burn
Her fire away…

With a shudder she remembered Jareth likening her to ripe fruit waiting to be plucked. At the time she'd easily dismissed it for the base comparison it was. It suddenly hammered home her mortality.

Jareth was nowhere to be found. Skirting the rotted pulps as best she could and wincing involuntarily whenever one squished beneath her foot, she made her way through the orchard until she came upon a tree of a different variety.

The smallest and most unprepossessing of all those she had passed, it was nonetheless the most arresting. Gnarled and twisted, it was strangely beautiful in its refusal to conform to any given shape. Its roots branched out impossibly far, exuding a latent power. Instead of bearing only one type of fruit it offered them all together. Glistening and ripe, they beckoned to be eaten.

Seducing…

They begged to be plucked before it was too late; before the first frost came… before they too rotted on the vine.

Once again her hand stretched upwards before her mind warned otherwise. In the end it was only the sensation of being watched that stopped her.

Jareth lounged against a rotting trunk a few feet away, his arms crossed over his chest restfully. His expression was blank, but his eyes were piercing. Sarah immediately dropped her arm, embarrassed.

…yet my mouth waters still…

"Is this another game?"

He laughed. A hollow echo. "This is the game."

Sarah frowned and turned back towards the tree... an apple, a pear, a plum, a peach… all clutched in canvas hands…

She jumped when she felt his breath hit her neck. "Hungry?"

"Hardly. I've been drugged enough by arrogant pricks, thank you very much."

Jareth smiled slowly. "A bit hypocritical, wouldn't you say?" He brushed a finger across her lips. "Although I must applaud your delivery methods."

Sarah removed his hand. "Just playing by your rules, Jareth."

He laughed again, another wintry one that never quite reached his eyes. "If only that were true."

"Why are they dying? I saw your expression when that guard told you."
Jareth's eyes narrowed, as though he was considering her question while also considering an appropriate answer. After a protracted silence she realized he was not going to oblige her.

"I'd give them back, you know." Sarah turned towards him when he said nothing. She held her hands up in explanation. "If this is what is causing… whatever is going on, I'd give them back."

Jareth frowned, mulling her words over as he searched her face for subterfuge. Finding none, his frown deepened even more. He couldn't decide if she was a consummate actor or an idiot. Wilfully relinquishing power was an entirely alien concept to him.

"That would be foolish," he began, the familiar spark returning to his eyes. "But if that's your way of surrendering, Precious, I'll gladly accept it." He held his hand out mockingly.

Sarah pulled a face at him, flashing him a nasty look.

"I hope our son has your eyes."

Though she knew he said it just to bait her she still felt an odd flutter at his words. Beneath the brazen arrogance was an honest admission that entirely knocked her off balance.

Jareth too seemed slightly undone by his own sincerity. He masked it quickly.

"I m-meant," she stammered quickly, "I'd be happy to go home just a regular old human if it meant fixing things here. Like a clean slate?"

His mouth quirked. "Now why did I suspect you weren't sweetly offering yourself for the taking? No… never that." He crossed his arms in resignation. "And how would you propose facilitating this rather… imbalanced trade."

"Couldn't you just… reorder time so that none of this happened? Any of this," she amended. "Or could I…?"

Jareth's expression immediately darkened, his tone laden with menace, "Don't even think about it."

Not willing to be cowed, Sarah bristled back, "Is that a threat? What could you possibly do that you haven't done already?"

Jareth flicked a finger under her chin, raising it until their eyes met. "What a very dangerous question. I've shown infinite restraint, Sarah. I didn't have to. And I don't have to…"

Feeling the tension in his body, suddenly pressed so closely against hers with the tree at her back, she didn't doubt that he had shown restraint. That he didn't have to. That it's wasn't in his nature, anymore than it was in hers. His kind never did. But he had. For her. Until now…

And maybe that was exciting as much as frightening. And maybe she had been running long enough.

Before she could decide, his mouth was on hers; his body caging hers against the rough bark of the tree that smelled of a thousand starlit dances - of possibilities. The kiss was fierce, almost harsh; she would be bruised later. He wanted to punish as much as pleasure. But it was also desperate. Because he knew that she could stop it at any time and likely would, as with all the times before.

So instead she softened and parted her lips. And when she dipped her tongue into his mouth, he made a sound that was half growl, half hiss. It undid her all over again. Carefully laid defences began to crumble. So much so that she didn't stop him when he pushed the cloak off her shoulders or when
he ran his bare fingers down her neck and over her collar bones with such reverence that she trembled. His lips and teeth traced the same path right after.

Sarah realized she was making noises that should have embarrassed her, but didn't, because when he ran his tongue along the almost-healed wound on her neck, it stung in a deliciously wicked way that made heat pool in her belly. Lost, she only half noticed that the fruit above them had started dripping, and only then because he caught a drop at the corner of her lips. When he slid his tongue into her mouth, she tasted a mixture of blood and nectar. It shot lightning through her veins.

Jareth knew he was playing with fire, but he was tired of the constant battles. He was tired of holding back when it was in his nature to capitalize on weakness; to exploit it. That much would never change. And she had the power to end it, more so now than ever. He would not allow that.

So when she didn't, he did what he did best: he took.

Everything else was falling apart around him. Sarah was an anchor in the chaos.

He couldn't decide if she was punch drunk or still in shock, but it didn't matter because her skin was so damned soft and her body so provocingly yielding. Painfully hard, he made sure she knew it. And as he sank into the cradle of her hips, wanting her to know his frustration, it was satisfying to feel her damp heat through the thin layers of ruined clothing. It was gratifying to hear her hiss in pleasure, but it was not nearly enough. Not after so long.

He'd been waiting...

No longer.

And when he tasted her blood, her head thrown back in abandon, it only made him harder. Because she tasted like Sarah and power and in that moment they were both his. That superseded everything.

For a moment, Sarah was thankful that she'd first come to the Labyrinth so young. She might never have left had it been like this. There'd been hints and promises, but the veneer of innocence had been maintained. With a strange sense of empowerment, she realized just how long he'd waited. Even now he was holding back, his body strung tight with tension as she ran her hands along the planes of his body.

Another rivulet of juice hit her upturned face and slid down her chest, beneath her dress. Jareth followed it with hungry eyes before licking away its trail, his tongue dipping into the cleft between her breasts...

...Teasing... Promising...

With one hand he deftly tugged her bodice down, rending the already fragile silk and leaving the lacy under corset exposed. It emphasized more than disguised, just skimming over the peaks of her white breasts, daringly cut so that they threatened to spill out. He'd dreamt about her like this. Dreamt of her as His. Jareth splayed his fingers over the fine fabric reverently, his thumb unerringly brushing against a taut nipple through the silk. Instinctively, Sarah arched into his touch until his hand was firmly cupping her.

He smiled against her neck.

His.

When the cool air hit her legs, she realized that Jareth had deftly tugged her skirts up with his free hand. His fingers began a lazy pattern up her thigh until they teased against the edge of her panties,
tracing the damp lace with exquisite torture. She knew they'd soon slip beneath. Slide within. Part of her wanted to let him, even encourage him. Beg for it. He'd ease the near-painful throbbing. And she was so ready...

The other part was too overwhelmed. His arms were like steel bands around her, pinioning her body against the hard planes of his. Their exposed skin was now slick with juice; the air fragrant with it and with their need. And he lay hot against her hip, reminding her where all of this was headed. The thought didn't disturb her as it should. But it made her pause.

Sensing her sudden reticence, Jareth pressed another open-mouthed kiss against her wet lips, stained red by nectar and his teeth. He'd had her for a moment, he was sure of that. She'd been so damned compliant; so delightfully acquiescent.

She beguiled him.

How dare she try and regain reason when he was already at the breaking point.

Past it.

He needed this.

Jareth knew he should pull back, the kiss had turned almost savage, his hand rough and possessive against her soft breast and he was in danger of losing control. But then Sarah made a raw sound of pleasure and gripped his hips to pull him closer. Breathing fractured, she slid a bare leg up his, hooking it behind his thigh to rock them together.

He could feel how wet she was. Because of him. For him...

And then he was truly lost. No going back. She had sealed her fate.

Finally...

His fingers abandoned their torture, eliciting a very feminine moan of protest, and began expertly tugging at the laces on her bodice. His other hand cupped the column of her throat possessively, holding her, as he lowered them both to the ground…

…that promptly split open and swallowed them both into the bleak darkness below.

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Chapter End Notes

Most of the lines in italics that sound like poetry, are exactly that. Taken from this story's namesake, Goblin Market by Christina Rossetti.

And in case it wasn't obvious, THE tree is where all the fruit come from. Including the peach from nine years previous and the one Sarah feeds to Jareth (though she didn't know it at the time). Hence very bad if it dies. Well, bad for Goblin Kings anyway...
Wooster: I say, Jeeves, it's rather warm in here. Was that the smut?

Jeeves: No, not really, sir.

Wooster: Sounded like smut to me…

Jeeves: Indeed, sir, but I'd say it's just a taste of what's to come.

Wooster: Bodes well then, old boy.

Jeeves: Indeed, sir. Celebratory cocktails again?

Wooster: Right ho, Jeeves!
Part XXXIV

You can choose what stays and what fades away
And I'd do anything to make you stay

No Light No Light, Florence and the Machine

I gave you all

But you rip it from my hands
And you swear it's all gone
And you rip out all I have
Just to say that you've won

Well now you've won

I Gave You All, Mumford & Sons

The sudden descent into nothing stole the breath from Sarah's scream.

As they fell, Jareth made a desperate grab for her hand; an inhuman snarl of fury on his lips. The rage frightened Sarah more than the fall. It meant he had had nothing to do with it. And he thought she had.

He was wrong.

For a second she had blindly reached for him with equal desperation, their fingers briefly entwining, before gravity tore them apart and all Sarah could think about was her terrifying descent into darkness.

And then, just as suddenly as she'd resigned herself to falling forever, it ended. Dry, leathery hands gripped her everywhere, suspending her very awkwardly within the rabbit hole. The dextrous fingers began to form faces.

"Forwards or backwards?" they asked in unison.

Sarah had never been so relieved to be manhandled by them again. "Thanks," she offered, as soon as she'd caught her breath. She craned her head around with difficulty. "Where is he?"

"Forwards or backwards?" they insisted.

"Hurry, hurry, we haven't got all day," urged one when she remained silent.

"We haven't got much time at all!" warned another.
"But aren't you supposed to ask 'up or down'?' Sarah winced at their increasingly bruising grip. "And where is Jareth?"

The fingers were now shaking with agitation. "Forwards or backwards?"

"Tha-t doesn't mak-ke any sense!" Sarah wheezed as the squeezed even harder. "How can I go backwards? Does backwards mean back up? Or back in time? I don't understand!"

"She chose backwards?" they echoed together. "She chose backwards!"

"No I didn't!" she screamed, clutching at their fingers as their hold loosened and her descent began anew. But it was too late and she knew better than to ask if she had made the right choice.

She landed in an undignified heap on an unforgiving floor, the force knocking the wind from her.

Before she could catch her breath, lights flooded the space, illuminating a vast stone amphitheatre in which she lay at its centre.

"Well, would you look at that…?"

"We weren't sure if you'd make it…"

"…Before it was too late."

"Capital!"

A round of huzzahs and enthusiastic clapping preceded the approach of two identically masked harlequins.

Sarah regarded the odd pair with wary interest as she rose. Their porcelain faces were devoid of any life; frozen in unnaturally wide grins. They vaguely reminded her of a pair of dolls her mother had sent her from a season in Italy many years before. They had always disturbed her - even as a child - and she'd kept them out of sight in a toy box.

"Er… Hello?" she offered tentatively.

The pair bowed flamboyantly.

Sarah had the strangest inclination to bow back, but stopped herself at the last moment. "Why did you bring me here?"

"Bring you here?" asked one in obvious surprise.

"We can't bring anyone," replied the other, gesturing towards the empty theatre. "No one ever comes to visit."

"And no one ever stays," they sighed dejectedly, despite their perfectly mirthful expressions.

"Though we'd like to keep them all," one added in a whisper.

Sarah frowned. "If you didn't bring me here and I didn't come on purpose… er… why am I here?"

"We're just the players." The pair shrugged, the movement meticulously synchronized. "We don't write the lines."

"Such a pity too," opined the one on the left. He motioned towards Sarah's torn dress. It's been ever
so long since we've had any heaving bosoms around."

The other agreed vigorously.

It was difficult to tell if the pair was actually leering, but Sarah's face burned a particularly unflattering shade of red anyway. She hastily wrapped the cloak around herself before an inner voice reminded her that she was not without resource anymore. Tentatively at first, her eyes flicking toward the watchful duo, she allowed the first coils of magic to slowly lick across her skin. Within seconds her blue gown was whole again. Sarah reeled from the effect. It was terrifying to feel so empowered.

"Not as much flair…"

"…but impressive, we suppose."

"So you do know Jareth. Did he do this?"

"Who?"

Sarah frowned again. "The Goblin King."

The pair conferred for a moment. "Tall, wispy hair, lots of leather?"

"Yes."

"Never heard of him."

Sarah's frown deepened at their obvious artifice. "Never mind."

She'd doubted his involvement anyway. She remembered his face in the orchard. When he'd told her the trees were dying. He'd been infuriatingly arrogant yes, but underlying that had been a palpable worry. One she thought he might have been about to confide to her. She knew she was part of the trouble, but not why. She sensed he was not certain either, rather he suspected. But then they'd gotten… distracted. And nothing else had mattered. She'd almost surrendered.

Could you call it surrender if you wanted to?

She was acutely aware that the skin beneath her mended gown was still stained with goblin fruit; their beguiling juices branding her body in hues of sunset red. Even now, with wits restored, parts of were feverish and unfulfilled.

Paths his hands and mouth had taken. Paths she had wanted them to take...

"Where's the door? I'm leaving," she demanded, halting the onslaught of traitorous feelings.

"Leaving?" they queried, all traces of merriment in their voices vanishing. "You can't leave until the performance is done."

They took a menacing step forward, their exaggerated smiles appearing more like sinister sneers. "The story is writ. You must see it to the end."

Sarah recalled Jareth's warning about the changes; about forces beyond his control. She had to find him.

"Look, I have to go…” her mind raced. Say your right words. "How do I leave?"
"Ah…" The mood lightened immediately.

"Change places!" cried the first.

"Change faces!" cried the second.

The two harlequins whirled towards the centre wall of the amphitheatre in strange, dance-like movements, and removed two of the hanging masks, unearthing as they did, the outline of a door. Sarah watched with a mixture of fascination and horror as they traded their old faces for new ones - revealing for just a moment the utterly featureless canvasses beneath.

Inching towards the exit, Sarah tripped over a discarded mask on the floor. A jagged crack ran its length, nearly splitting it in two. It was utterly unremarkable, save for the damage, but she could feel the power thrumming through it as soon as she picked it up, compelled for some unknown reason to do so.

"And so she has chosen…"

"…before we even asked!" They sounded disappointed. "For better or worse."

Alarmed, Sarah made to drop the offending article. "Chosen? I haven't been given a choice since I got here," she scoffed.

The harlequins laughed. It was a fell, hollow sound. "What honeyed lies from honeyed lips do fall."

"For you've read those lines before..."

"…Oh so many times that they have lost their meaning."

"Fine." Sarah had to bite her tongue against the childish impulse to point out how unfair it all was. "So I made my choice. Can I leave now?"

The harlequins each held aloft a finger. "You must first change your face..."

"…to change your place."

Always with the body parts. Sarah grimaced, remembering her similar encounter with the Fireys. "With this?" She held the mask up. "But this one is broken."

"Not completely."

"Not yet."

"And it's too late by far to change your mind." They almost sounded sorry for her.

Sarah swallowed the irrational lump of fear. She suddenly felt very much alone.

"And Jareth?" She wasn't even sure what she was asking, only that it mattered.

The harlequins shook their heads. "He already wears his face."

"And knows the price…"

"The longer you wear a face, the harder it is to take it off again."

Dangers untold… Sarah fit the fragile piece to her face without further hesitation.
Colours swirled before her eyes in a dizzying display. The ground tilted violently beneath her feet until her knees buckled. For a terrifying moment, she thought she would fall into nothing again, but a soft surface broke her fall.

When the chaos cleared, she was sitting upright on her old bed in her childhood bedroom.

And she was alone.

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When Jareth found himself back in the room, alone, his first inclination was to destroy something. He was not used to being toyed with. He was not used to losing control. Timing was cause enough. The air around him crackled dangerously with the first sparks of magic, before he supressed them resentfully. When he willed Sarah to his side and she did not appear, he recognized with distaste that he would have to wait; an unnatural skill for one of his kind. But one he had bitterly honed in the last decade.

Ability he owed to Sarah.

He tested his connection to her, releasing the breath he had not even realized he held, when he felt its continued strength. It was a reassurance that however far divided they might still be, their paths were intertwined beyond her ability to break it. Despite her new strength. Despite whatever forces were at work. That much he had wrought. There could be no going back. Not this time.

But the unspoken words between them left an acrid taste in his mouth. He was unsure what he might have said, had he not lost himself in her softness - knowing only that it would take more than silken cords and skilled fingers to truly bind them. He wanted more than her body. And the longer he waited the wider the breach between them. They saw their worlds through different eyes.

The visceral part of him still toyed with forcing her. As always it was but a flick of a wrist away. Force was subjective, after all, when right played a part. But he dismissed the inclination, however tempting. He was mercurial yes, but not vicious. Sarah did him disservice there at least. Rarely did he act if there was no benefit to be gained. Some things had to be given, not taken.

He would just have to make her give them.

Jareth smiled with dark satisfaction. It wouldn't take much effort.

And yet an insidious doubt had crept in and slowly begun to cripple him; where once he'd been imperiously decisive, he now questioned. A fear had taken seat, somewhere deep and unfathomable within him, and it refused to be purged. Only once before had he felt so uncertain. And it had been by her hand then too.

In this very room.

He may have turned her world upside down, but she had nearly destroyed his. He could be blithe about it, and had been, but it was just a mask. A mere slip of a girl had shaken him. And that was something he would not forget. He could bind her with ancient rite, but she had bound him long before - and so innocently too - without any trace of guile. There lay the bite. A skilled woman of talent could not have ensnared him better.

He loved and hated her for it.
Jareth tried to remind himself that there was much she had to atone for, but he was not so certain anymore. Not so certain that there would not be a price paid for his actions. One he was already paying. His thoughts returned to the deep-seeded sense that all was unravelling before him.

Maybe deservedly so...

Not so certain that he hadn't wronged where he should have loved.

"Jareth," spoke a feminine voice.

Sarah looked around the long familiar room in a sort of frozen daze. She wasn't fooled by appearances - the Labyrinth had misled her with false promises before - but it was still unexpected.

It appeared exactly as she had left it when she'd flown to Ireland. Though it had not been her room for more than five years, it still looked largely as it had throughout her childhood. The bedding had changed and a few coats of paint had given it whatever veneer her fancy had taken throughout the years, but the bones remained. Boxes now littered the ground. Storage that had bled down from the attic and a few boxes that she'd meant to bring over to her apartment, filled with trinkets from childhood she couldn't bring herself to get rid of: a music box, a statue, a worn red book.

Karen's sewing machine now sat upon her old vanity; the pictures of her mother long put away in an album she rarely opened. It would make sense to change the room into a workroom for Karen. Silly not to, really, she was not coming home again.

You can't go back after all.

The thought made Sarah pause. She told herself she'd meant she was not moving back into her childhood home. She was an adult and her apartment was lovely and affordable and more importantly, all hers. She'd probably live there until she got married or needed more space or something....

Married.

It seemed a foreign concept, even though she'd always assumed it would happen one day. It was difficult to picture now - a normal life's routine shared with a normal man. The 'normal' she had extolled and accused Jareth of taking from her.

No, perhaps she'd meant something else entirely. She was not coming home again.

Sarah stood, unwilling to explore those paths any further. It was a dangerous road right now. Everything was far too muddled – because of him. It had been so easy when a child had been at stake. Toby. The brother she had never wanted; had wished away and was now precious and beyond arms reach. His fault, she reminded herself. And yet, she was not so certain anymore.

She reached for the bedroom door, half-expecting to see the junk lady on the other side, imploring her to stay in the safety of her dreams, when it opened inwardly and a dishevelled Toby barrelled into her.

Shocked, she caught him by the shoulders and then tried to enfold him into a hug. "Toby!"

"S-Sarah? What are you doing here?" She felt him stiffen in her arms, drawing away.
Sarah stilled, at a loss for a reasonable explanation, but Toby had already stepped back, his boyish face contorting into anger. "You're not Sarah. This isn't real."

She assumed that to be her line. "It is! Toby, it's me… I can't explain-"

"No. You're. Not. Sarah is in Ireland. And she's not coming back. Maybe not for a long time. Or not at all. Mum told me. You called because you'd been offered a great teaching position or something. And you met someone. Or something. You're very happy and you're staying. Mum said, 'she's not coming home again.'"

Taken aback by the mixture of betrayal and hurt in his voice, Sarah reached for him. "Toby – it's not true! I wouldn't do that. It IS me. It wasn't my choice-"

The young boy shook his head. "You're not really Sarah. You're wearing her clothes but you're not really her.” Sarah looked down to see that her torn gown had been replaced by jeans and a billowy linen shirt. Clothes she knew she still had in the back of her closet; clothes she had never been able to throw away and had never worn again.

"Because Sarah's not coming back,” he finished sadly.

He had always been a fanciful child, touched they would say in Ireland, with keen insight and a wild imagination that sometimes ran to the deviant. She always supposed it was a by-product of his time spent below. But she couldn't make sense of his words. She didn't want to.

"But Toby, I'm right HERE. It wasn't my choice -"

"Stop lying, Sarah!"

Before she could say anymore, Toby turned and flew through the open door, slamming it loudly behind him.

Sarah wrenched the door open to follow and found herself in the castle's tallest tower. In the nursery. Only now the years of disuse and neglect had been completely stripped away.

And she was not alone.

A woman sat dozing by the fire, her head dipped in slumber and a curtain of dark hair obscuring her face. Shaken by her encounter with Toby, she wasn't ready to have another encounter with an echo of Jareth's mother.

"I don't want to play this game anymore,” she announced shrilly.

The woman did not stir, but a small plaintive cry started from the circular crib. Frowning, Sarah approached. The infant within - a fringe of familiar silvery hair on its head - flailed its tiny limbs as it blearily awakened. Sarah instinctively reached a hand forward to soothe it back to sleep, but moss green eyes blinked open.

Sarah snatched her hand back as though burned. The babe wailed with full force at her retreat, reaching for her with grasping hands. The woman by the fire, jerked awake by the wail, rose from her chair and turned, brushing the hair back from her face.

Sarah stared at herself in silent shock.

'I hope our son has your eyes.'
The other Sarah mouthed a 'shh' and scooped the baby up, cooing it back to sleep.

Sarah recoiled at the sickeningly perfect image they presented and backed through the nursery door…

…into the portrait gallery.

Breathing deeply, she put a steadying hand against the wall. A child? Her child.

Their child.

The thought sent a shudder through her. Sarah shook her head again resolutely and flicked an accusing glance at the sea of couples. That's what it was all about it in the end, wasn't it? A never-ending cycle of seeds being planted. It was just a trick to weaken her; make her lower her defences. She would not, she swore vehemently. She would not be undone so easily. These other women may have fallen, but she was made of sterner stuff. She could be Lizzie. She would certainly not become the beguiled girl in that cursed portrait.

Even as the thought crossed her mind, she caught sight of the maddening piece out of the corner of her eye. Triumph was etched into Jareth's features, resplendent in his Goblin King Armour, and worse, the look of pure enthrallment on…

Someone else's face.

Sarah cooled, the disdain dissolving from her expression as her mouth parted in surprise and confusion. It was a dark-haired woman in a white dress, but it was not her. Different nose, different jawline. Pale grey eyes beneath fine, arched brows. Another's face. Another woman in her place.

Unexpected emotions rose within. She wanted to rejoice that she was no longer on the wretched canvas - a part of her did - but another part, a deeply buried one, wanted to destroy the portrait for very different reasons. Jealousy roiled within and a swelling rage began to bubble to the surface, unexpected and unbidden.

Sarah was suddenly disgusted with herself. Because she cared.

Because she could be replaced.

She turned away to leave and came face to face with the Jareth - the one from the portrait, imperious and cold and entirely otherworldly.

He wound his gloved hand into her hair, his deft fingers curling against her scalp in an almost tender gesture as he turned her back towards the portrait. When she tried to twist away, his grip tightened implacably and she cried out at the burning sensation.

His fingers soothed the hurt with rhythmic strokes, but he did not let go. "Stop running from things that make you uncomfortable."

"Stop doing those things," she hissed.

He smiled at her anger.

"Let me go! Sarah pulled at his hand. "Enough games. It's cruel. And it's annoying!"

"You invite cruelty. And you're getting annoyed. Are all your arguments so circular?"

"Why do you even care? Looks like you've found another idiot to torment."
The Goblin King dipped his head until his lips touched her ear. "You can't be jealous. Isn't that what you wanted, you precious thing?"

Sarah swallowed; her eyes on the strange woman's face. "Of course," she replied defiantly. But the words sounded hollow and her mind went to the green-eyed babe. The child that would not be.

The Goblin King tsked, "Such a pity..." and passed a gloved hand over her face.

Sarah had no idea if he was referring to her words or the fact that she had lied.

The mask fell to the ground with a shrill clatter.

Sarah stood in the amphitheatre, the stone door now open. She touched her face absently but dropped her hand when she felt eyes on her.

"Did you see what you wanted or what you needed?" The harlequins inquired politely from the audience, their porcelain faces in shadow. They did not clap.

Sarah's eyes flickered. "I-I don't know."

"You will."

She suspected she did already. "Was it even real?" she asked hesitantly.

They ignored her question. "It's time for you to leave."

"Before it's too late."

"Before we keep you," one whispered too quietly for her hear.

Sarah stepped through the door, a sense of foreboding taking seat in the pit of her stomach.

The mask remained as it lay - in two halves on the floor.

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The sun was low in the sky, just dipping beyond the horizon, when Sarah stepped into the orchard.

Jareth leaned against the gnarled tree, his eyes closed.

Again, he looked somehow softer in rest, though his mouth was set in a grim line.

In her absence more fruit had fallen from the tree, rotten before they hit the ground. She sidestepped them carefully.

Jareth's eyes remained closed, but he exhaled slowly; his body relaxing almost imperceptibly - as though he'd been uncertain of her return. Without seeming to move, she was enfolded by strong arms and her face tucked into warm chest. Jareth's heart beat a steady thrum in her ear. He squeezed too tightly, but for just a moment she clutched him too – so brief and perfect he thought it imagined - before pushing against him insistently.

At first he resisted, his long fingers tightening; reluctant to let her go again. Their eyes met in the low light, his fierce and over-bright. When they drifted to her lips, Sarah moistened them instinctively, acutely aware of the lithe body pressed so intimately against hers. When his head dipped lower at her
wordless invitation, she panicked and deflected, pushing against his shoulders more forcefully. After a moment's consideration, he sighed in resignation and let her go.

Sarah looked around and then back at him.

At her unspoken question, Jareth offered, "The Labyrinth may be ever changing, but all paths lead to me."

"Then what is the point of choosing?" she challenged, jealousy, anger and relief warring beneath the surface. "I hate what this place stands for," she whispered, when he remained silent.

"Yes, you do." Jareth touched a dried vine thoughtfully. "But I wonder if you really understand it. It can be a gift."

"A gift with cost," she replied evenly, her thoughts on Toby.

"Everything comes with a price. I thought you had learned that, Sarah."

Sarah nodded slowly. "Yes… a price." The rancour fell from her voice. "What happens to my family?"

He quirked a brow.

"My family. If I stayed here… with you. What would happen to them?"

Jareth's eyes narrowed, as he carefully tasted his words.

Sarah didn't give him the chance. "They'd think I'd decided to stay in Ireland wouldn't they? And never question why I didn't come home. At least Karen and my dad wouldn't. But Toby might wonder. Because of his time here," Sarah's voice began to rise. "Just like your mother's family. They'd remember, but only sort of. Blissfully believing all was well with their daughter, without ever actually seeing her again."

"Sarah-"

"Don't! Don't lie to me! Do you even care?"

At this, Jareth's calm demeanor fractured. He gripped Sarah by the shoulders roughly, his eyes so dark they were almost black. "Stop accusing me of not caring. There are many faults that can be laid at my door. Many transgressions I cannot and would not defend. That is not one of them."

"But-"

"What is it that you want to hear? What magic words? That I would bring your family here? That I would take Toby a second time and keep him?"

Sarah paled.

"By your leave this time," he amended with a sigh of exasperation.

An angry tear - unexpected and uncontrolled - slid down her face.

Jareth smoothed the salt away. "I won't rob them of their humanity – their chance to burn so brightly… and so briefly, before going out." He hesitated, his eyes betraying a rare uncertainty. Tenderly tucking an errant lock of hair behind her ear he cupped her chin gently. "Would you have me rob them as I have robbed you?"
Sarah sucked in a sharp breath, arrested more by the regret and guilt underlying his tone than the meaning of his words. Of all the gilded lines she'd expected him to say, that not had been amongst them.

"Your lives are so fleeting," his hand traced her collar bone lightly, "and so fragile."

Sarah was no longer sure whether he was speaking for her benefit or his.

"You're so easily broken - and all the more precious because of that fundamental… flaw. You burn out before you've even begun," his thumb now ghosted across her lip, "but with such passion and such dreams. You may dream of us, but we dream of you."

All her recriminations turned to ash in her throat.

"Would you have me take that from them?" he demanded.

Sarah had no answer. She imagined Toby at band practice in school, his first kiss, experiencing the adventures that only come with youth, as a grown man with a family of his own. All without her. It was easy to see.

"Would you, if I asked? Or could I?" She had to know.

Jareth sighed, and for a moment she thought he would not answer. When he did, he sounded weary, almost defeated. "I imagine you could do anything you wanted, Sarah."

He held up a gloved hand, power returning to his voice. "But know this - there is a price for meddling in the world above. Magic ebbs and flows between the two, but there are always consequences. When we take we must give and it is not as easy as it once was. Tara is one of the last true seats of belief." His hand smoothed over her brow tenderly. "So few have the imagination to believe anymore; so few invitations are given. So few fires lit."

Sarah caught his hand; the same one that had been bound to hers at such a fire. "But would you if I asked?"

His body stilled instantly, weariness gone and lithe muscles flexing, like a predator ready to strike. "Does this mean you want to stay?" It was not the question he wanted to ask, but it would suffice.

Sarah's hesitation was noted by both. "Would you let me go, if I said no?" she asked finally.

Jareth's silence was answer enough.

"Would you bring them here, if I asked?" she repeated resolutely.

His face hardened for a moment, taking on the wintry cast of the Goblin King from the portrait. She thought he might say something piercing and dismissive, but when he spoke it lacked sting. "I'm not sure there is anything I would not do if you simply asked."

Disarmed by the honesty in his words, she challenged, "Except move the stars? Except let me go?"

Jareth inclined his head; eyes hooded.

"You didn't give me a choice."

"No. I didn't have a choice to give."

Sarah dropped his hand and turned away in frustration. She wondered if they'd ever be able to hold a
normal conversation, one without imputation and blame. Her eyes swept over the trees. "Why didn't you choose someone else?" She sounded small and bitter, even to her own ears. "You could still choose someone else. And you would if you had to, wouldn't you?" She hated the vestige of jealousy in her voice, but she couldn't stop herself; had never learned to dam the flow of words once they started. "It doesn't really matter who, does it? As long as they're ripe."

It was petty perhaps, to throw his words back at him, but she'd already opened the door and had nowhere left to go.

"Is that what you think?" Jareth looked glacial. "Have you really learned nothing?"

"But that's what this is all about isn't it?" She asked, gesturing at the rotting fruit. "Continuing your twisted line at any cost?"

Jareth abruptly let her go, his face contorting into a mask of rage and something else – more troubling by far. "There could be no other. I would have no other."

"Easily said when it suits you."

"What do want from me, Sarah?" His eyes were dark and piercing. "You faced dangers untold and hardships unnumbered for a child. I faced the same for you."

Sarah retreated, stung by the power behind his words. She shook her head dismissively. "That was… This is just about pride -"

"No Sarah, this is about love!" He gripped her shoulders again, fingers biting into her skin; his voice harsh and raw. "This is about me loving you."

"You-!"

"But you already knew that, didn't you," he continued. "The Goblin King had fallen in love with the girl," Jareth mimed. "You want me to love you – to be your willing slave," his eyes narrowed, "but you don't want me."

Sarah realized with chilling prudence that this was indeed what she had wanted, as much as she had dreaded it. She'd wanted his confession to erase her doubt and her spite. Validation.

Lightning began to strike around them. As it had on Tara.

"You speak of others, but would you share, Sarah? Am I not yours alone?" His lip curled. "Yours to deny?"

Basking in the naked revelation on her face, Jareth thrust forward. "Tell me, Sarah, did you wonder if I would ever come back? Wish it even – afraid to speak the words aloud. During those long, lonely, years apart." He held up a warning finger when she opened her mouth. "Please don't treat me to a litany of my sins again. I am well aware of what I have taken from you. You will never let me forget that. And I can't give it back. If I thought it would have made a difference…" his eyes flickered, "But no, I'm not sure even then. It's not in my nature. Forgive me for not wanting to share, especially when you offer so little of yourself… and demand so much."

His tone was half confession, half accusation and it stripped her bare until she was no longer sure which one of them was the villain in the story.

"And you? You don't make demands? Love me, fear me… You take pride in being feared."
"Of course," he answered smoothly, but his voice sounded bitter. "One must have pride in something."

"And why not in being loved?"

Jareth laughed. "Aren't they the same thing?"

"And which would you rather have from me?"

"Are they mutually exclusive?" he parried blithely, offering her the lazy, dangerous smile that had come to make her insides curl.

"I wouldn't know. You made sure I could never find out."

He nodded slowly, unable to deny her words and numbed by the realization that he might in fact have to choose. Aware that it was too late. "I can't deny that, Sarah. I won't. But know this: no normal man could want you more. No human man could need you as I do. And even if they could, it would be fleeting. I offer you forever." He touched her wrist. "Bound? I am as much a prisoner as you are. Find a way to love me, Sarah," he bid roughly.

Sarah pulled her hand back, unsettled by the fervour in his words.

"Love is… can be easy. To be trusted is a greater compliment than to be loved." She had once read those words as a child and thought them strange and untrue at the time. The innocence of childhood taught that love conquered all. She was only coming to understand them now.

More lightning struck.

Jareth allowed her retreat, his eyes blazing in the red-gold light. "Then answer me this. During those years, how often did you wonder if you still held power over me?"

Sarah bit her cheek, unable or unwilling to speak, though the words were there - begging to be released.

"You must have. Or how did I come for you at all?"

Her eyes widened, searching his face for deceit. But they were both past lying. And she already knew. Had always known. She may not have spoken the words this time, but she had gone to Ireland looking for magic and adventure. She'd gone because all the rest - the normal - just wasn't enough anymore. She wanted more.

And she had found him.

Jareth watched the emotions dance in her eyes.

"Are you implying I wanted all this to happen?" she asked after a heavy minute.

His tone softened at her discomfort and a new emotion laced his words. "When you thought you weren't the chosen, despite what I had put you through, were you disappointed?"

Another lightning strike. Closer now.

Sarah said nothing.

Jareth shook his head, face drawn. "If you can't even answer that…"
More fruit fell around them. Like fallen stars.

Jareth’s eyes flashed before a final burst of lightning set fire to the sky. The orchard, the Labyrinth and the underground dissolved in a blinding flash of white.

Sarah and Jareth stood on Tara, canopied by a stormy sky. A robed figure led silent vigil by the Lia Fail.

It was the end of the third day.

Sarah looked to Jareth, expecting him to gloat; to throw his victory in her face. Absurd as it was, she had almost forgotten that there was a ritual to complete. In those moments of raw emotion and revelation, she had forgotten there were forces beyond their control. Forgotten the ticking clock.

All the revelers were gone – no Declan or Mrs. Whelan - no masked figures. The fire had long since died; the strange sky providing the only light, though vestiges of the blaze remained: a few smouldering embers and the cloying smell of ash in the air.

And something else underlying it.

Salt and water permeated the darkness, chilling her with recognition.

When she turned, the stone church and small forest were gone, replaced by a precarious cliff’s edge perched atop a roiling sea.

A sea she had seen once before.

Instinctively, she wove her fingers through Jareth's. A slight flickering of his lids was the only sign he'd noticed.

The robed figure approached. "Three days have passed. The final test is over..."

Sarah stiffened, prepared to face her fate.

"...and has not been passed."

The Voice bowed to Jareth. "There is no Argh Riogh this night."

Sarah heard the words in her head - would hear them echo for a long time after - but could make no sense of them. Nor of the unexpected emotions they evoked. "I-I don't understand... he won. He solved the Labyrinth in time."

"Yes." The Voice inclined its head. "But the words spoken were 'I challenge the Goblin King to run the Labyrinth... just like I did.' He did not."

Sarah looked to Jareth for a reaction, but he said nothing, made no attempt to argue. In fact, he showed no trace of surprise.

"For did you not aid him?" the figure continued.

Sarah's mind raced, settling on the image of a drowning Jareth, his body drawn down by nubile forms. And of her diving in, pulling him to shore...
"...a little, maybe... but I didn't want him to win!"

"Did you not?"

Sarah recalled the bittersweet feeling when she'd assumed he would lose; when she'd sat her vigil in the tower window, an unlooked at crystal in her hand. How she'd shivered when she'd realized he'd have to go back because of Hoggle – her friend - how he'd never have enough time.

How a deep, traitorous part of her had hoped he'd win.

Sarah dropped Jareth's hand in shock. "Are you saying I cheated? That I helped him win? How is that even possible?"

…the Goblin king fell in love with her and gave her certain powers…

"By no hand of his did you triumph."

She looked to Jareth, daring him to say otherwise. Willing him to say otherwise. She knew without asking that she hadn't; the Goblin King had wanted her to lose nine years ago.

It was such a minor detail - just a phrasing of the words - that it seemed too ridiculous.

"That's just..." Sarah trailed off. A sinuous thought took hold of her, winding its way through her mind. It was too wild to be considered and yet impossible to dismiss – fueled by so much evidence, gone unnoticed until now. Riven had said that things were different; that this had not happened before. And Jareth too... 'The Labyrinth is changing, Sarah. In ways you can't imagine. Beyond my power.'

But not beyond hers.

Subtle power she'd always had. And power she'd kept when Jareth had lost... because she'd wanted him to win.

She could not meet his eyes.

"The Labyrinth... the changes... my magic... that was me too?"

Silence answered her.

"But I never... really even used them! Not consciously..."

Bound to Jareth. Bound to the labyrinth. The cords of magic she had felt – the ones she had denied, tried to sever... wish away - she had been the source of the chaos. They both had in their way. The magic had been fractured, warring, as it never had before. The Labyrinth was reacting to their discord, remaking itself. By her whim or his?

'There has never been another like you.'

Her eyes finally turned to Jareth's, but his were on the sea; hands clenched at his side tightly, as though he were barely restraining himself.

'...I hope you're also ready to accept the consequences of those words...'

This was the victory she had won.

"So what happens now...to the Labyrinth... to us?" she asked finally. The question was as much
directed to Jareth as it was to the robed figure.

"What is bound cannot be divided," repeated the Voice, sadness tingeing the cadence. "It must be undone."

'…Should He fail, all that is will be lost and undone…'

Another arc of lightning and the stone and its voice disappeared. Only the sound of the crashing waves remained.

Sarah shivered, whether from cold or emotion she couldn't say. Warm arms adjusted the cloak, settling gently upon her shoulders. She looked up into his eyes, expecting fury or disappointment. Judgment. He looked only resolute.

"So… what happens now?" she whispered. "The Labyrinth?"

"Will go on."

Sarah shifted nervously, unsure of what she wanted to hear anymore. What do you do when you can't move forward or backwards anymore?

"And us?" She could still feel the tether between them; the silver cord beneath her wrist.

Jareth said nothing.

"I didn't ask for this to happen. I mean, not really. I could give it back… couldn't I? The magic?" Fix things.

A muscle ticked in Jareth's cheek. He merely nodded. "I know."

Sarah hated his unexpected restraint; his carefully measured tone. "You could have just asked me, you know. Avoided all of this."

"Asked you?" he repeated softly.

"Asked me," she whispered, heart suddenly beating far too wildly in her chest.

Jareth smiled thinly; his eyes on the waves again. "But that doesn't sound like me at all."

She shook her head slowly. "No it doesn't." Her Goblin King never asked.

He looked like he was about to say something else, but instead he pulled her close, enfolding her within his arms as he'd done in the orchard. His hands tightened on her back beneath her cloak, fingers curling into her skin as though he would never let her go.

And then he did.

Love me, fear me and… I will let you go

All it took was a simple push.

Sarah had been relaxed in his arms, unresisting and pliant, and then the next minute she was falling over the edge. Instinctively, she caught at his hands, tearing at his fingers, a scream of fear on her lips. For a moment she hung suspended - caught between two worlds while part of neither - and then she slipped from his grasp and fell toward the waters below.
He let her go.
The silver cord severed.

…sometimes we will fall…

There were no helping hands this time.

Chapter End Notes

*ducks* Don't hate me for ending it with another ill-timed fall. This one was foreshadowed many times – most specifically in the dream sequence ending in chapter 25.

I imagine this installment may have posed as many questions as it answered, but the next chapter is largely written (no lie) and should clear up any confusion. If you really can't wait, message me and I'll see what I can do.

The harlequins were last seen in chapter 22. The mask played a part there too.

'I hope our son has your eyes'... was spoken by Jareth in the previous chapter.

"Say your right words" is from Labyrinth (the movie).

"To be trusted is a greater compliment than to be loved" is a quote from George MacDonald, writer of the book(s) The Princess and the Goblin. Classic children's book (with a MUCH less appealing goblin king). Seems a likely story Sarah would have had on her shelf as a kiddo.

Argh Riogh – Means High King in Gaelic (last referenced in chapter 16).

…I hope you're also ready to accept the consequences of those words…was spoken by Jareth in chapter 17

…Should He fail, all that is will be lost and undone…was spoken by the Voice in chapter 17

…sometimes we will fall… is a line from the Frames song, Rise, and was part of the dream sequence in chapter 25.
Part XXXV

Believe me when I say that I cannot apologize enough
When all you ever wanted from me was a token of my love
And if it's not too late
Could you please find it deep within your heart
To try and go back, go back to the start
Go back to the start

Go Back to the Start, Lily Allen

"...there, there, love..."

Sarah dazedly awoke to a cool cloth on her forehead and aches all over her body. When she opened her leaden eyes, sunlight instantly blinded her.

"Jareth?"

"Who, dear?"

Sarah shot upright at the feminine voice, and then regretted the sudden movement. She clutched her pounding head as she stared, slack-jawed, into the quizzical face of Mrs. Gannon. Or Mrs. Whelan? She wasn't sure.

She looked around wildly. Vaguely she recognized the room she had rented at Tara. Mrs. Gannon then.

"What the... Where is he?" she croaked.

Mrs. Gannon cocked her head to one side, repeating, "Who, dear?"

"Don't play games with me. Jareth!" When the older woman continued to look blank, Sarah hissed, "The Goblin King!"

Mrs. Gannon clucked and tried to wipe Sarah's brow with the cloth again. "Oh, me wee dearling, ye hit her head worse than we thought."

"What the hell kind of trick is this?" Sarah slapped her hand away roughly. "I saw you! You were at the Hill. All of you were!"

"Here, drink this." Mrs. Gannon held out a fine china cup with a patient smile on her wizened face. "It'll help clear yer head."

Sarah eyed the contents and then pushed it away from her, uncaring that she sloshed some of the liquid on the handmade coverlet. "Really? What is it this time? Peach juice? Plum tea?"
Mrs. Gannon tactfully ignored Sarah’s rudeness and placed the cup on the nightstand. "It's a crushed up Tylenol in some Chamomile. I imagine yer head is none the better a'fer the thump ye gave it."

Sarah automatically raised her hand back to her throbbing head and only then noticed what she was wearing. She whipped back the covers: a torn nightgown and dirty jeans – a bloodstain on the knee. Her hand fell limply back to her lap as the first tendrils of doubt crept up her spine. "I don't understand… You were there, he was there… the fire?"

Mrs. Gannon clucked again, "I know dear. Those naughty lads thought they'd have a go at the wee American." She pointed at the cracked window. "Broke one of me panes, they did. Daft buggers."

Sarah swallowed reflexively, her throat far too dry and her thoughts clouded. "I chased them to the Hill, but they were really goblins and then he…” she trailed off at the patient look on the older woman's face. Sarah used to wear that look whenever Toby told her about his make-believe adventures or waxed poetic about the latest video game.

"And ye slipped and smacked yer head on the church steps," Mrs. Gannon finished. "Or so we gather. The lads came back immediately and admitted to baiting ye. A few of the boys at the tavern carried ye back here, dazed but conscious." She cracked an indulgent smile. "Said ye had a few pints o' Guinness and nary a bite o' supper. But yer none the worse for wear. Ye've been dozing since. Doctor had a peek at ye, he did, and left his number just in case. Suggested ye visit the hospital a little later in case of concussion. Though he thought it doubtful."

Sarah said nothing, her mind having gone blank long before Mrs. Gannon had finished her explanation. When the older woman reached to smooth her forehead again, Sarah let her, closing her eyes at the damp coolness. Wordlessly she took a sip from the china cup.

Chamomile tea. Nothing more.

"I'll let ye get a tad more rest, shall I?" The older woman moved towards the door, turning as she left. "And then we'll see about getting ye home."

The last word jerked Sarah from her numbness.

Her voice sounded broken when she spoke, "I had a… a dream, I guess. Only it wasn't. It was… it seemed real."

Scrambling across the bed, Sarah caught Mrs. Gannon's hand tightly, searching her face beseechingly. "You'd tell me, right? If it wasn't… if it was real and this was some kind of punishment? Or if this was another trick? It would be cruel not to… after everything."

Mrs. Gannon looked surprised by Sarah's sudden outburst, but her expression betrayed no signs of understanding. No signs of deceit. After a moment's hesitation, she squeezed Sarah's fingers reassuringly. "Of course, dear. Would you like to call yer parents? Or a loved one? I'd hate to think a sweetheart would be missing ye."

Sarah's mind skipped over her father and Karen. Even Toby. "I… no. There is no one." Anymore. "But maybe I'll call home later," she added when Mrs. Gannon shot her a pitying look.

The older woman nodded and left, quietly clicking the door shut behind her.

Sarah waited an excruciating minute and then immediately bolted for it, pulling it open so fast that it banged into the wall.
Nothing. An ordinary hallway.

Sarah shut the door and then glared at it, willing it to change. When it did nothing remotely interesting, she spun away in disappointment - both with the door for remaining perfectly ordinary and with herself for being so contrary. Ruefully, she thought of Rum Tum Tugger: whose "disobliging ways were a matter of habit. When you let him in, then he wants to be out; he's always on the wrong side of every door."

She absently rubbed her wrist, suddenly overwhelmed with the loss of something she'd never wanted in the first place.

For the next hour Sarah went through the motions of normalcy in a daze. When she peeled her ruined clothes off, she stared at her body with sharp eyes, but could find no trace of the Goblin fruit that had stained her skin. Nor any trace of his attentions. She showered and let the stinging heat of the water burn away her doubt.

When she re-entered the bedroom, some bread and cheese and a still-steaming bowl of soup had been left for her on a tray. As the first bite passed her lips, Sarah discovered that she was ravenously hungry. She couldn't recall the last time she'd eaten. Everything was so frustratingly hazy; all her thoughts were fractured.

She dressed in the change of clothes she'd brought and then stuffed her ruined nightgown and jeans into her overnight bag. She left the room without a second glance. Mrs. Gannon was drying some dishes when Sarah found her in the kitchen.

She cleared her throat awkwardly, "So I'm off… Er, what do I owe you for the room?"

The older woman turned; a worried look on her face. "Leaving? So soon? But yer head, dear!"

"The Tylenol helped. Thanks. I feel okay and I've got to get back to Dublin. I have classes on…" Was it only Sunday? "Monday." Sarah held out some notes in her hand. "Do you know if there is a bus soon?"

Mrs. Gannon ignored the money. "I can't take yer money after… Well, after everything. Are ye sure ye need to leave now?"

"Is there a reason I should stay? A reason you aren't comfortable being paid? Sarah's eyes narrowed. "Feeling guilty?"

Mrs. Gannon looked blank. "Well, ye had a nasty bump on yer head and a no' so very hospitable stay. Doesn't seem right, is all."

Sarah carefully placed twenty punts on the kitchen table. It was above the going rate for most B&Bs. "It's not your fault. I hope those… boys pay for your window."

Mrs. Gannon made no move to take the money.

"Do I owe anything to the doctor? I have traveller's insurance, but I imagine he expects payment up front."

The older woman shook her head. "None at all. But did ye not want to pay a visit to the hospital then?"

"No, but… thanks for the room."
Sarah turned and headed for the front door, slinging her bag over her shoulder. She watched to see if Mrs. Gannon followed. "So I'm leaving now..." she said pointedly as she put her hand on the knob.

Mrs. Gannon nodded, making no move to stop her. "Safe journey then, Sarah."

Sarah frowned, but opened the door and left. Outside the air was crisp and cool, despite the bright sun. The street was deserted; most people likely at morning service. The ache in her head has receded to a steady but manageable throb. She stood on the step for a moment in indecision, before retracing her steps to the pub. Unfortunately, it was closed for a private function. She peered in the windows, but could see nothing inside. The fruit cart was similarly absent. Doubt took a firm hold.

Twenty minutes later found her at the Hill. The tourist centre was also barred and shut. Sarah wandered the grounds but found nothing out of the ordinary; no signs of ritual or ceremony, just scorched earth from a fire. As Mrs. Gannon had said. The burial mound itself was locked, as it had been on her tour. When she entered the woods, try as she might, she could find no hollow tree. No nail marks in the wood. For a brief moment she experienced the sensation of being watched – of eyes in the trees - but nothing happened, and the forest let her leave without incident.

Sarah caught the next bus back to Dun Laoghaire.

A week went by without anything abnormal happening. Sarah went through the motions, attending her classes, marking work, pretending to study. If her students or professors noticed anything wrong in her manner, they said nothing. Her landlady gave her a wide berth and aside from providing an unasked for cup of tea and a pitying look now and again, seemed content to let her be. She asked no questions and offered no more stories of changeling babes. Sarah loathed every minute.

The days were long, but the nights were worse. Sarah's sleep was troubled. Not through dreams, but through their lack. Absence swelled her doubt, until she thought she'd drown. It was like being in a perpetual state of expectation. With never-ending disappointment.

It took her a long time to recognize she was in mourning. And even longer to admit it. She would be fine one moment, the next crippled with ache. A piece of modern art reminding her of a twisted metal crown that would not be. Or worse, never was. Her course work, brimming with its symbolism and imagery, now seemed inane and unremarkable. Nothing extraordinary happened. No coincidences, no traps. No magic.

In that time Sarah ended up at the Dublin airport twice. Passport in hand. It would be so easy to turn and run home. No one tried to stop her. Both times she turned back at the ticket counter. She was no coward.

No more running.

Sarah passed by her as-of-yet unpacked overnight bag for days before she finally decided to do something about it. Ignoring it had only made it the elephant in the room. She couldn't explain why she was reluctant to just consign the ruined clothes to the trash; only that she hadn't been able to let go of them. When she finally pulled them out, a stream of light from the open window glinted off something on her nightgown. Snagged on the thick cotton sleeve was a small gold ring.

A garnet ring she had not seen in nine years.

…she caught at his hands, tearing at his fingers…
Sarah clutched the ring like a lifeline. She wanted to scream in triumph. But it was a hollow victory and the brief smile slid from her face. It erased her doubt, but changed nothing. If anything it confirmed her fear. The one she denied having. She slipped the ring onto her finger. It still fit. The last time she'd worn it she had wished away her brother. The last time she'd worn it she had traded it for a victory. Jareth had returned it.

He wasn't coming.

Sarah discovered that desperation can be damning.

It drove her to the sea the next day. Blackrock, a subset of Dublin, was only a few kilometres from the city centre, sitting right on the coast. When she'd finished class she decided she couldn't face returning home again. She couldn't stomach another comforting cup of tea. Another pitying look. Not now that they had substance. It was too fresh and she was too volatile; vacillating between sorrow and anger. She let the Dart pass the Dun Laoghaire stop, the other stations blurring by too, until the sight of the grey-blue water beckoned.

The autumn wind was fiercely biting and the long stretch of beach was deserted, unsurprising given the time of year and the weather. The baths, once forming part of Blackrock Park, had long been abandoned, but the tall diving tower remained. Sarah took off her shoes and waded in to her ankles, letting the icy water wash over her feet. She knew she was being foolish, but she closed her eyes and waited anyway. When she opened them nothing had changed.

She was just about to leave when the uncanny sensation of being watched made the skin on the back of her neck prickle. Sarah turned and saw a sleek black horse standing not twenty feet off. Though she had never had much experience in the equestrian world, Sarah could tell it was a magnificent creature. And horses like that did not roam free.

Fear urged her to run, but curiosity kept her rooted to the sand even as the stallion approached. Sarah looked around wildly but saw no other people - no cause for an animal to be left unattended. The horse stopped a hand's breadth away. The violent wind whipped its dark mane across its eyes. Eyes that were an unearthly blue. Eyes trained on her.

Sarah sucked in a breath. "I know who you are."

She waited expectantly, but the horse did nothing extraordinary.

She narrowed her eyes and raised a trembling hand. The flesh that met her fingers was warm and velvety smooth. And utterly horse-like. She pulled her hand back doubtfully. The stallion still made no move.

And then fire flared within its eyes.

The strongest compulsion instantly overcame her and before she fully understood what she was doing, Sarah raised her arms and prepared to mount. The horse lowered its forelegs obligingly.

Warning bells rang in her head. Sarah blinked and dropped her arms. She took a cautionary step back into the icy waters, crossing her arms over her chest and squeezing her biceps until her knuckles bled white.

The dark horse watched her for a minute and then snorted, as though amused. It tore off down the beach. A spray of water stung her face in parting.

Sarah wiped her eyes and hurriedly pulled on her shoes, uncaring that her feet were almost white with cold and still caked with sand. Her mind was racing.
That evening she called home.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Karen. It's Sarah."

A pause. "Oh Sarah! We didn't think we'd hear from you today. Your dad's at the office. How are you doing?"

A longer pause. "Fine. Just fine."

"Really? You don't sound fine? Did something happen? Is it school? Do you need money?"

Sarah smiled in spite of everything. "No, no. Work is fine. Just...ah... having one of those days." She wound the phone cord around her finger. "I just... missed you guys, I guess." It wasn't the whole truth, but it was enough. She couldn't say more.

Sarah heard the smile in Karen's voice when she spoke. "We miss you too, sweetheart. But I'm sure you're having much more fun there than here. Adventures and Irish boys." Karen still thought of her as 15 some days. "Did you meet anyone special?"

Sarah's hesitation was met with a piercing squeal. "Oh you did, didn't you? I just knew it! Now you'll never want to come home again. I knew that some Irish boy would steal you away!"

Sarah clutched the receiver until she was sure it would crack, but was saved from having to comment.

"Sarah, is that you?"

Sarah's grip relaxed. "Toby?"

"Toby, what have I told you about interrupting people's conversations?" snapped Karen in an exasperated tone.

"Not to do it because it's rude," he recited by rote. "Now get off the phone, kay, mum? I need to speak to Sarah."

There was more arguing and indefinite threats of grounding, but in the end Sarah was left speaking to Toby alone.

"How are you, kiddo?" Sarah forced levity into her voice.

"Same as always. Did you buy me anything cool?"

Sarah snorted. "Of course. It's in the mail," she frowned, "...I think."

"Good. So anyway, I had a dream about you. I wanted to call you but mum said not to bug you about something so silly."

"Oh?"

"Yep. You were like you but not you... and I think you'd moved to Ireland forever or something. Anyway, you weren't coming home. Or something. Weird, huh?"

Sarah swallowed thickly. She didn't trust her voice not to shake.
"'Cause you are coming home right? With more presents?" asked Toby, sounding completely unconcerned by the former.

Sarah choked on the laugh that had threatened to become a sob. "Of course!"

"Kay, that was it." Toby sounded like he was about to hang up.

"Toby…” she wasn't sure what compelled her to ask, "what if-if I didn't come home again… or just… not very often?"

There was a long pause now. "Well, I guess that would be… cool." Indecision gave way to excitement. "Could I come visit you?"

Sarah felt hot tears begin to well. "I don't know." She shook them off. "Forget I asked. I'm just being silly."

"Er… Okay." Sarah could tell Toby had picked up on her distress and was uncomfortable, but he surprised her yet again. "I mean I'd miss you, but I think if you want to stay, it's… well, it's really up to you."

Up to her. From the mouths of babes.

"But send presents." And the pragmatism of a ten year old.

Sarah laughed and let the tears burn down her cheeks this time. "Love you, kiddo."

"Yuck." The dial tone followed.

Sarah hung up the phone and collapsed back on her bed, a smile on her face. The tears dried on her face with no one to wipe them away.

It felt like goodbye.

But the days following passed without incident, until Sarah was certain she was going mad.

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Midweek, her colleagues convinced her to join them for a drink. Unable to plead a reasonable excuse, she was reluctantly herded to a local pub. Hours later, buoyed by laughter and liberal drinks, Sarah actually relaxed enough to enjoy herself. So much so that she was reluctant to return to the solitude of her room. When all but one of her coworkers had headed home, she was still sitting in the corner booth. Their relationship had only ever been strictly professional, but Sarah instinctively knew Connor was amenable to more. He flashed her a lop-sided smile as they sipped their draughts. She returned it. Both were showing signs that they had had too much to drink: skin flushed, eyes bright, and inhibitions lowered. His hand tentatively landed on her thigh. She was about to rebuff him gently when an entirely different idea entered her mind.

A potentially dangerous one.

Sarah leaned into him and tipped her chin up expectantly. It was a clear invitation and Connor took what was offered without hesitation. Cupping her cheek, he pressed his lips against hers and teased them open. His breath had the slightly sour hint of beer, but his lips were soft and the kiss was surprisingly skillful considering their respective states. Sarah threaded her fingers into his hair in
encouragement and then waited, heart thudding wildly in her chest.

Connor mistook her rapid pulse for excitement and his hand squeezed higher up her thigh. Sarah pulled back from the kiss slightly and scanned the bar, but no one paid them even the littlest attention. Undaunted, Connor just transferred his attentions to her neck.

He wasn't coming.

The realization sobered her up immediately. Just as Connor's hand reached the apex of her thigh, Sarah bolted upright, knocking the table and spilling their remaining beer over both of them. She grabbed her purse, mumbled an apology and ran from the pub.

The next day she called in sick.

She spent the morning lying in bed, trying not to consider the previous night's events. Or their implications. There were papers to mark and a lesson to plan, but she lacked incentive. She hadn't touched her thesis since… but she couldn't muster the care for that either. Her deadlines could rot.

The warm sun, a rarity in autumn, beckoned from the open window and invited her out of the shadows. The air was strangely sweet. Sarah forced herself to change into a grey wool sweater and dark jeans. She brushed her hair and washed her face, carefully applying a light layer of makeup. Sometimes all it took was the threat of runny mascara to stave off tears.

Mrs. Whelan was nowhere to be seen when Sarah descended the stairs, but a note had been left on the hall table letting Sarah know she'd had to go out, and expressing the older woman's wish that Sarah "have a bit of crack", as it was a lovely day. She planned to do just that.

Without meaning to, Sarah ended up at Blackrock again. The Blackrock Market, though less cosmopolitan than Grafton St, still attracted crowds to its quaint cafes, boutique stores and variety of pubs. It was Friday afternoon and the market was bustling with people, both tourists and natives alike. A few buskers performed for the onlookers, jugglers and fire-eaters, the clinking of coins signaling their success. She stopped to watch for a few minutes, losing herself in the light-hearted distraction and added a coin or two of her own.

The day continued to be surprisingly warm and most of the pubs and cafes had opened their patios. Sarah snagged a seat at a small table outside the 'The Wicked Wolf' pub. She sipped a cup of fresh brewed coffee.

Over the din of laughter and the crackle of fire, she caught the twang of an acoustic guitar and a haunting baritone accompanying it.

"Can you lie next to her
and give her your heart, your heart?
As well as your body…"

Sarah craned her neck and watched appreciatively as the musician's fingers danced across the strings, eyes closed and voice commanding. She usually loathed maudlin songs, but something about the cadence and intensity had her rapt.

"And can you lie next to her
and confess your love, your love?
As well as your folly
And can you kneel before the king…"
Sarah rose and took a few tentative steps closer.

"So tell me now where was my fault, in loving you with my whole heart? Oh, tell me now where was my fault, in loving you with my whole heart?"

The chords became more frenzied, the voice more passionate and raw. An accompanying drummer picked up the beat, adding depth to the lyrics.

"Her white blank page and a swelling rage, rage
You did not think when you sent me to the brink, to the brink
You desired my attention, but denied my affections, my affections…"

Sarah went completely numb. A white blank page in a little red book. A story with no ending.

His words and the accusation she could no more deny now than she'd been able to then.

The song changed again. Softening. Almost supplicating.

"So tell me now where was my fault, in loving you with my whole heart? Oh, tell me now where was my fault, in loving you with my whole heart?"

A few bolder couples had begun to dance, playfully caught up in the rhythmic beat. People were laughing, faces spinning. Sarah slipped through them, drawn like a moth to a flame.

"Lead me to the truth and I will follow you with my whole life oh lead me to the truth and I will follow you with my whole life…"

A flash of silver hair through the crowd. The colour was unmistakable – too otherworldly to be anyone other than him. Sarah's breath caught in her throat, her heart drowning out all other sounds. Jareth. She began forcing her way through, but there were too many faces and all of them were wrong. Like the ballroom, he was always just out of reach – leading her through a dance without touching her.

A flash of black cloth. Sarah could feel the beginnings of angry tears sting her eyes. With a desperate grab, her hands met warm flesh, but her boots caught on the cobblestones and sent her to her knees.

The dark figure turned, cool blue eyes flashing down at her. "Disappointed?" Riven asked with an enigmatic half smile.

Sarah merely gaped at him.

"Cat got your tongue? I know they certainly tried." He bent in a smooth, graceful motion, and offered her a gloved hand.

He hauled her up forcibly when she ignored it.

Sarah pulled her arm free, willing her traitorous eyes dry. "You can't hurt me," she warned. Her voice shook betrayingly.

Riven merely looked amused. "My dear, whatever gave you the impression I would bother? I can't imagine that would suit anyone's purpose at all. You must be feeling guilty."
Sarah scowled, an unspoken I didn't do anything wrong hovering on her lips. But she did not feel innocent. Instead she asked, "Then... are you here to take me back?" She prayed he couldn't hear the trace of hope in her voice.

"Alas, force is not allowed." He sounded disappointed. "You are free to do whatever you want to do," "Or whatever you're persuaded to do," he added with a wicked smile.

Sarah felt the same strange compulsion begin tingling along her spine. "I knew it was you on the beach."

Riven's smile deepened; eye-teeth glinting. "What a shame you didn't accept my offer."

"I didn't trust you."

"Probably wise," he agreed. "You shouldn't."

"But would you have taken me back then?" she asked doubtfully. "Because you just said force wasn't allowed."

"I guess you'll never know. I never offer twice." Without a backwards glance, as though he was finished with her, he turned and walked away.

Sarah was left staring after him open-mouthed. She stumbled to catch up. The crowd parted easily for him, though none ever looked at him directly. Like they instinctively knew something best avoided was in their presence.

"They can't see you, can they?" she asked when she finally drew level with him.

"Sad, isn't it?" Riven acknowledged, but didn't slow his pace. "So prosaic these days. Though still easily influenced." He narrowed his eyes at a passing man.

The man shuddered, looked around fearfully, and then crossed himself. Riven smiled.

A belated realization made Sarah cringe. "But they can see me talking! To nobody," she hissed out of the corner of her mouth.

Riven grinned unrepentantly.

Vaguely, she realized they had left the main Market and crossed into an older part of Blackrock. New design had given way to rough stone. Narrow streets and crumbling archways. Less people.

"So if you aren't here to drag me back..."

Riven arched a brow – the action so like his son's that Sarah's heart skipped a beat and she forgot what she wanted to ask.

"You could always wish yourself away," he invited, a saccharine expression on his face.

Sarah would be lying if she said she hadn't considered it; wasn't considering it still. But words mattered. She couldn't bring herself to deliver herself into Jareth's power. Even after... Wishing herself away would strip her bare of everything. There would be no equal ground.

And how could she possibly admit to him that she was equally worried Jareth wouldn't come if she called?

She said nothing instead.
Riven turned so suddenly that Sarah tripped backwards into a stone wall. He rested one arm above her head and studied her face, a slow smile beginning to bow his lips. "You'd actually prefer if I stole you, wouldn't you?" The smile spread when she didn't immediately deny it. "Fascinating. A way to keep… what? Your pride? And still get what you want in the end."

Sarah gaped.

"Or rather who you want," he amended pointedly. He cocked his head to the side as he considered her. "And if I was the one to do it, then you'd believe he held no power over you."

Sarah offered no denial, overwhelmed by his sudden proximity and unnerved by his skillful reading of what she herself had yet to conclude.

Riven looked delighted with her damning silence. "What a masterfully diabolical mind you have! Very goblin-like. You're a treasure, Sarah."

She tried to duck under his arm, but he continued unfazed. "Not one girl in a thousand could have denied a Goblin King. Especially two. And not one in a thousand could refrain from making a wish," his eyes dared her to lie, "when she so obviously wants to go back."

Sarah managed to slip under his arm, but he was too fast again. He circled her with that measured prow she had come to associate with Jareth. The fact that he said force was not allowed did nothing to lessen the caging effect it had on her.

"I find myself wondering how you've done it, insignificant little mortal like you. You must be a rare thing indeed."

Sarah tracked his movements with wary eyes. "You think you're better than us."

"Mortals? Naturally." He flashed a wolfish grin. "But you, you're just like us. You like to get what you want and you don't mind breaking rules… or people to get it."

His words stung. Sarah chewed the inside of her cheek to cover her reaction. She would not give him the satisfaction. "Your wife was a mortal. All goblin queens were."

"Ah, but we made them so much more," he exhaled reverently.

Sarah ignored his arrogance. "Speaking of, why is it always you? You said I wouldn't see you for a very long time." Liar. "Why do I never see Etain?"

"Etain has her own part to play," he said cryptically. "And as for me, well, the story took an unexpected turn. Never let a caged bird free." He cupped her elbow, drawing her along with him as he began walking again. It would have almost been a gentlemanly manoeuvre had his grip not been implacable.

Sarah noticed that they were now completely alone. The stone walls and buildings were all derelict and non-descript. She wasn't sure she'd be able to make it back to the pub at this point.

She tried to pull her arm free, but his voice dropped warningly. "I'll like it more if you fight, Sarah. You'll like it more if you don't." Riven grinned at her involuntary fission of fear. "You should really learn to pick your battles. We always win in the end."

"Really? Sarah pulled herself free anyway, her own eyes flashing now. Isn't this all because he lost? Because I won?"
"Did you?"

Sarah's fingers unconsciously went to her bare wrist.

Riven followed her movement, but he made no comment. "No wonder he calls you 'precious'. Resourceful. Intelligent. Loyal… in your way." He shot her a knowing look.

Sarah reddened.

Ruthless and callous too," he challenged, stepping backwards through a stone arch so that Sarah was forced to follow him or be left alone.

He'd stopped again as soon as she was through. "And you're astonishingly beautiful. An ideal Goblin bride." He traced her jaw line with reverence; his lithe body suddenly far too close and his expression far too intense. "I'm almost envious," he breathed.

Sarah exhaled shakily.

"Almost." He dropped his hand. Etain is…” his sharp features softened, "…there could be no other.”

Sarah wanted to cry all over again. He’d said the same thing to her. Before he let go. Before he let her fall…

She hardened her resolve. "But you didn't really ask her. You could have reordered time. You could have made it so that she didn't have to marry that merchant," she accused. "You took any real choice from her."

"Of course," he agreed unabashedly. "Choice would have invited failure."

"What would you have done if Etain had chosen to return to her family?"

Riven answered immediately. "I would have ended them without hesitation. If they'd stood between me and what I wanted, I would have done it with delight."

"That's horrible!"

"That's merely fact," he corrected. "It was a different time. Her family could have easily been felled by Nordic marauders and she would have ended up a thrall in some stinking Viking hut, without any interference of mine."

"But I was referring to your interference."

Your mistake," he eyed her blandly, "rather one of your many mistakes - is ascribing mortal values to us when we have neither the ability nor the inclination to uphold them. Make no mistake - someone would have had her: whether it was the fat merchant, a ruthless savage, or death in the end. She wished otherwise so I gave her more. And she gave me all."

Sarah was reminded of Jareth's accusations. That she had opened the door for him. Her realization that she had. How he would not rob her family of their mortality. How he would not take more than what was offered. Despite all the cruelty she believed him capable of she couldn't imagine him hurting Toby. Jareth was Riven's son, but he was also Etain's.

Riven watched Sarah's inner struggle play out lazily; relishing the coupling of horror and relief on her face. He'd never minded playing the villain. "Doesn't seem quite so heartless now does he?"

Sarah eyed him warily. "Why are you even telling me this?"
"Perspective," he replied smoothly. His expressions darkened. "Because I wouldn't have let you go. I would have found a way to keep you."

"And I would never have loved you," she countered coldly. She'd meant as Etain had come to love him, but she realized it was likewise a confession.

Riven's sharp eyes narrowed on her face. Calculating.

Sarah quickly looked away. "Anyway, he had to. The Labyrinth-"

Riven waved a hand dismissively. "He let you go. He didn't have to. There were other ways to keep you and still right the wrongs."

Judging from the thinly-veiled darkness in his expression, Sarah suspected she wouldn't enjoy any of them. Worse was the confirmation that her fall had stemmed from something other than necessity. She wasn't sure if she could process that. Or if she wanted to.

"Then it was pride. He was mad he'd lost," she ventured, but her voice lacked conviction. Why else would he have let me go?

"Think what you want, but make no mistake," Riven pinched her chin tightly, forcing her to meet his eyes. "The need to keep you is more than possessive; it burns in his very bloodline. Letting you go was something else entirely." He studied her pale face. "I can't decide if he was a fool or a genius."

Sarah pulled free only to finally notice her surroundings. She was back on Tara. More than 40 kilometres from where they'd been in Blackrock.

"How did you do that?! You said-"

"This is what you've been looking for, isn't it?" He swept his arms wide. "Our front door."

"But-"

"You wanted to walk in your own terms. No tricks. No wishes. Well here's your chance," he dared. "You might have thought of it on your own, really."

Sarah hugged her arms and walked forward on shaky legs. The church was closed, the grounds deserted. The sky above the Mound of Hostages was cast in shades of grey. Light streamed through the clouds in bright slashes. Just as it had in the brochure. The image that had tempted her there in the first place.

"No going back, mind." He'd come up behind her unnoticed. "And no one to blame but yourself if you don't like the consequences."

Sarah shot him a vicious look over her shoulder.

He ignored it, leaning in until his head was level with hers. "It would have been easier if you'd just let yourself be taken," he whispered conspiratorially. He took a step back, his face the modicum of innocence. "But it's your choice after all. The one you so desperately wanted? You're welcome to just run back home."

"I assume you aren't going to offer to return me there."

Riven laughed, "Sadly no. I think I've outstayed my welcome. I'm sure I've broken a rule or three as it is," he added unapologetically. "Good thing I've never had any use for them."
"No, I won't return you," Riven laughed again, a wicked gleam in his eyes. "But I will gift wrap you." He flicked his wrist and Sarah's clothes were replaced by a long silvery dress, knotwork designs on the trim.

"Consider it my parting gift." He smiled at her look of outrage. "You're welcome."

Underwear had not been part of the wrapping. Sly dog. Lacking a wallet, which lay at the bottom of her abandoned purse in Blackrock, getting home would be both challenging and embarrassing, and he knew it.

"I don't like you," Sarah declared bluntly. It was only a partial lie. She feared him, distrusted him and thought him overly cruel. She also found his charisma unsettling. But she could see the appeal in that intensity. She saw the same in Jareth.

Riven's grin only widened. "You don't have to like me. You just have to love my son."

"I- it's complicated." Sarah's eyes misted despite her anger; her emotions roiling. "What about my life? My career? I love literature. I love writing. I wanted to get published... I-" she tripped over her words. There were too many questions left unanswered and even more unasked.

Riven looked completely unmoved – even indifferent - but when he spoke it was not unkindly. "Our writings have a habit of making an appearance in your world."

Sarah opened her mouth, but he held up a hand. "I've exhausted all my lines, I think. You certainly are a very trying creature. I'm sure you'll make the right decision... and make it as difficult as possible once you do." He tipped his head. "But I may have been wrong: a cat is nothing without claws." He winked and was gone; leaving Sarah to wonder if she'd imagined it all over again.

But standing on Tara without a jacket, in a dress that wasn't hers, without money and forty odd kilometres from where she'd been before, she had no trouble discerning the real facts of her predicament.

Predicament or opportunity?

Underlying their banter and behind his machinations was the undeniable fact that Sarah had been given a choice. She was free to leave. There was no binding ceremony, no chases through the woods. And no Goblin King to take her back.

Maybe none that wanted her back.

Sarah started pacing without even realizing it. For twenty minutes she wrung her hands, swore vehemently and dissolved into tears, in various order. She knew she could walk to the town and throw herself on the mercy of Mrs. Gannon or a patron at the pub. There'd be a phone at least. She'd even started down the path, unconsciously rubbing her wrist the whole way, before she turned back only to repeat the process over again. The sheep watched with disinterest.

Riven had perhaps been right. It would have been easier to just be taken. With everyone to blame but herself. She'd wanted choice and had been given one.

But he hadn't come.

Sarah shook her head and headed for the town. She couldn't. She just couldn't. She'd made it halfway there before she turned around again and stared at the Hill. It looked every bit as
otherworldly as it had when she'd first seen it. The clouds were beginning to thicken, slowly snuffing out the light. She brushed a finger over her garnet ring.

Sarah was back at the mound in half the time.

She crossed over the remnants of the fire. Rain had washed most evidence away, but charred wood and grass still littered the ground. Within the ash was a distinct shape: a carving - the sure blade marks deep and fine - done by a practised hand.

She picked it up. It had once been an owl. Now it was marked by flame.

Sarah took a final look around. Her heart was beating wildly but it was tempered by the unexpected sense of peace that comes with resolution. When she opened the unlocked gate to the mound her hands began shaking. For one last moment she stood frozen at the entrance - uncertainty urging her to retreat, anticipation bidding her jump.

Could there be victory in surrender? Or was it surrender in victory? Forwards or backwards...

'All paths lead to me'.

She brushed a finger over her ring again. It didn't really matter. A white blank page is only waiting for ink.

Sarah fell to her knees and crawled through the small door, giving herself to the darkness within.

Chapter End Notes

Rum Tum Tugger: The name of a cat (and a poem) in T.S. Eliot's Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats – classic read. If you weren't already aware, yes, it is what Andrew Lloyd Weber's musical, Cats, is based upon. Note: Thanks to Chloechum for pointing out I originally wrote 'Alexander' not 'Andrew'. I should really stop huffing glue. (N.B. I do not actually huff glue).

Garnet ring: If you'll recall Jareth has been wearing Sarah's garnet right on his little finger since chapter 20 (looted from the Wiseman's box). FYI - the word 'Garnet' originates with the Latin granatum malum which means pomegranate. And bohemian garnet jewellery was traditionally designed with a large number of small stones set close together so they resembled the seeds of a pomegranate. In the Bronze Age it was considered a talisman against evil, and had the ability to light the darkness. Noah is said to have used a garnet lantern to steer the Ark at night. Seems appropriate that Sarah's ring is a garnet, no?

"Have a bit of craic" is have fun/ have a laugh in Irish slang. When I was in Ireland it took me a very long to realize what it meant. Many embarrassing moments ensued. Note: Thank you to Laura135 who pointed out that it is spelled 'craic', not 'crack'. If I had seen it spelt back then, I may have saved myself a lot of embarrassment.

There really is a pub in Blackrock called 'The Wicked Wolf' – but I have obviously
taken license with it and with Blackrock in general.

The song Sarah hears in Blackrock is called "White Blank Page" by Mumford and Sons. It's a freakin' fantastic song and while I was listening to it I immediately thought how well it worked for this story. And I could so picture the band busking in Dublin (though they are English, not Irish). For those of you who hate songs included in the middle of the story, sorry, this song worked so well, I couldn't NOT use it. Plus is nicely paralleled the Frames' song she hears in chapter 8. And Labyrinth was awesome because of the music.

The Rock Road, which forms the south western boundary of the Blackrock Park, is part of one of the oldest roads in Ireland, the ancient Slíghe Chualann. It was constructed by the High King of Ireland several centuries before St. Patrick and it connected Tara with what is now southern Dublin and north-east Wicklow, in this case Blackrock. It seemed appropriate that Riven would "walk" it to take Sarah to Tara. Bending the rules without breaking them.

The line "I'll like it more if you fight, Sarah. You'll like it more if you don't" was (loosely) borrowed from Kresley Cole's novel Lothaire. If you like paranormal romance (Vampires and Werewolves who aren't angsty teens) check her out. That line just seemed so very Goblin King-ish.

Riven's line 'Here's our front door - you wanted to walk in', was paraphrased from Clara B. Dunkle's The Hollow Kingdom – a great-young adult book about another Goblin King with mismatched eyes.

Riven's quip about letting Sarah keep her claws after all is a reference to his declawing comment made in 33.

Declan was last seen carving wooden figures in chapter 32.
Surrender

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I don't own them. I make no profit from this. Henson and co. would never let me do all the pervy things I want.

Warnings: …for peach pie, peach cobbler, peach tarts, peach sorbet, peach juice, peach jam, peach Jell-O, peach preserves, peach candies, peach nectar, peach ice cream, peach wine, peach cocktail, peach popsicles, peach tea…

… In other words, much naughtiness abounds. You have been forewarned. This has been rated M since the beginning, mes amis - time to earn it.

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

Part XXXVI

I follow the signs marked back to the beginning
No more compromise

Into the fire
I'm reunited

Into the Fire, Sarah McLachlan

Surrender…
Every word, every thought, every sound.
Surrender…
Every touch, every smile, every frown.
Surrender…
All the pain we've endured until now.
Surrender…
All the hope that I lost you have found.
Surrender…
Yourself to me

Surrender, Billy Talent

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------

"Jareth," spoke a feminine voice.

Jareth turned, expression angry, but then his eyes softened and his shoulders sagged.
"You know why I'm here."

Jareth nodded. "I suspected."

"And you know what I will have to do." The tone was apologetic. "Are you disappointed?"

"Her actions betray her, but," Jareth paused, "it has cost me in the end."

"Such a pity," the Voice agreed. "However, all is not lost. Your failure is also hers."

Jareth made a non-committal sound. "Her will is... formidable."

"And that is why you are planning to let her go."

Jareth shot the robed figure a sharp look. "I hadn't decided."

"Hadn't you? I know you better than you give me credit."

"I can see no other way. My hands are tied."

"And so you plan to untie the knot." The Voice studied his face. "And then let her tie it back again?"

"Mm." Jareth's lips thinned. "It could fail."

"I hazard it won't. And neither do you or you would never consider it," replied the Voice smoothly. "You are a Goblin King. I imagine you won't let failure stop you. Poor girl."

"She is stubborn-"

"And so are you," the robed figure countered. "But she loves you willingly. Else you would have won. Which is more important?"

Jareth knew, but his face darkened. "She won't admit it. She fights even now."

"She will. Time is short. Three days have ended." The robed figure stepped back, adjusting her hood so that her face was once more obscured. "Nothing more than a voice. You may have lost but you are still a Goblin King. We all have our parts to play."

Jareth sighed, "Ever her villain."

He inclined his head and vanished, reappearing moments later in the orchard. The sun was very low in the sky. He leaned against the tree and closed his eyes to wait.

And prepared himself to let her go.

="/--------------------------------------------------------------------------=

"She's coming back!" shrieked a voice.

"Who's coming back?" asked another. His helmet had bits of flooring stuck to the horns.

"THE girl!" snapped the first.

"THE Girl?" echoed the rest.
"As in the girl who ate the peach and kissed the king and broke his-

"Argh! Not this again!"

But it was already too late.

"I knew she couldn't stay away!" a splintery goblin opined smugly. He began madly polishing a twisted lump of metal with a rather revolting mixture of spittle and earwax. A passing goblin's beard was unwillingly employed as a rag.

Goblin faces everywhere fractured into toothy grins and general pandemonium ensued. The chickens clamoured for cover.

But their jubilation fell silent at the distinctive sound of crystal smashing.

Sarah was trying very hard to be brave.

The entrance to the tomb smelled of loam and decay – made worse by the recent rain. With no source of light, she crawled blindly. The ground beneath her hands was moist and cool, and likely home to things best not considered. The damp seeped through the fabric of her gown, staining her knees. 'So much for the wrapping,' she thought wryly.

The last time she'd entered the mound she'd been fleeing a goblin horde; running away from him. The parallel was not lost on her and the niggling sense of 'joke's on you' was hard to ignore.

When the narrow passageway opened into the domed centre, Sarah caught the first tendrils of it – the distinctive scent of magic underlying all the rot. Magic and fire. Before it terrified. Now it thrilled. And perhaps still terrified a little.

Then she'd known what villain she'd been running from; now she wasn't sure what villain she was running to. Or if he even was anymore.

But there was no time to second guess her decision because almost immediately her skin began burning. It was slight at first, the sensation of heat creeping across her body, but it built and spread and multiplied 'til she was aflame. It lingered on the threshold of pain. Sarah rolled onto her back in discomfort - laid out like a sacrificial offering in the dark. But it ended abruptly when then the ground vanished beneath her. It was not quite a fall – she'd had more than enough of those to be something of a connoisseur – rather more like being swept away. The smell of fire gave way to the smell of sea, and for a moment Sarah swore she could feel water flow beneath her.

And then it was over.

Though it wasn't the harrowing descent off a cliff's edge, the brief journey was nonetheless rattling; all the more so because she'd welcomed it willingly.

When Sarah opened her eyes, almost reluctantly, it was to mottled darkness. Pinpoints of golden light swirled down from above in broken patterns. She did not need to see to know where she was; she could feel it. Every nerve in her body drew taut. Fear gave way to anticipation. Strangely, it felt like coming home.
Until the roof collapsed on her.

The Underground may have been on an entirely different plane, but the taste of dirt was evidently universal. It could have been worse, Sarah reasoned, she could have had to solve the Labyrinth all over again. When the dust settled, she pulled herself free of the debris, shook her hair out and then looked up.

"Son of a -!

She was on an irritatingly familiar hill… beyond the castle, beyond the Goblin City and most definitely beyond the Labyrinth. 'Joke's on you' indeed.

A part of her, breath bated, expected a shadowy figure to appear; to tempt and to beguile. The expectation of that reunion sent a frisson of anticipation through her.

But there was no baby to be bargained over this time, no challenge issued, and in the end he did not come. The inclination to call upon him was great, but she would not give him that satisfaction. She'd bent far enough. And the sense of being ignored did not settle well. An insidious voice whispered that he might not even answer.

By the time Sarah reached the entrance to the outer wall, not even the faeries dared bite her. In fact, no one met her at all. The absence was telling, and her initial ire turned to doubt. From there it was only a small step to fear. She hadn't been sure of the reception she'd receive, but she'd expected something at least. This had all the sting of a slap in the face. The great doors opened easily enough, however, and she wasted no time in feeling along the uneven stone walls until her hand dipped within. She had no illusions that she could retrace her steps, though the path was etched so vividly in her memory. Or that the same rules would even apply. After a moment's indecision she turned right.

Sarah stepped out into a canopied forest. She balked at the drastic change until she recognized that she'd once eaten a drugged peach somewhere within its confines. The thrill of expectation returned, and not a small measure of relief. Rather sourly, she considered that it would have been a much shorter journey if she had just ignored the worm's advice first time around. But the notion followed that it might have had a different ending when all facts were considered. Endings are worth nothing without the journey. That spin revitalized her resolve.

She had not gone far before she came across a weathered sign pointing down a winding path. The sign, in faded lettering, read 'This way to Eternal Joy and Plenty'. Recognizing the direction, Sarah snorted. Someone had a twisted sense of humour. She wondered if ancient Irish warriors had once traversed that path with the promise of sacred blessings. And what they'd made of the bog once they got there.

The rest of her passage through the dense forest was as uneventful as her arrival had been, and it was not overly long before she broke through the tree line. The rubbish heaps stretched before her; the city gates just beyond. She'd never been so happy to see junk in all its chaotic glory. Skirting the desolate jumble, she was again tainted by doubt. She had yet to cross paths with a single soul and the Labyrinth was anything but uninhabited. Far from relieved, she instead vacillated between anger and fear. Those emotions were magnified tenfold when she entered the city unchecked. No goblin army attempted to route her; no monstrous metal contraption attempted to crush her. The lack was almost insulting.

The last time she'd been through the city, it had been bustling. Now it was shuttered. She eyed the remnants of her first visit: cannon balls studding the walls, boulders incorporated into new builds; even a monument, unnoticed before, to the 'Great Battle'. The casting was rather unflattering – she was sure her nose was not that big and Ambrosius did not have two heads - but it was difficult not to
feel a little pride. She wondered if they'd amend it to read 'Girl who became Queen'. Fairytales had taught her hat a queen needed subjects... and a king. Those she was decidedly without.

Sarah halted outside the palace. Embarrassment withered her resolve. It was hard not to search the windows, wondering if he watched – unwilling to meet her halfway. The possibility made her angry again. Perhaps this was some sort of penance. She would have preferred the cleaners, all things considered.

She found her way to the throne room by rote. The hallways, for once, actually obliged her. Her mood shifted further when she saw what lay before the door. She recognized the would-be crown immediately, and noted the added shine. It was still ugly. Beautifully ugly, she amended giddily. 'All queens need crowns.' She couldn't stop the smile that followed.

It vanished when she opened the throne room doors; the colour draining from her face.

A lone figure occupied the throne, resplendent in silk and glossy sable hair. Sarah vainly tried to swallow the sudden lump threatening to choke her. All the doubts and fears that had dogged her so relentlessly collided, coalesced and bottle-necked in her throat.

The other woman appraised Sarah with dark-eyed interest.

It was all a cruel joke; the stupid dress just tar and feathers. The overwhelming sense of betrayal was as surprising as it was staggering. It left a vile taste in her mouth and she wanted to rail at the unfairness of it all. The first tendrils of jealousy crept up her spine.

They dissolved with recognition. "You're…"

Etain's lips twitched with a barely suppressed smile. "I am."

Something akin to relief swelled her chest, before being swiftly replaced by embarrassment. She had the perverse urge to apologize. "You know who I am."

"I wouldn't say that exactly," Etain canted her head. "I've heard such... varied accounts; I'm not really sure who you are at all. Your reputation certainly precedes you." The tone was part amusement, part diplomacy.

Sarah winced. Though Etain appeared the younger, she felt like a naughty child in her presence. A naughty child who done many naughty things against and with her son. Sarah's cheeks blazed tellingly.

Etain laughed at the display, but it was a lovely lilting sound and it cut through the tension keenly. She rose from the throne and approached with graceful and assured steps that Sarah couldn't help but envy. She gently smoothed a smudge of dirt from Sarah's face and smiled.

Sarah mirrored it. "I wanted to meet you."

Etain looked delighted with her admission.

Riven was arrogant and callous and compelling – every inch a Goblin King, but Etain... Etain had always been the eponymous character in the story. The bride stolen by moonlight. The woman who had rocked a blonde-haired babe by the fire.

"Did you regret your decision?" Sarah blurted. She hadn't meant to ask that question, not at least, without a proper preamble, but there it lay.
Far from being insulted, Etain sounded amused. "Why? Do you?"

"I don't know yet."

Etain nodded. "But you think I do?"

"I think lots of things," Sarah admitted. Recent events fueled her tongue. "I think they have always done exactly as they’ve wanted. I think it’s unfair." She thought of Riven's cold calculation; of his manipulations. "I think you weren't given a choice. Not really."

"But you were," Etain countered calmly. She gestured at the room. "And yet here you are."

"But it's not the same…” Sarah trailed off; frustration mounting.

"No, it's not."

Sarah faltered under her even gaze. She found Etain entirely disarming. "Why are you here? Why now and not before?"

Etain's voice softened. "Did you suppose I would help you? Save you from your fate?"

"I – yes. Maybe…” Sarah floundered. She hadn't framed it as such until then. And once said, it sounded somehow ridiculous. "I thought you'd understand at least."

Etain took Sarah's hands in hers. "Because I was stolen? Because I was a mortal too?" She squeezed. "I do. But you forget that I am also Riven's wife. That I am also Jareth's mother," she added pointedly. 'Don't pity me,' was the unspoken.

Sarah felt foolish and tried to pull her hands back, but Etain held on. She brushed her thumb over the garnet ring thoughtfully.

"And you didn't need rescuing." Etain released her and moved to the window, her dark eyes scanning the sprawling chaos below. "You're definitely unique. Dismantled a kingdom. Denied a king his crown. Escaped… Broke all the rules." She shot Sarah a coy look over her shoulder. "Very goblin-like; they just adore breaking rules."

Her words echoed Riven's and Sarah looked surprised. "You sound like you approve."

"Naturally. It's much better this way, I think; turning the world upside down as you did." Etain's eyes danced with mischief. "I expect big things from this."

Sarah was beginning to suspect Jareth did not inherit his mercurial nature from his father.

She joined Etain at the window. "I wouldn't say I escaped." Cast out more like.

"If you think you didn't have any agency in it, you'd be mistaken,” Etain admonished.

Sarah sniffed.

"You certainly had some in your return."

And that was the issue. This was a life she barely knew, even less understood, and yet she'd chosen it over her own. Looking at the chaotic vista below, the reality of it all began to seep through the cracks and she hadn't even seen him yet. He was a whole other unknown and his absence was…

"There are… a lot of unknowns," she said instead.
"I remember that feeling." For a moment, Etain looked nothing more than the fragile, wayward girl she'd once been. It was hard to imagine whose mother she became. "But you'll learn," she continued blithely. The fragility vanished. "It's a leap of faith, to be sure, but you've already made the first. As I suspected you would."

The spark of triumph colouring Etain's tone set Sarah on edge.

"Suspected?"

"Predicted… advised." Etain waved a hand dismissively. "Nothing of import. You like a challenge; that's your key."

Sarah's edge sharpened. "Key?"

Etain leaned in and whispered, "What is the value in a falcon until it has been released? There is no way to know a bird is tamed until it has had the chance to taste freedom and returns to its master."

She stood back and let the implication sink in; a mixture of pity and delight on her lovely face.

"Riven thought otherwise," she added confidentially. "But I'll be delighted to tell him I was right and he was wrong. He'll just hate that."

Sarah was at a loss. Hands fisted at her side and red crept up her neck. It was ridiculous to feel betrayed, but she did.

"It's too late for doubts now; what's done is done," Etain chided perceptively. "You made the choice, remember? And choice is only of worth when there is something to lose."

Sarah pulled away angrily. "Was this just some game to all of you?"

Etain halted her with a slim hand – the mark on her palm clearly visible. "The very best sort; the kind for keeps."

Sarah instinctively flexed her bare one.

Etain noted the slight tell, but she offered no comment. She touched the stains on Sarah's dress. "These are marks of bravery, I think." Her tone was almost envious. "You should wear them proudly. You are far from helpless. Don't forget that you are both bruised, even if you cannot see the marks."

Sarah scoffed and paced away, but Etain rounded on her by the throne.

"I'm no victim, Sarah. And neither are you. Make no mistake." Her face held a fierce light. "However it may have begun, Riven is as much mine as I am his."

Sarah could not doubt it. In that moment, she could see what had once captivated a Goblin King – what Riven had pursued so relentlessly and perhaps what had ensnared him in the end. To own a Goblin King. Sarah was in awe; her anger temporarily checked.

Etain's voice softened. "I should go. I'm certainly not needed here; my part is played – at least for now. It is your time." A slight nudge landed Sarah in the throne.

Etain descended the steps.

"Wait!" Sarah rose; suddenly needing reassurance. "What's going to happen?"
Etain turned, her dark eyes dancing again. "You think I know?"

"I think you know your son," Sarah parried.

"I do. But I'll leave you to manage him. That I never learned."

Etain laughed at Sarah's stricken expression. "I wouldn't worry overly. I merely wanted to meet you properly; this time without artifice." Another coy, secretive smile. "I'm sure I've delayed the inevitable long enough as it is."

Sarah shook her head in confusion.

"Remember the words? What is bound cannot be divided. It must be undone…" Sarah stilled, blanching at the familiar cadence of the voice, eyes flicking to the folds of the queen's blue cloak. "…and then made stronger," Etain finished with a wink. "Fáilte ar ais, Sarah." She faded from the room.

Sarah sat down heavily on the throne and took several measuring breaths. Hysterical laughter boiled. Etain had shaken her more than Jareth ever had.

A slight sound made her look up. Or not.

The devil himself was in the doorway; an imposing figure in hues of midnight and limned by amber light. His eyes slaked over her, expression guarded. They flicked to the throne and then returned to her face.

"Are you here to conquer or to surrender?"

She rose and hastily stepped away from the dais. Under his piercing scrutiny, she fought the urge to fidget – failing spectacularly. Of all the scenarios she'd imagined, all the ways she'd played it out in her head, this had not been it. Silence descended.

"Is that all you have to say to me?" Her voice cracked tellingly.

"Ah." Jareth raised a brow. "Not surrender then."

He smoothly clicked the door shut behind him, and then watched her expectantly.

The tenuous hold she'd had on her emotions finally broke. "You didn't come!"

His eyes flickered, the mask slipping briefly before sliding back into place. "And you didn't call." He brushed past her and sank into his throne. "It must be positively aggravating to not have things go as you want," he mocked.

Sarah sucked in a sharp breath, but Jareth wasn't through with her.

"Did you think I would fall at your feet in thanks? Host a fanfare for your victorious return? You seem to forget that you're the villain here." He paused. "Though I appreciate that you didn't sack the city this time."

"I'd hate to be predictable," Sarah replied snidely. How easily they fell into their old ways.

The silence bled to uncomfortable before Sarah spoke again. "Is the… is everything okay now?"

Jareth steepled his fingers thoughtfully. "Some things, yes. Others… no. But order has been restored, if that's what you meant."
Something in his hooded eyes and clipped tone set Sarah on edge. Every even breath he took increased her resentment.

"Too bad." She didn't mean it. Not really. "I could have had a perfect record."

The silence stretched again. Jareth sighed this time. For a moment he looked strained. "Must I always be the reasonable one, Sarah? It's becoming rather tiring."

Sarah mouthed the word incredulously. Jareth said nothing – if anything he looked bored. She bristled at his easy control.

"What? Do you expect ME to beg?" Angry tears burned her eyes but she'd be damned if she was ever going to cry in front of him again. She laughed humourlessly. "Aren't those supposed to be your lines?"

Jareth's eyes narrowed. "I learned a long time ago not to expect you to do anything. Saves myself the disappointment. And a lot of castle repairs."

"So sorry to constantly disappoint then," she hissed wrathfully and strode towards the door. It disappeared as soon as she touched it.

"You can't always run away. I thought we'd agreed." The low words were spoken against the nape of her neck, his breath feathering through her loose hair. Hands caged her against the stone; his heart beat steadily against her back.

Sarah turned her head slightly, licking her suddenly dry lips. "I came back, didn't I?"

"Yes," he breathed. "You did."

Within those words lay everything unsaid.

For a moment Jareth just held her, trapped between him and the unyielding stone; the cords of his control fraying. He was terrified that she would somehow vanish, slipping through his fingers yet again. Angry she had waited so long. Her transience was novel; her powers unknown. He both hated and loved her for it. But there she was, against all odds, within his arms.

Willingly.

The cords finally snapped.

Jareth turned her roughly, pressing her back against the wall, and then his mouth was on hers. Hands traced her jaw line, her neck, the hollow of her throat. Everywhere he touched it burned. Sarah noticed his gloves were gone. His teeth scraped against her lips, forcing them to part so he could deepen the kiss. He tangled a hand in her hair to better angle her head.

Sarah's hands clutched reflexively on the open folds of his shirt and then slid over the firm planes of his chest to wrap around his neck almost desperately. She arched into him - offering. Jareth hissed in response and pressed an open-mouth kiss to her neck, his tongue hot against her pulse. He tugged her dress down off one shoulder and bit down roughly. Sarah shuddered in response. He growled his approval against her skin. The sound was almost feral. Definitely not human.

His hands smoothed down her back and cupped her rear - fingers splayed - pulling her against him sharply. Sarah could feel the hard length of him through the thin layers of cloth. She knew he'd only allow one outcome this time. She only wanted one. An aching coil unfurled within her and her breathing fractured. His was ragged. Jareth's loss of control was fire in her veins - empowering.
But it also terrified. Her body was already ten steps ahead of her mind. She pushed him back decisively and ran shaking hands through her hair.

Jareth's eyes narrowed and he took a step forward, but Sarah held a hand against his chest. His heart was racing beneath her palm.

Jareth wrapped his fingers around her wrist. "This is a dangerous game you play," he warned.

"I - I just need a minute to think." A minute to breathe.

"The last time I gave you a minute to think you won your brother back and felled my kingdom." He raised her restraining hand and pressed a hot, open mouthed kiss against her palm. Sarah's eyelashes fluttered and her fingers instinctively curled against his jaw. Jareth smiled. "I think I prefer when your mind is otherwise occupied."

Sarah snatched her hand back. "Stop distracting me!"

His eyes flashed. Too late, Sarah realized she had challenged him.

She ducked around him and warily backed away. "I just think we need to talk before… We just need to talk."

Jareth's lips twitched as he easily paced her step for step. He didn't look like he had any intention of wasting breath on words.

Her body was still mutinously thrumming in response to his; knees embarrassingly weak. She took another faltering step back and met the edge of the stairs, landing hard on the steps.

Jareth loomed above her, one hand on the throne by her head; voice deceptively soft. "Well? Speak."

Their relative positions meant Sarah's eyes were at his waist. They flicked down of their own volition. "Um…" Her mouth went dry and her questions were instantly forgotten. Eyes flew back to his face in embarrassment.

But Jareth was intently focused on undoing the cuffs of his shirt.

"Wh-what are you doing?"

Jareth paused only briefly. "Undressing." His tone suggested it should have been patently obvious.

Sarah scrambled to her feet. "What? Why?" She looked around. "Here?" Everything was spiraling out of control.

Jareth grinned unrepentantly. A flash and then they were in the tower bedroom. The doors were notably absent.

"Better?" His shirt now hung open from his shoulders, revealing the smooth expanse of his chest. His skin was pale and unblemished, lithe muscles and stark lines marked his strength. A line of fair hair began a tantalizing trail from his navel and disappeared beneath the waist of his pants. Pants that were slung dangerously low on narrow hips.

Sarah cleared her throat shakily. "I said we needed to talk!"

"And you did. 'Um' was very enlightening." He closed the distance between them.

Sarah squeaked, much to her shame, and danced backwards out of reach.
Jareth chuckled. "For someone here to conquer, you seem decidedly meek."

"I never said I was here to conquer."

His smile deepened. "Surrender then. How refreshing!"

Sarah couldn't help but laugh in return. "I didn't mean that and you know it."

"I know you want me," he countered smoothly. His voice was deep, heavy, tempting. All traces of mockery were gone.

"I don't want you." The words came automatically. Defensively. She'd meant right now, if anything. Even then it was a partial lie.

A slow smile spread across his face, telling Sarah that he knew deceit. "And yet… you're here."

The words sobered her. "Why do I feel like I haven't come back willingly, so much as been manipulated back?"

Jareth sighed and poured himself a glass of wine. He took a sip and then chose a fruit from the nearby bowl.

"Peach?" he offered innocently.

Sarah pulled a face.

"I let you go, Sarah. I didn't have to." I didn't want to. He drained the glass, eyes raking over her hotly. "But don't expect me to be entirely honourable."

Sarah wasn't sure how to process that.

"But you didn't come." Hurt coloured her tone.

"Don't mistake absence for weakness. Or ignorance. I saw what you did." He stalked towards her. "Everything you did."

Sarah blushed, but forced herself not to retreat. "You can't blame me for trying to provoke you. You yourself said you don't share."

Jareth smiled darkly. "I don't. Neither do I play my hand by your command." I played it after. But Sarah didn't need to know that. The boy was fine. Mostly.

His fingers cupped her chin. "I won't lie; I savoured your disappointments." They tightened when she tried to pull away. "Don't begrudge me my petty victories, Sarah. I told you I loved you. You told me nothing."

The words hung heavy between them. Part accusation. Part challenge.

Jareth spared her the need to speak by pulling her closer. He breathed the words against her lips. "I didn't come, because I didn't need to."

He didn't tell her that he'd been uncertain. That he'd doubted. That letting her go had been the hardest thing he'd ever done. That not coming had been even harder. He didn't need to.

But Sarah hovered at the edge of the kiss, hesitating. "And what if… if I hadn't come back?"
His fingers flexed against her arms and his eyes flickered. "Do you really want the answer to that question?"

Staring up at him, she realized she didn't. It could wait. Perhaps it didn't matter. And perhaps she already knew. He would always be the villain. Her villain.

Jareth felt her surrender - that small submission he'd been waiting for. He could not help the look of satisfaction that flashed across his face. Sarah would no doubt make him pay for it later. They had forever to work out their differences. He eyed her mutinous expression. Or more likely never. He'd enjoy that too.

Forever.

Jareth's kiss was victorious. Fingers curling into her hair, his mouth slanted against hers roughly. He tasted like spice and wine. Sarah returned the intensity, her teeth nipping at his lips, along his jaw. Her hands explored the expanse of his chest. When her nails skimmed over his nipples he sucked in a breath. Sarah smiled against his mouth. She was entitled to her victories too.

When she repeated the motion, Jareth hissed and bent his mouth to her throat. His teeth scraped against her sensitive skin, drawing a mewling sound from her. He could feel her heat against his naked skin. But it wasn't enough. Jareth's hands dropped to the laces of her gown and deftly began its destruction. The dress dropped to her hips before Sarah even noticed. Her upper half was left clad in only a thin silk under slip. With the fading light behind her, she knew he could see the outlines of her breasts through the material; the peaks dark against the fabric. They tightened in response.

Jareth's expression turned flinty. Flustered by his intense scrutiny, Sarah sucked in a breath and closed the distance between them, using his body as a cover. She licked at his jaw line and her hands trailed lightly across his stomach.

Jareth laughed, not fooled for an instant by her distraction. But he groaned softly in appreciation when she nipped his ear lobe, the angle of her body pressing her breasts against his bare chest. His hands tightened on her back, his fingers following the gentle curve of her spine. Goosebumps arose in their wake.

When he reached for the ties on her slip, Sarah shivered and coyly danced out of his arms. This was another sort of game to be played. He lunged for her. She sidestepped him in a twirl of fabric. The dress slid further down her hips, revealing the shadow of a dark triangle through the sheer material.

He sportingly let her dodge again before he easily hauled her back against his chest.

"You had your chance," he breathed into her ear, voice rough and possessive.

Sarah's legs trembled, but he held her tight against him, his hardened length pressing into her back. He snaked one arm around her and cupped a heavy breast, his thumb expertly circling the nipple until it strained against the thin fabric, begging to be freed. With his other hand, he tugged up her skirts and skimmed his fingers across her bare thighs. He smiled at her lack of undergarments. Jareth slid his hand over her core, revelling at her dampness, until he found the spot that made Sarah gasp. By the third expert flick, she was writhing against his hold.

Annoyed at how easily he could manipulate her, she squeezed her thighs shut and grabbed his arm to pull him away. He used his knee to force her legs apart and with a quick turn of his wrist he grasped her hand and pushed two of her own fingers into her slick folds. Sarah gasped at the unexpected invasion. She watched breathlessly, fighting a moan of protest, as he withdrew them and then slowly slid them into his mouth. Spellbound, Sarah craned her neck backwards. His tongue swept along her
fingers, savouring. She was poised to fight, but she stopped at the shudder that ran through him; as though the taste of her undid him. Sarah wet her suddenly dry lips.

Eyes dancing, Jareth gripped her by the back of the neck and slid his tongue into her mouth. Tit for tat. He owed her, after all. Sarah's knees went weak.

Jareth swung her into his arms without breaking the kiss and swiftly lowered her to the bed. He pulled back just enough to speak; arms caging her head. "Tell me you don't want me," he challenged.

Sarah swallowed thickly. "W-what?"

"Say it again. Ask me to stop. Otherwise I won't." Say your right words… His expression said it wouldn't matter anyway.

Sarah had come too far to turn back now.

When she spoke it was a harsh whisper against his lips, hands curling into his hips. "Don't stop."

He smiled triumphantly against her mouth, and then turned his attention to her aching breasts. When he sucked a nipple into his mouth through the chemise, Sarah almost moaned. Her hands twined through his hair, torn between pushing him away and holding him down. His tongue circled where his thumb had before. When he bit down lightly, his teeth teasing maddeningly through the silk, she did cry out.

Jareth raised his head to grin wickedly. "Really, Sarah. Think of the poor goblins." And then he bit down on the other one.

Incensed by the look of smug satisfaction on his face, Sarah managed to push him back. He allowed it, but only because he'd gripped the thin silk of her slip and the force of her push tore it apart. Gift wrapped indeed, she thought perversely, before instinctively crossing her arms.

Jareth swatted them away easily. "I think not," he tsk'd, fey eyes glinting.

When she tried to do it again, purely out of spite, he glared at her and effortlessly forced them apart, holding her wrists down on either side of her. She wanted to protest at his high-handed tactics - it seemed only fair - but the look on his face silenced her. Both irises were so dark they were almost black. She could see the tips of canines against his parted lips. Sarah thought, with a delicious shudder, that he had never looked less human.

And never more reverent.

Sarah had never been looked at like that before.

It made her feel vulnerable and empowered at the same time. Her skin prickled in anticipation and her chest heaved, which drew an appreciative hiss from Jareth. He ghosted a hand over her white skin slowly, fingers barely touching - memorizing, and then met her eyes. Sarah bit her lip at his unguarded expression.

"You're beautiful," he breathed roughly. And then bent his head to show her how much.

His lips were hot against her neck; his fingers slid across her sensitive breasts with delicious friction. His mouth followed suit, trailing a burning path across her nipples. He used his tongue and teeth to torment.
If this was what it meant to be devoured, Jareth was right - she did welcome it.

Sarah felt his fingers slide up her inner thigh, beneath her bunched up skirts, pausing to tease at her entrance. He slowly slid a digit in; eyes rapt on her face. She stared boldly back until the sensation made her lids flutter tellingly and her breathing hitched. Jareth's lips twitched at her response. Another finger joined the first, spreading her folds. It was the same and yet different than her own. His movements were practiced, reaching places she'd never even known she'd had. Hazily, she thought she'd never watch him spin a crystal the same way again.

Sarah arched into his touch, her nipples brushing against the firm planes of his bare chest. He growled low in his throat, pulling back just enough to wrench the shirt from his shoulders. Sarah matched his fervour, catching at his lips, his chin, and his neck with her teeth. Her nails raked down his back, sliding beneath the waist of his pants to cup the flesh beneath. Jareth bucked into the cradle her hips. Sarah squirmed in response, pressing back, trying ineffectually to ease the ache that now bordered on discomfort.

Jareth hissed at her motions; he could feel how ready she was through their remaining clothing and it felt like vindication. He tore her remaining skirts away; the fabric rending beneath his fingers until she was laid bare. His eyes raked over her, pausing on her bruised lips, on the marks he'd left on her full breasts, on the damp thatch of curls between her lovely thighs, before returning to her sea-green eyes. Far from looking vulnerable, she looked fierce and powerful – the mortal girl, now woman, who'd beaten him. Twice. He was in awe. A queen.

Jareth stilled in surprise, before they both dragged them off his hips.

For a moment she felt a pang of trepidation. There would be no going back. But then she boldly dipped a hand down the trail of hair that had captivated her before, and wrapped it around his shaft, smoothing it down the long length. When she tentatively ran her thumb over the head and squeezed, Jareth gasped, a shudder running through him. He allowed her to explore him slowly, revelling in her soft touches even as he wanted nothing more than to hold her down and finally have his due.

Their due, he amended at look of pure possessiveness on her face. It fueled his own.

Sarah knew Jareth was holding himself back – giving her the lead. She saw the tension in his wrists; the corded muscles in his neck. He throbbed in her hand. Again, the sense of power sent a thrill though her. He looked wild and untamed, but she had a Goblin King at her mercy. Her Goblin King, she thought deliciously.

And then the restraint snapped.

With deft hands he captured her fingers. For a moment she struggled with him, but Jareth was through being denied. Eyes locked on hers he pressed her back into the bed, using his thigh to part her legs. Cupping her neck, he kissed her deeply, delving into her mouth. His other hand palmed her firm breasts, skillfully teasing her abused nipples. The ache within her intensified and she hooked a
slim leg around his thighs to lock them together. She used her hips to rub herself against his length.

Jareth's jaw clenched. He slid his hand between them, teasing over her nub, before positioning himself at her entrance. He paused, eyes returning to her face. Sarah thought he was going to ask if she was ready. She was ready to beg.

Her lips parted just as Jareth pressed himself into her with one smooth motion, robbing her words. He'd learned long ago not to give her the chance to speak. He groaned at her tightness, at the wet heat that welcomed him. For a moment he just held her, his breathing ragged against her neck. Precious things needed to be savoured.

But her inner walls contracted and he was lost.

Sarah had forgotten how to breathe. Shocked by the sudden feeling of fullness, her body froze. His heart was erratic against her breast. It felt right. She made a tentative motion, half instinctual, and Jareth snapped. He pulled back and drove forward – hard – and then again, rocking their hips together until they found their rhythm. Sarah hooked her other leg around him, drawing him even deeper. Her nails traced the hard planes of his back, while his mouth devoured. He bowed back to draw a breast into mouth with his teeth. Sarah threw her head back in ecstasy. Vaguely she realized she was making a sort of mewling sound. Jareth was murmuring words against her skin she didn't understand, so she guessed they were even.

Whatever Jareth had imagined, had hoped for, had wished… did not compare to the sight and feel of a pliant Sarah beneath him - A Sarah who writhed so willingly, so wantonly; who responded to his touch with such abandon. And gave as good in return.

His.

At last.

A feeling of connection spread across Sarah, beyond the physical. It entwined their bodies like a net-bounding. Instinct made her want to fight, but she was already lost. The only sound was the beating of Jareth's heart. She could feel it thrum into her own chest and for a moment it seemed that her own strove to match its rhythm.

Hers.

Jareth knew he should slow down - draw it out longer - but he couldn't. That would have to come later. Instead he gripped Sarah beneath her thigh and pushed her leg up to deepen the angle. Their movements became more frenzied; their pelvises colliding with every thrust. They'd both be bruised tomorrow. Jareth would kiss them all away. And then make new ones.

He slid a hand between their bodies, until he found the spot again. With skilled fingers he drew Sarah's mewls into a full keening wail. He could feel her tightening around him, drawing him deeper with every thrust. He struggled for control. A moment later he felt her contract around him, impossibly tight; her wail turning to a silent scream. He let himself follow.

Sarah's mind went blank – driven by pure sensation. The ache that had coiled and unfurled within her burst into a thousand points of light. Jareth had once said that he moved the stars for no one. She was pretty sure he just had. Only half aware, she could feel the force of his release. Jareth growled against her breast, the words broken and rough. His expression was unguarded and raw. He strained against her, and then his lithe body shuddered.

For the next few minutes the only sound was their erratic breathing. Pushing back slightly, Jareth
smoothed the hair from Sarah's face and dipped down to brush a gentle kiss across her tender lips. Looking at her flushed cheeks and drugged eyes, he knew himself lost. She'd come to conquer after all, he mused.

His eyes trailed down her naked body. A surge of pure male satisfaction shot through him as they stayed to the damp curls and glossy wetness of her thighs.

Sarah tried to feign outrage, but merely smiled - part shy, part triumphant.

Snaking his arms around her possessively, he rolled them; bodies still joined.

"Mine," he breathed into her ear.

Say your right words…

"I love you," she whispered back.

Sarah felt him still beneath her, his lithe frame going rigid.

And then he hardened inside her, skilled hands dropping to her hips.

Chapter End Notes

To pre-empt any questions or confusion (due to length btw updates) – the italicized part at the beginning is the hinted at scene in chapter 34. BEFORE Jareth sent Sarah back above ground. It picks up from the line: "'Jareth," spoke a feminine voice' in chapter 34.

Tar & Feathers – In case some of you have not heard of this act, it was used to publicly shame an individual in old time vigilante justice. The victim was covered in tar and then rolled in feathers and then paraded through town.

'Fáilte ar ais’ – ‘Welcome back’ in Irish Gaelic

Sarah thinking Jareth was right about welcoming being devoured is a reference to their heated conversation in chapter 15.

Bonus: There is Celtic knot work in the throne room in Labyrinth. Watch the movie again and you'll see it. I literally just discovered that little bit of icing (and I have watched the movie far too many times).

Small(ish) anecdote: When I started writing this story, my husband (fiancé at the time) was intrigued, having never heard of fanfiction. I explained the whole secret world to him and then outlined my story (as far I as I knew it at the time). He surprisingly, as he is not interested in reading overly much, wanted to read it.

I wouldn't let him.

Finally, after much haranguing, I printed a copy off for him. I think I was up to like
chapter 25 or so at the time. He made it to about chapter 12 before he started asking when the "action" was going to start. I tried to explain plot development, character analysis, etc. He just grinned boyishly, clearly having figured out fanfic's guilty secret. He made it to about chapter 18 before he asked again. Whenever I got writer's block and turned to him for inspiration, his response was another cheeky smile and a "just have them get to the sexy times already. How long is this story going to be anyway?"

(In actuality, he's not completely depraved; he did in fact enjoy the story and the tension and provided lots of lovely feedback when asked - which I did. Very infrequently).

More recently I pointed out how long ago this story was started. He was surprised and quite horrified that I've left Jareth "hanging" for almost four years. He's quite convinced that Sarah is the "biggest bleep tease" ever. Needless to say, he was like "enough is enough, the man needs relief."

*sniff* He has no finer sensibilities whatsoever.

Cheers,
Vic Wit

________________

Wooster: I assume, sir, I may now take the liberty of disposing of these… umbrellas?

Jeeves: Right-o, take them away, Jeeves, but don't give me that look. Smut like that demanded the celebratory cocktails be properly festooned!

Wooster: If you say so, Sir. If you say so.
Part XXXVII

Love is never defeated, and I could add, the history of Ireland proves it.

Pope John Paul II

The moon was bright when the Goblin King opened his eyes; a grin softening his aquiline face. Silver light painted a path across the floor from the window to the bed, bathing the occupants in its glow. Jareth took a moment to simply breathe deeply: the Labyrinth, fresh linen, ripe fruit, the heady scent of Sarah.

Victory.

Her face was tranquil in sleep, bordering on innocent. He hadn't lied when he'd said she'd always be just a little bit pure. Even plucked. His smile deepened in reminiscence. He was at leisure to watch her while she slept; her scathing tongue at rest. Not that he really minded the barbs. They made the game more dangerous and the rewards more precious.

And Sarah, he'd found, was worth everything.

Jareth stroked a hand along her bare shoulder, watching the fine hairs rise in its wake. Murmuring something unintelligible, she rolled towards him, tucking her head into his neck; her body unconsciously moulding to his heat. He could feel her bare breasts press against his arm and her damp curls against his hip. His heartbeat spiked immediately, but kept himself still. It was better to just savour the novelty of having a willing Sarah in his arms. A Sarah who had come of her own accord. A Sarah who gave herself freely.

A Sarah who loved him.

When she awoke, he imagined she would be prickly once again. Perhaps sore - likely embarrassed (he rather liked it when she blushed) - for they had not settled everything and possibly they never would. But now... now she was just his. Like it was always meant to be, fight it though she had. He'd expected nothing less. His in victory or his in surrender, it hardly mattered in the end.

Just his.

For the first time, in what seemed a very long while, Jareth allowed himself to relax.

Sarah awoke to the delicious sensation of being pinned to a bed.

A lithe body was entwined with hers. Feathery hair tickled her face, almost white in the early
morning light. A pale hand lightly cupped her breast beneath the sheet.

When the hand began to stroke, she began to suspect he was no longer asleep.

A reluctant smile tugged at her mouth, despite her natural inclination to resist. She'd do that later. "I know you're awake."

Jareth laughed lowly. "Then there's no more need for subtlety." The fingers became more brazen.

Fighting back a moan, Sarah captured his hand with her own and then froze – transfixed by the mark on her palm.

"It's back..." She traced the spirals in wonder, remembering the strange sense of connection, of being bound. And the foreign words breathed against her throat. Her hand moved from her palm to wrist, following the path of an unseen cord.

Jareth lazily propped his head up on one arm and watched her movements from beneath lowered lids. "Do you mind?" His underlying tone suggested the answer would change nothing.

Sarah traced the spiral again. It was difficult not to resort to old lines, especially given the provocation, but it was equally difficult not to appreciate the return of something she'd lost and mourned. Much to her surprise.

"No... I don't think so," she answered finally. "It was certainly... better getting it the second time. Even if you didn't ask then, either," she added pointedly.

Jareth grinned, his eyes dancing wickedly. "Are you saying that if I'd just thrown you down on the stone altar and had my way with you right then and there, we could have avoided all of this?"

Sarah snorted. "Very funny."

"It only worked because you were willing, Precious." He pulled the sheet from her in one smooth motion. "Delightfully willing, I might add."

Sarah squeaked and tried to snag it back. It promptly vanished.

"Jareth," she warned, "I'm sore and bruised and-!"

Jareth immediately flipped her over and began taking mock stock of her injuries. "You do look like a speckled egg," he observed, not sounding apologetic in the least. "Ah," his lips feathered over a mark on her hip, fingers teasing up her inner thigh, "I particularly enjoyed making this one."

"You're depraved!" Sarah admonished, trying - and failing - to maintain an even expression. It didn't help that her legs parted obligingly.

"You don't seem to be putting up much of a fight," Jareth grinned again, "for a change." He slid his fingers over her slick folds.

Another touch earned a shiver from her, as well as a defiant scowl. But when his attentions became more aggressive, Sarah winced.

Jareth immediately drew back, stroking her arm in mute apology. "If it's any consolation, you left some claw marks on me too."

"It's a tremendous consolation," she replied tartly.
"I thought it might be." Jareth brushed her hair back and tenderly kissed her neck. "Vixen." He tucked a cover around her and rolled from the bed. Snagging a glass of wine, he moved towards the open window.

Sarah crooked an arm beneath her head and unabashedly admired the view. Well, mostly unabashedly. She had no doubt that part of the swagger in his walk was due to her eyes on him. That made her blush slightly. The rest of his swagger was due to her continued presence in his bed. That made her... she wasn't sure yet. It was all too new and still surreal. Like a dream that would not end. A wicked dream, with a tight as...

When her eyes finally returned to his face, he was smirking at her over the rim of his glass.

Sarah wondered if she'd ever stop blushing.

Eying the wine, she yawned. "I'd kill for a coffee." She nearly dropped the fine-bone cup that appeared in her hand. "Hey! You could have warned me..." she trailed off at the look on his face. "You didn't do it." Sarah sat up abruptly, uncaring when the sheet dropped to her waist. Her eyes flicked from him to the offending cup and back again. "So... I did?" The coffee was a rich black; Sarah preferred hers with cream. It lightened accommodatingly.

"It would appear so."

Sarah couldn't decipher his expression. "Are you angry?" The possibility rankled. It also chilled.

He was beside her in a moment; faster than any mortal. He pulled the cup from Sarah's limp fingers and placed it on the night table, caging her hands within his. "Should I be?"

Sarah canted her head in confusion.

"Do you plan on trying to leave?" The words were quietly spoken, but his hands tightened on hers. Sarah's eyes went wide. "No."

Their grip relaxed. "Then never with you at my side."

His intensity strangely thrilled her. Whatever else he was, he was sincere in that moment. She didn't point out that he'd often been angry when she was by his side, and would likely be again.

Instead she watched, enchanted, as a crystal appeared in her other hand when called. Her eyebrows rose in a playful challenge.

Jareth's lips twitched. "I shall just have to get more creative," he warned.

Sarah rolled the orb, trying, and failing, to emulate some of his tricks. She looked up to see if he'd mock the feeble attempts, but his attention was on her exposed breasts. She snatched the sheet up. Jareth looked less than contrite.

Rolling the crystal once more, she gave up and let it float away. Jareth caught it and expertly danced it across his fingertips; a studiously bored look on his face.

"Show off." But she was enthralled by his skill. Probably always would be. Her tone turned serious. "How?"

"Consider it a side benefit, I suppose," he mused. "Your circumstances were... different than the rest." He pinched her chin. "You were ever anything but easy, Precious."

"Consider it a side benefit, I suppose," he mused. "Your circumstances were... different than the rest." He pinched her chin. "You were ever anything but easy, Precious."
A sobering thought wiped the answering smile from her face. "But the Labyrinth… before-"

"This is different." We are different. His eyes narrowed. "Though I imagine our fights just became much more complicated."

His tone was playful but Sarah was not blind. This had altered the balance of power. She could hear the deflection in his words; sense the calculations in his mind. Doubt filled hers.

"Will it change me?" Sarah stilled his wandering hand. "Will you… miss my humanity?" She didn't just mean the extra magic. There would be other changes. He'd once said he loved her brief spark of mortality. What would happen when that spark turned to an ember that would never fade? Would she herself miss it after the long years?

'Will you love me less' is what she did not ask.

Jareth studied her face. "I will love you for different things, Sarah."

Several heartbeats ticked before she cracked. She began to sob uncontrollably - great racking shudders that shook her frame. They were as surprising as they were violent. They weren't pretty tears either, leaving her face red and her nose dripping, and knowing that only made it worse. She cried for all the things given up and for the unknown she suddenly feared. She cried because stories always ended at happily ever after and she had no context for what came next.

She cried because her decision was still so newly made, and living with a decision is so much harder than just making one.

Jareth held her throughout. He said nothing, knowing for once, he was not the cause. When she was spent, her cheeks streaked and hot, he smoothed the damp hair back from her face and spoke softly, "I can't imagine you losing your humanity, Sarah. I can only see you adding to it." He was as surprised as she by the honesty in his words.

He did not ask if she regretted her decision - it was too soon. But he would not ask it later, either. They both knew her answer would change nothing. Jareth would never let her go twice, magic or no. Regret or otherwise.

And she would never ask him to.

Sarah clung to him, twining her arms around him and tangling her fingers into his wild hair. He stroked her back soothingly. They remained like that for a long time, until the light caresses changed from comfort to need, as they are wont to do.

He'd warned her not to expect him to be entirely honourable.

No more was spoken. Jareth showed her that he meant to keep her. Sarah showed him that she meant to stay.

Hours later, when night had fallen again, Sarah padded quietly from the bed and sought out the little red book from the tall shelves. She needed to see that there was more than a blank page. That it would not begin all over again. Flipping through it, she was relieved to see her return played out in black ink. But a moment later she slammed shut the book, a horrified expression on her face. Some things, she reasoned, should NOT be written down. She buried it behind a stack of books, wondering if she dared bog it later.

Eying the other volumes – tales of other Goblin Kings and Queens – the realization struck that they would be similarly filled. When she spotted a familiar blue one, her fingers itched daringly. She
forced her hands behind her back and padded back to bed. It would be too weird.

She'd probably get caught.

And not by Jareth.

A few days later, once the bedroom door reappeared, a reunion of sorts followed. Much goblin ale was consumed – an unreasonably potent drink, Sarah discovered - and largely responsible for what would later become known as the Great Scrabble War.

Sarah chose to believe that Jareth did not attend because he wanted to give her time alone with her friends. Jareth was emphatic that he did not come because he couldn't think of a 'more repulsive way to spend an afternoon'. In either event, Hoggle was happy.

"You came back, Sarah." His words were unusually sombre amidst the gaiety.

"You don't sound entirely happy at that, Hoggle."

"No, I am! But…" he faltered.

"But you think I'm trapped," she finished, taking a sip of brew to hide her smile.

Hoggle took a steadying breath, eying the distant castle nervously. "You don't know him like I does."

There were many ways to reply - several that would make Hoggle blush - but his words rang true. She didn't really know him. Not yet. "No," Sarah answered carefully, "I don't. But I will."

"I just worry…I mean-"

"It's not your fault, Hoggle. I came back because I wanted to."

"And if you hadn't, Jareth would have taken you back," Hoggle persisted bravely, "whatever he might say!"

Sarah smiled secretively. "I know."

Hoggle shook his head in wonder. Jareth didn't deserve her. "You love him. Even after all the things he's done. And he'll do it again, make no mistake!"

Sarah caught the tinge of jealousy in his voice. It was not romantic, but it was there all the same. "I do. And I know." She pulled him into a hug. "I love you too."

"Argh! Don't kiss me again!" Another furtive glance towards the castle.

Sarah laughed and released him.

"Jareth friend."

They both turned towards Ludo in surprise.

"Oh! What do you know, you big ugly beast," Hoggle blustered after a moment. "You think rocks
are friends!"

Sarah coughed into her drink, imagining Jareth's reaction to being counted amongst Ludo's beloved boulders.

"Are we playing or not?" Sir Didymus rapped his staff sharply. "Sir Ludo, My Lady?"

Sarah bobbed her head apologetically and returned to the board. She squeezed Hoggle's hand in reassurance on the way.

Curse him, but he was happy to have her back. He felt selfish to feel so, like he was somehow betraying her. Perhaps Jareth has been right. It was worth it just to have her, even if she was muddled in the head. He didn't know what Jareth had done to her, but he'd heard tell that the screams coming from the tower had been long lasting and plentiful. She seemed fine. Perhaps he'd mention it later.

"We are honoured to have you back, my Lady." Sir Didymus's brown eyes twinkled as he spoke. He'd never had any doubts she would find her way back - that it was meant to be - but then one didn't reach his advanced age by doubting. And if he thought anything of the castle gossip, it was only that he'd heard enough to know not to comment. He'd seen more than one Goblin Bride in his long life, and never had one been more right than the Lady Sarah. It was fitting that she'd been the only bride to ever willing deliver herself to a Goblin King.

"I'm pleased to be back," Sarah laughed again, thinking that perhaps more was gained than lost. "And I told you I owed you a game of Scrabble."

"Then prepare to do battle, My Lady!" Didymus' brows waggled as he lay down his first tiles. "En garde."

The cursed portrait made its reappearance not long after. Unexpectedly passing it in a hallway one day, Sarah nearly fell down the stairs in surprise. The thing might have been bogged for that transgression alone, had she not immediately noted its changes. Gone was the awe-struck girl, replaced instead with a rather regal looking young woman, gowned in a silver dress. Jareth's hand was still curled possessively around her waist, but Sarah looked an even match. The peach was still in her hand, but its positioning was such that she may have been offering it, so much as taking it.

The overall effect was very different and it was spared further attack. Sarah found it was oddly comforting to know the archaic thing had returned.

Jareth said he missed the poufy dress, all things considered, but that its replacement would always remind him of its 'unwrapping'. He conceded it was an improvement for that reason alone.

Sarah was mortified she'd ever related his father's words.

The first time Sarah disappeared was the first time they had a real fight. Time had given her a better handle on her abilities, but it had done nothing for her discretion.

Thinking of home one day, she was startled to appear in it seconds later. She would never get used to
the feeling - the magic that drained the very warmth from her marrow – but she was ecstatic to be in 
her childhood house. Even more so, because it appeared unchanged. Karen and her father treated her 
as though it was mildly surprising 'to see her home' but nothing out of the ordinary. They embraced 
her warmly and went on with their routine. The feeling was bittersweet. Toby, on the other hand, 
watched her strangely – his blue eyes probing. He kept his distance. Sarah was disconcerted to find 
him so much taller. In him, she marked the passage of time easily. Of things lost.

When she entered her old room, she saw what else had been lost. Everything that had been hers was 
gone; the room stripped bare and reformed into a generic guest room. She stood in silence for several 
minutes, trying to process the emotions that roiled in the pit of her stomach. It would have happened 
eventually, but she'd always imagined she'd have been part of the process. She felt erased.

The air crackled, the window banged open, and an owl swooped past her head, its talons grazing her 
scalp. Strong hands gripped her arms with punishing strength.

Sarah immediately struggled. "Stop!"

"You said you wouldn't leave." The words were hissed against her ear.

He loosened his hold so that she could turn and face him. "I didn't!"

"Don't lie!"

Sarah began struggling again in earnest. "I wasn't lying. This was an accident. I would have come 
back!"

"Yes. You would have," he promised in a dangerous tone. "Because I would have brought you 
back." He looked wild and formidable in his goblin armour.

Sarah could not help but think of Hoggle's caution. "I know. But I would have come back."

Jareth's face was still a mask of anger, but he released her arms. "I could still take him you know."

"Why?" She didn't need to ask who. "Why would you even say that?"

"He is already touched. It would be so very easy."

"But you said…" Sarah shook her head. "You wouldn't."

He laughed coldly. "Why would you ever doubt that I would?"

Her first instinct was to scream, but she checked it when she realised he was shaken. He looked 
haunted. She felt his fear, buried deep beneath the fury.

She forced calm into her voice. "I would have come back, Jareth. I chose you."

"And yet you still deny me." His words had lost their vitriol. It was more statement than accusation.

It took Sarah a moment to realize what he meant. She was bound to him and to her life below by the 
mark on her palm. But that was the only physical tie between them.

It was a subject they never discussed.

Sarah turned away to stare at the wall. It used to hold her posters; a shelf full of toys. "It's all different 
now."
She felt his warmth behind her. "I would have spared you this."

"At the cost of my freedom." She wasn't sure she wanted to come back.

Jareth's lips thinned. "If you want to visit again, tell me next time. The kingdom would be much more peaceful for it."

She nodded. It was a huge concession from one such as him. It was just not in his nature.

He held a hand out. "Come home, Sarah." His face held no more enmity; he looked almost remorseful. It was likely the only apology she'd get, at least in words.

Sarah took one last look at the room and then placed her hand in his.

When he wrapped his arms around her - his black cape enfolding her - it felt right.

Toby watched, unseen, from the doorway.

It was not their last fight. Sarah was not subdued and Etain had spoken true when she said she would turn the world upside down. Or try, at least.

"Why must you always defy me, Sarah?"

Startled, Sarah looked up from the book she was reading and then hastily tucked it into the arm of her chair. "What do you mean?"

Jareth canted his head impatiently. "Are you being purposefully obtuse?"

Sarah flicked an invisible speck of dust from her pants.

"You let another one go." The words were clipped, the tone glacial.

Sarah flicked another speck. "Ah. That."

"That," he mimicked. "Is that's all you have to say? Sarah, we've discussed this already. Stop fighting me on this."

"You should be used to it by now. Stop telling me not to fight you on it."

"You're being childish. You have responsibilities to this world. Act like a queen."

Sarah rose defensively. "Says the wise and powerful king."

"And what is that supposed to mean?" His tone went deceptively calm.

"I just don't think it's what… kings should do!"

"Oh?" Jareth looked coldly amused. "Pray tell me, what should kings do?"

There was no ready answer and she threw her hands up in frustration. "Kings kiss babies, not steal them!"

"Fine. I'll steal them, you can kiss them."
Sarah pulled a face, but Jareth continued unchecked. "I'm not just any king, Sarah. I'm the Goblin King. And may I point out that they are wished away. Often by spoiled little girls." He slid his arms around her waist; eyes darkening. "It's the little girls I steal."

Sarah pushed him away. "Be serious."

"I was serious. It's a gift. They should be honoured I am so… generous."

"Generous?" Sarah repeated incredulously. "Their lives are far from perfect here."

"And they are all perfect Above?"

"No, but-"

"But what?" He jeered. "Stop trying to redeem me, Sarah. You know what I am. I warned you not to ascribe mortal values to us. You chose this. If they are quick to throw lives away, I will be quick to take."

Her mind flew to Toby. "That's not fair."

"No? And what is fair?"

"Easy for you to say when you're the one taking."

Jareth's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Sometimes I don't need to take. Sometimes they're so very eager, they just willingly fall into my lap."

Sarah recoiled as though slapped. Jareth knew she'd make him pay for it later. He reached for her in apology, but she knocked his arm away and sat back down.

Jareth's mouth hardened into a thin line. "The Underground benefits from them and they benefit from it."

"There must be another way!"

"There isn't." His tone was absolute.

Sarah thought of Mrs. Whelan. Of Declan. Of the Fey fires slowly dying. Magic waning. But the note of finality rankled. "You're just not willing to bend on this!"

"I'm not willing?" he asked softly. Suddenly he was before her, his hands gripping the arm rests and his face rigid with anger. "I have bent more than any king before. Don't forget it."

And there it was. They were no longer only speaking of stolen mortals.

Sarah's face was ashen when she spoke. "You said you didn't resent my power."

"I don't… When you aren't using it to interfere with mine."

"You just want to control me!"

"Of course I do!" Jareth's lips curled. "If I could control you, we wouldn't keep having these… discussions."

"Do you ever get tired of getting your own way?"
"I'll let you know if I ever actually get it."

Irrational laughter surfaced. Their fight was such that any normal couple would have. Strip away the stolen mortals and magic, and it was as mundane as any common power struggle. But looking at Jareth's immortal face - the hostility that sparked in his mismatched eyes - Sarah swallowed the inclination. She doubted he'd appreciate it. And she was also wise enough to know that Jareth had not fully played his hand; that he practiced restraint when it came to her. She could see him warring now - fighting his inclination to subdue. She may have powers, but he held his back.

Jareth sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Do I have your promise not to interfere again?"

Sarah chewed her lip. It would be easier to just give in. She was partly responsible for him losing the Lia Fail's magic – a renewal of power. "No."

Jareth nodded curtly, as though he expected nothing else. "Then as I warned, I will get more creative. And I promise you won't like it." He turned to leave, but Sarah hastily gripped his arm.

"Wait. I… I just need to time to get used to all this. You have to understand that this is still all very… new." And wrong. She thought he would argue further, press his point, but she felt some of the rigidity leave his frame.

He slipped an arm around her waist and pressed a kiss to her neck. "I do. And I will give you your time. So long as you realize that on this I will not change. Try to restrain your natural inclination to defy me. We'll both be happier for it."

"I thought you liked it when I challenged you?" she asked playfully, her hand slipping into the open fold of his shirt.

"I do, so long as I win in the end." He ran his fingers through her silky hair. He loved her hair. He'd never tire of being able to touch her at will - of those sweet submissions. And he'd never tire of her hands on him. Her hands, her mouth… that she just parted ever so slightly… licking her lips…

"Sarah, are you trying distract me?"

Sarah smiled beatifically.

They would fight on this again, he had no doubt. On many things. But not all. His eyes flicked to her slim waist. "I should go. I have other matters to attend to." He pressed another kiss to her forehead, before turning away.

"Oh and, Sarah," he paused in the doorway, eyes glinting, "enjoy your book."

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It was later that Sarah noticed that Jareth disappeared on a regular basis. When he returned he was always silent, and always pensive. Once or twice she caught him looking at her with calculation in his eyes. As time passed, those looks often crossed to bleak. Haunted. He accepted her attempts at comfort with eager arms, but was in no way forthcoming on where he went.

Sarah eventually took matters into her own hands and followed him one evening.

He appeared in the Goblin Orchard - perhaps orchard was no longer the word. The trees were bare and grey. Dead. She had forgotten it even existed, though she'd once despised what it stood for. She
wasn't sure how to feel about it now. Its demise unsettled her.

Jareth had said that things were put to right, but not everything, apparently. He stood silently before the strange gnarled tree at its heart and pressed a hand against the trunk. Sarah got the impression he'd done the same many times before. When nothing happened, his face betrayed no mark of surprise. Not even shades of disappointment. If Jareth knew she watched, he gave no sign.

Moons waxed and waned and it was always the same. The fruit never bloomed. Jareth never mentioned it and Sarah never asked. Eventually his visits stopped altogether.

Sarah continued to haunt it, however. At first it stemmed from morbid curiosity; it was only later that the implication truly rattled – and even then she could only guess at the meaning, or its full ramifications.

On one such occasion, Sarah sat beneath the withered tree and watched the sun cross the sky, absentely running a finger over her ring thoughtfully. She pricked the tip on one of the stones, a tiny drop of blood welling. Sucking it into her mouth, she held her other hand up to the light. Perhaps it was merely the location, or just an active imagination, but the garnet setting had always reminded her of a cluster of seeds. Such a silly little bauble. She'd once sacrificed the ring in exchange for aid. Jareth had given it back to her.

Purely on a whim, she pulled it free from her finger and pressed it into the dry earth at the base of the tree. A leap of faith, Etain had once advised.

She felt the change before she saw it. The ground thrummed, and for half a second she wondered if she was going to be swallowed up again. But she watched in astonishment as lush green began to spread beneath her. Green as the fields of Ireland. Green as Tara. Scrambling to her feet, coils of gold wrapped their way up the trunk, twisting and knotting until they reached the outermost branches. They bloomed into leaves at first, and then into buds of every sort imaginable. It began to spread to the other trees, growing like wildfire. Consuming the grey with gold.

Sarah was on the point of rushing back to the castle when she felt a familiar presence behind her. Jareth observed silently, his eyes on the transformation around him.

"I don't know what I did," Sarah blurted.

Jareth turned, his look considering. "An old woman once told me that wives were wiser than their husbands. She may have been correct."

Sarah blinked and then nodded numbly, not fully understanding but recognizing that she had done something right. Possibly momentous.

The green and gold continued until Jareth and Sarah were by far the dullest part of the orchard. At some point he'd joined her, silently threading his fingers through hers. She tilted her head up to watch him, wondering if the best gifts were the ones you didn't know you'd given. She was prosaic enough to realize what she'd done, and by extension what she was condoning, but the look of wonder on his face was enough. She'd deal with the other later. She'd never been much of a hero either, she reasoned. There'd been a vein of villain in her long before she'd regularly shared a bed with one.

Jareth released her hand and moved to the tree. Removing his gloves, he touched his palm to the trunk. The expression on his face was breathtaking. The look he directed towards her a moment later made her toes curl.

She smiled. He closed the distance between them and cupped her face reverently. He kissed her
lightly, his mouth surprisingly gentle. Sarah melted at his touch and parted her lips in invitation.

When he pulled back, his eyes were hooded. She looked at him in confusion but he moved away. He settled himself against the tree, arms folded languidly. A dangerous glint sparked in his eyes.

"Take off your dress, Sarah."

She started at the softly-spoken works. "What?"

"Take off your dress." He repeated.

"But…” Sarah was at a loss.

A half smile curling his lips. "For me. I ask for so little."

His words and his demeanour made her laugh nervously, "Why?"

"Because I want to finish what we once started."

"Here?" Sarah gestured around herself. "Now?"

Jareth nodded slowly.

There was no reason to be shy. She had nothing he had not seen – and explored thoroughly – before, but she was. Her embarrassment turned defensive.

"Why? You could just use magic." She wasn't sure if it was meant to be a suggestion or a plea.

"I could. But I want you to do it. Undress for me." His voice softened. "Please."

He countered with a challenge.

Sarah craved him - was pretty sure he'd become an addiction she could never break; a hunger she could never sate. There was little she would not give him if asked. And she was certain he knew it. That he counted on it. She straightened her spine. Her hands betrayed her only once as they rose to the front of her gown. Slowly, she pulled the laces loose, until the bodice gaped widely, hanging from her shoulders. With a slight roll of them, it slid down her body and pooled at her feet. She smiled beneath her lashes.

Jareth's jaw ticked when her hands dropped to her corset. Emboldened by his expression, she unhurriedly popped each hook free until the corset parted and joined her dress in the long grass. The thin muslin under slip ended at her knees and was secured by two simple ties on her shoulders. Sarah took a deep breath and smoothed hands down her liberated torso – careful to brush across her breasts. If she took a few liberties, they did not go unnoticed.

Jareth's breathing hitched.

Sarah raised a hand to her left shoulder, a coy look on her face as she toyed with the knot, before undoing it. The strap dropped down, revealing a full, rose-tipped breast.

Jareth still made no move, but she could feel the coiled tension in the air; see the restraint in his lean frame.

Hand trembling slightly, she raised it to her right shoulder and repeated the motion. The shift slipped away completely, leaving her in nothing but short pantalets. She flicked her long hair over shoulders, arching just a little as she did.
Sarah thought she heard a growl.

Her hands dropped to her waist and pulled the drawstring, pausing for a moment before letting the ties slide through the fingers teasingly. The last defence fell.

The sun was warm against her skin, but the slight breeze left goose bumps in its wake. His eyes roamed freely across her bare flesh. Sarah felt her nipples tighten in response. She raised her hands to them, easing the ache.

"Come here." The words were pitched low and softly spoken; but the command was implicit.

Sarah stopped a handsbreadth away from him. She didn't feel playful anymore. She should have felt vulnerable to be so bare before him, while he remained clothed, but it was strangely wicked. Empowering and terrifying. Biting back the fear, she boldly met his eyes.

His hands rose to her temples and lightly traced the contour of her face, smoothing across her lips – dipping between for just a moment. Sliding down her throat and across the breadth of her shoulders, they moved forward and palmed her breasts, his thumbs brushing across her nipples teasingly. Sarah's lids fluttered shut. She swallowed a moan of protest when they continued downwards, smoothing over her ribs, and pausing again to dip into her navel, before stopping on her hips. A hand ghosted across the curls between her thighs and she trembled.

"I've dreamed about you like this," he whispered.

Sarah's eyes met his. "Yours," she reminded him.

He lowered her backwards into the grass. For a moment, he merely looked at her, memorizing the sight of her laid bare in the orchard, the sun painting patterns across her smooth skin. And then he bent his mouth to her neck, teeth grazing her throat hungrily.

"Your mine, Sarah."

"Yours." Sarah wrapped her arms around his shoulders and pulled him down, sighing when she felt his familiar weight settle over her. He worked a knee between her thighs. The feel of leather against her overly sensitive skin was strangely erotic. He caught at her lips - bruising them - before he claimed her mouth fully, tongue delving deeply.

Sarah met his kiss with equal fervour, losing herself in his familiar taste; his smell beguiling. She tugged his shirt free of his pants and explored the planes of his back and his chest, using her nails to draw a visceral hiss. In punishment, he bent his head to her breasts, worrying the tender peaks between his teeth. Sarah's eyes screwed shut at the sweet pain. A moment later she felt liquid hit the abused skin. Jareth had crushed a ripe peach above her, allowing the juices to drip freely. Before she could protest, he dropped his head back to her breasts, licking and sucking the golden pap from her flesh. Sarah thought she would scream.

Jareth stifled the sound with his mouth, offering her a taste of the forbidden fruit. Her head swam. His hands stroked down her body, slipping between them to press against her centre. He groaned at her wetness; at the eager parting of her thighs. His deft fingers renewed his claim, expertly easing every ache, before renewing them again. They slid within her, curling, before withdrawing cruelly. He licked his fingers clean. He replaced his fingers with his mouth – using his tongue to tease taste.

Sarah arched against him, her body taut and glistening. "Please," she begged.

Jareth swore. With a quick adjustment he freed his length from his pants. When Sarah reached for him, he threaded his fingers through hers and forced her hands above her head, inexorably pressing
them down into the earth.

She huffed in protest, but was silenced when he drove into her with one hard thrust.

The unexpected sharpness made Sarah freeze. Jareth used that to his advantage and set a maddening rhythm, rocking into her slowly and deeply before withdrawing almost fully. The ground rasped against her back and his clothing brushed her bare skin, the dual friction heightening every sensation. The look on his face as he sheathed himself in her welcoming heat completely disarmed her. In that moment she would have given him anything he asked.

Jareth smiled; fire in his eyes.

Sarah hooked her legs around his hips, simultaneously trying to regain control and draw him even deeper. Her body bowed beneath his. Jareth's breathing turned ragged and his thrusts more wild. Releasing her hands, he gripped her hips, raising them to sharpen the angle. Sarah's head fell back, her dark hair weaving into the grass. More juice fell. His mouth sought her breasts again, his teeth rough.

"Oh… please…" Sarah wasn't sure what she was asking for, but a moment later she found it. Lights danced behind her lids as her core tightened and fluttered around him. Jareth let go and followed with a hoarse yell, his arms banding around her possessively. He murmured tender words against her damp skin as he collapsed atop her, his body shuddering.

After a moment he pulled back slightly and kissed each breast lightly, before doing the same to her lips. She could still taste herself on him.

They lay entwined in the grass and lazily watched the sun begin its slow descent. His hands traced patterns on her back.

Later, Jareth dressed an unresisting Sarah in his shirt. It still smelled of him. She pulled grass from her tangled hair. "I must look ridiculous."

"You look like a Goblin Queen. Powerful and dangerous," his eyes glinted, "and properly ravaged by a Goblin King."

Sarah threw a shoe at him. Jareth easily ducked it.

"But not sated?" He arched a brow.

Seeing the renewed hunger in his face, Sarah held her hands up in mock surrender. He tugged her forward by her wrists and cupped the back of her neck.

He slowly ran a knuckle down her front, twisting his hand around to splay across her stomach. The touch was hot and possessive.

The darkly satisfied smile that curved his lips made Sarah stiffen. Her eyes dropped to his hand then back to his face, only to widen at the fierce look on it.

"Yes," her breathed.

A shocked look crossed her own; her cheeks paling before suffusing with colour.

And then Sarah's hand joined his, their fingers lacing tightly across her abdomen.

…Fruit ripens, seasons change and new seeds are planted…
Chapter End Notes

Bet you all forgot about the portrait, eh?

The baby stealing vs. baby kissing argument was a nod to Pika-la-Cynique's web comic "The Girls Next Door." In #144 Jareth makes a comment about 'leaving the baby kissing to Sarah.' If you have not read her comic – go do it now! You'll find it on Deviant Art

I purposefully left the passage of time ambiguous in this chapter. I would suppose Sarah and Jareth would like to spend sometime together before goblin babes (and they certainly have the luxury). You may imagine it however long (or short) you would like. What you read was snippets of their life together. How that time correlates to the passage of time Above is equally ambiguous. Canon doesn't specify so I've 'decided' time fluctuates sporadically (because there is nothing logical about the magic of the Underground afterall).
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: This marks the end of playtime. I have to put the Labyrinth characters back in their boxes since they were never mine and never will be. I didn't make any profit from playing with them anyway.

AN: This is light-hearted over all. Just snippets bordering on ridiculous, sometimes fluffy, sometimes smutty, sometimes maudlin. It serves only as an epilogue, with no real plot. Sort of an overview of their lives together.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Part XXXVIII - Epilogue

The Owl and the Pussy-cat went to sea
In a beautiful pea-green boat,
They took some honey, and plenty of money,
Wrapped up in a five-pound note.

They dined on mince, and slices of quince,
Which they ate with a runcible spoon;
And hand in hand, on the edge of the sand,
They danced by the light of the moon,
The moon,
The moon,
They danced by the light of the moon.

The Owl and the Pussy-Cat (excerpt) ~ Edward Lear

"What is that doing on the bed?"
Sarah glanced over her shoulder. "It's an afghan. I know it's hideous, but it reminds me of home. My - old - home," she amended with a half smile.

"Yes, it is hideous, but I was referring to the," Jareth's lips curled, "thing atop it."

The thing in question hissed by way of response.

"Oh. Cute, isn't it? They're really not so bad when you're not helpless and vulnerable. And after a few baths," she added glibly. Sarah's eyes were still trained on the window or she would have seen the apoplectic look directed at her back.

"Only you would try and make a pet of" - the Cravling hissed again - "that."
Sarah turned and scooped the creature up into her arms, perching its bulk on her rounded belly.
"Mmhmm, but it's quite harmless now. They've learned they lesson." She scratched the creature under its chin. "Haven't you?" Her attention returned to Jareth. "Magic may have helped. I've decided to try and domesticate them. Seems to be working."

The look it shot him said it begged to differ. Jareth's lips thinned in distaste.

"Is this some sort of human thing? Did I do something to upset you and this is your revenge?" He twined his arms around her shoulders. A deftly placed elbow knocked the filthy creature from her arms. "Because perhaps I should just offer my surrender now. You are a formidable enemy, and one never to be taken lightly." The words rumbled against her neck, his lips teasing over her hyper-sensitive skin in a way that never failed to make her toes curl.

Sarah pulled back. "Is that a knock at my size?"

Jareth stilled immediately, only relaxing again when he spied the laughter in her eyes. His hands dipped to her curved stomach, stroking lightly.

"And risk your wrath? Hardly. As it is I'm not convinced that," he glanced at the bristling ball of fur on the floor, "creature isn't an attempt at regicide."

Sarah sniffed imperiously. "In that case it wouldn't just be an attempt."

"Consider me duly warned." He took her hand in his. "Let me draw you a bath."

"I had one this morning," Sarah protested, though she allowed herself be led. "Are you implying that I need another one?"

"Not at all," Jareth replied with a wide grin, kicking open the door with his boot. "I just want to watch you splash around naked. No bubbles this time."

"You're a complete degenerate."

"Without a doubt. I'm a slave to your every whim. You very much enjoy warm baths and I very much enjoy looking at you without any clothes on. Especially wet. It seems the fault entirely lies with you." His hands reached for the ties on her shirt. "And Sarah," he leaned in, brushing his nose along brow, "you do smell of feline."

"Just for that I am using extra bubbles!"

After some 'persuasion' the Cravling did not make a re-appearance in the bedroom. It was given free reign of the castle, much to the displeasure of the resident fowl, but never again the highest tower.

Small concessions, she reasoned, were easier to make than large ones. And far easier to live with.

As her pregnancy progressed, Sarah continued to visit the Orchard - almost as though it had become a holy rite. She was still unsure of her feelings towards it, and of her involvement in its resurrection. Some days it left an ashen taste in her mouth. Other days she felt like a saviour. The growing life within her did little to help her unease. The love she felt for her child was already overwhelmingly fierce – but she could not shake the sensation that she had become a cog in the wheel when she could have become its destruction.
She had sown the seed. Not a goblin king.

And powerful things always had such small beginnings.

The child stirred within her, as though echoing her thoughts. She smiled. She’d been nervous at first; unsure as any normal woman. She’d insisted on visiting a human doctor despite Jareth’s vehement protests. And her family to tell them the news. They had been happy in their dazed way. Only Toby had shown uncanny interest – his eyes less veiled than those of her parents. It was the price she had paid.

As the weeks progressed, her visits to the doctor stopped altogether. There was a connection, heightened by magic no doubt, that no machine could ever reproduce. She could feel her son grow within her. She could feel his strength – the tiny spark of his life as he flourished daily. It lent her a strange sort of confidence.

Her eyes returned to the fruit. And reminded her of who he would one day become.

The babe kicked again just as arms curled around her from behind, hands splaying across her distended belly possessively. Without turning, Sarah knew the expression Jareth wore. She had come to recognize these moods; the need to clutch and hold. Ensnare. Jareth had come a long way in accepting Sarah’s independence - her hard won powers. But it was still in his nature to trap and keep; to bind what was his. And that need was always there – heightened if anything - by her unique position. It was difficult not to test his limits from time to time. To see how long it took before he snapped. It was sometimes thrilling, she reflected, when he lost control. But not today. Today she allowed it.

"Villain," she whispered, affection numbing the sting.

Jareth’s lips curled against her hair. She knew his eyes were on the tree, his hands resting on her abdomen, even as she guessed the direction of his thoughts.

They fell into an easy silence, remaining in the warm orchard until sunset. Sarah disengaged herself to join her friends for their weekly supper. Sir Didymus grew more ecstatic about her pregnancy each time; Ludo was likewise thrilled. She’d been given more rocks as presents for the baby than she knew what to do with. Only Hoggle had been reticent to openly show joy, still harbouring his doubt. He did, however, express a fervent desire the baby would take after his mother for a change, and not be like "Him". Sarah considered that a great concession.

Later that night, as she prepared for bed, Jareth wordlessly parted the fabric of her dressing gown, prying the fabric from her stiff fingers when she tried to stop him. She wore nothing beneath. His mood had not passed. Eyes on her face, he knelt at her feet, his hands coming to rest on her swollen stomach. Leaning forward he kissed her navel. His touch was soft and reverent and so gentle that it made Sarah’s breath catch. Her hands came to rest over his.

"What a Goblin King you shall make," he breathed gruffly. "The most powerful yet, I’ve no doubt."

A smile. "And perhaps the noblest?"

"From you and I?" Jareth snorted softly. "I would not count on it."

"True," Sarah laughed lightly. "And yet you would think that with so many mortal mothers in the line, Goblin Kings would have a little more…er, humanity in them by now."

"No doubt they do. You’re just supposing that all the 'bad' comes from us. I'm rather insulted really. Any faults our son will have will be thanks to your side of the family."
"Mmmhmm. Because you're all without fault. You and your father are such generous, patient and generally all 'round nice guys."

"I'm glad you agree." He smiled lazily. "Though that does make us sound awfully bland."

Sarah shook her head. "You are deliberately obtuse."

He stood, but kept his warm hands on her stomach. "While you are delightfully rounded. Not to mention delightfully naked." He immediately snatched a kiss, muffling her sound of outrage. "And all mine." His fingers trailed down further after a moment, eliciting a hiss of pleasure mingled with annoyance.

Sarah slapped his hands away, backing him into the bed at the same time. She took some satisfaction in his less than graceful sprawl.

"Oh, no," she admonished, as she followed him onto the bed, losing the dressing gown in the process. "Mine, mine, mine," she mocked. "We are doing this my way tonight."

At his bemused expression, she smiled coyly and slipped her cool hands into his pants. "Ask me to stop. Otherwise I won't." Her expression said it wouldn't matter anyway.

Jareth had no intention of asking anything so foolish. In fact, words failed him completely. He did manage a very guttural groan, his hands fisting into the sheets when she slapped them away from her body again.

She arched a brow even as she used her nails. "Really, Jareth. Think of the poor goblins."

He couldn't stop a small laugh at that. It turned into a hiss on the same breath as she freed him from his pants.

Before he could react, she slid herself down onto his length in one smooth movement, arching like a cat. She brought his hands to her heavy breasts, holding them there as she began to rock against him.

Tendrils of magic licked along her skin.

Her body was so hyper-sensitized that it was not long before she was arching her back in pleasure. Jareth thought she had never looked so beautiful – her skin moist and glowing, her expression lost to pure sensation.

When she caught her breath, she let him tug her down for a kiss. "Don't worry, I haven't forgotten about you," she whispered against his lips, before deepening the kiss.

She skimmed her nails down his chest, teasing his nipples, and began moving again - slowly at first and then faster. Jareth's hands dropped to her hips in encouragement; his attention rapt on her bold face, on the rhythmic movement of her breasts. The feel of her against him.

It soon sent him over the edge and his body tensed in release. Sarah bent to his ear, catching his lobe in her sharp teeth. "Mine," she whispered.

On the next full moon, the baby came. Before the first hint of pain, Sarah knew it would be that night. At first, she'd wanted to go to a hospital – mortal habits die hard – but with the first throb came
a measure of peace; the sense that all would be well. Two practiced Fey assisted.

It the end it was not an easy labour, magic aside. Jareth was deathly pale by the end of it; Sarah exhausted. But when the clock struck thirteen, magic sparked in the air and their son gave his first plaintive cry.

Sarah smoothed his face with a clean cloth, marvelling at his perfect features. Tears streamed down her face. Jareth's were glossy, though he would deny it later.

"He's so perfect. And he's mine," she breathed. She caught Jareth's hand. "Ours."

Jareth bent and pressed a kiss to her temple and then to his son's. "Yes." The baby's lids fluttered open and Jareth's breath caught. "He has your eyes."

He dismissed the attendants once Sarah was settled and comfortable, their son nursing at her breast. Jareth sank into the chair next to them, legs stretched, with vest unbuttoned and shirt sleeves still rolled up. Resting his head on one fist, he watched them in wonder. Marvelling at what fate had given him. At what he'd won and lost and won again.

When the baby was sated Jareth pulled him from Sarah's lax arms, smoothing the hair back from her face even as she drifted to sleep. He adjusted the covers around her and dimmed the lights.

Distantly he could the sounds of celebrations. The castle would no doubt be a disaster in the morning, he mused with a smile. They'd do something official later, but tonight he would not leave their side. Not even to witness the fire that would burn on Tara. Tonight was for his son. And for Sarah.

Hours later when Sarah awoke, it was to the sound of Jareth's voice. The fire had gone low in the grate, casting the room into shadow. Jareth sat in the chair beside it, his arms cradling their son. He was crooning a low lullaby. Without missing a note, he caught her eyes. Sarah's breath hitched at the look on his face. Love like she'd never seen before – a reverent, indefinable sort that was part possessive, but ran so much deeper and so much purer. It tugged at her heart, making her want to weep. She smiled instead and lay awhile watching them. She eventually fell asleep again listening to the logs crackle and Jareth sing to their child.

The named him Oran – Gaelic for song.

The celebrations lasted for days, perhaps weeks. Sarah had lost count. Goblin ale flowed freely. Fey lords and ladies—flawless in their splendor—from the surrounding lands paid their respects. Mrs. Gannon presented them with a beautifully woven blanket of Celtic design. She did her best to hide the smug look of 'I told her so' but Sarah spied it simmering harmlessly right below the surface.

The birth of their child was not only a joyous occasion, it was also a covenant. A renewel of the magic that flowed through everything in the Underground and inherently joined all life together. The cycle would continue unbroken. Sarah could feel it in the thrum of the crowd; in the beat of Oran's heart. In the cord that bound her to Jareth and he to her.

He was a child now, but one day he would be a King.

She clutched him to her tighter.
Sarah pushed open the throne door quietly. The Goblin King sat with their young green-eyed son perched on his knee. He was in the midst of telling a dramatic story. Gurgles and giggles suggested his success. She smiled at the picture they presented.

When she heard the part about the "spoiled, greedy girl that destroyed the city in order to overthrow the valiant and just Goblin King", she knew she'd have to disabuse her child of those falsehoods later, but for now she'd leave them their moment.

Goblins, by nature, were highly destructive creatures, but easily managed. Goblin princes were far worse. As Oran grew, so too did his mischievous nature. Silence was generally met with suspicion – justifiably so.

"What is in your pocket?"

Both Oran and Hoggle turned, twin looks of guilt on their face. The toddler recovered first.

"Nuffin', mummy."

"Oh?" Sarah's brow arched. "And why does 'nothing' appear to be squirming?"

Hoggle coughed. Oran endeavoured to affect a look of cherubic innocence.

"Now, please."

Scowling, the boy produced a wriggling, rather rumpled looking fairy in his hand.

"Do I want to know why you have a fairy in your pocket?"

"It's not in my pocket, mummy. It's in my hand."

"Oran!"

"Best fess up, lad," Hoggle murmured, his eyes trained on his shoes.

"'Cause I was going to put it in daddy's boots."

Sarah's lips twitched. Hoggle coughed again, although it sounded like a suppressed snort.

"Oh. I see," she said after a minute. "Carry on. Be careful. They bite."

Oran grinned.

Riven's words had not gone unheeded. Sarah began putting pen to paper. There had been no real intent at first; she'd just started writing – surprised as the words flew so readily from her hand. She'd started writing for Oran – harmless adventure stories to interest a child. Before she knew it, she was
writing tales of goblins and Fey; of lords and hapless mortals… of owls and water horses. Of ravens. Tales of loss and regret and those of pure joy. Tales to tempt mortals… to renew magic.

Her eyes flew to the bookshelves – to the endless books - as realization struck. She would one day begin a tale for Oran… one that fate would finish.

Sarah put the pen down with an unsteady hand.

Jareth later found them both in the garden. Sarah was watching their son play from a stone bench. He smiled until he noticed the look on her face. He joined her silently.

Eyes still on the boy, she said, "He will be King some day."

Jareth hesitated, unsure whether or not it was a question. "Yes."

"And he will need a bride."

He stiffened. "Eventually… yes."

Sarah nodded slowly. "And I will wear a blue cloak and seal some girl's fate with fire and blood. Like your mother did for me."

He wanted to reply that she had ultimately sealed her own fate, but thought better of it. "You'll play your part," he answered carefully.

Sarah lapsed into silence, but her frame remained rigid. After several minutes, he touched her hand lightly. She started.

"So it just continues on and on-"

"We've discussed this, Sarah."

"Yes, about us." Sarah gestured at the laughing child. "Not about him."

"You had to know what would happen. What will happen."

"I did… but not really," she floundered angrily. "Now it's… real."

"He's a child. It will be a lifetime before his time will come."

Oran paused, catching his parents' interest on him. He grinned devilishly; silvery hair wild and green eyes shining. He looked like a mischievous sprite. Sarah pictured him grown – tall and imposing, dressed in goblin armour. Her heart sped.

Noticing her discomfort, Jareth waved the boy on. "What is really bothering you, Sarah? That he will eventually grow up or that he will follow the same path as his father? And all the kings before. That you will be part of it? Even now, will you mind that much?"

Sarah exploded. "What bothers me is that I won't mind! I would do anything to make him happy."

Her hands shook. "And that makes me the worst sort of hypocrite. I'd let some child be taken from her family to make MINE happy."

Jareth was surprised by her outburst and he took a long moment to mull her words over. It was not something he'd ever really discussed with his own mother. She'd never openly questioned their traditions; had even counselled him when needed. She'd proved to be as devious as any Goblin King. But perhaps she had once felt the same.
"And what if she comes willingly?" Sarah looked confused at his question. "Would you be a hypocrite then?"

"I… no, I suppose not. It's hardly likely though."

"Perhaps not," he shot her a sidelong glance, "but you did."

Her lips twitched. "Willing is perhaps relative."

"Would you deny him his birth right?" He brushed his knuckles along her jaw. "His happiness?"

She caught his hand. "I just hope he doesn't choose some twit with no backbone, who doesn't know how to hold her own. Not if he has your ego. Then again," she continued, missing Jareth's wry look of amusement, "he could end up with a stubborn fool who will make his life a living hell…" she trailed off when she realized what she was saying. "God! What is wrong with me?"

"Nothing at all. You're thinking like the mother of a Goblin King. I told you the mortal half was responsible for the so-called 'faults'. Stubborn fool was it?"

Sarah punched him in the arm.

"You are not helping your point, Precious."

Sarah's eyes returned to her son. Jareth's remained on her.

"Tell me you're happy."

"You know that I am," she answered automatically.

"Humour me."

Something in his voice made her turn to face him. "I would change nothing." She cupped his cheek. "I beat you, remember? You're mine to do with as I'd like."

He grinned against her hand. "I don't quite remember it that way, but I'll play along if you promise not to be gentle."

"I swear."

He kissed her deeply, with the same fervour as their first. It would always be that way between them. They only pulled apart when they'd had a surfeit of Oran's cries of 'ew'.

Sarah knew she would one day play her part, but she was by no means helpless.

Both Sarah and Jareth felt the pull in the darkness that night. Sarah felt it with confusion; Jareth with disbelief. They answered nonetheless. A fire burned on Tara. A familiar robed figure by the Lia Fail, ready to pronounce a High King on Tara. The old words were spoken. He'd failed but had proven himself in the end. Perhaps more so than any other. The ancient stone's roar rent the air. Sarah had once found the archaic ritual brutal and damning. Now she watched in awe – fierce pride on her face. It was her victory too. Magic suffused the air, drowning out the cheers of the crowd – of the covenant renewed.

Jareth pulled her to him, looking stark and imposing in his armour. His skin burned against hers, fire reflected in his eyes.

"Thank you," he whispered against her ear.
Soon after she was accosted by Mrs. Whelan. She had the same smug glint in her eye as her doppelganger. Declan, more wizened, humbly presented her with a carving of a Raven, offering his heartfelt congratulations. His hands shook but the twinkle in his eyes had not dimmed.

When they withdrew, Etain approached.

"My role is finished it would appear." She canted her head. "The mantle is now yours."

"This was… surprising."

"Was it really?" Etain asked. "I said you'd turn the world upside down. Throw all their rules out the window. Well done."

Sarah caught Etain's hand. "I understand… better now, despite how I feel. I'm happy you could do this for him. That you and he were not robbed of this bond."

"As am I." Etain's smile turned coy. "But I was not speaking of this rite." She twisted Sarah's hand so that it lay against her own abdomen. "Upside. Down."

Sarah's eyes flickered in realization. "No…"

"Yes, Sarah."

As far back as memory, Goblin Queens had only ever birthed a sole heir. It was assumed that magic played its part, and considering the relationship between the Labyrinth and its monarch, it was understood that such power could not be divided. Should not be divided.

But Sarah had already once divided it… only to reunite it. They should have known it would be forever changed.

Jareth reeled at the discovery. He spent hours pouring over books, even more consulting with all the wise minds he could find. The news rocked the kingdom just as greatly. Many whispered that two heirs would split the kingdom and sever the line, despite the renewed favour of the Lia Fail. Power should never be torn. The worst whispered that the queen must have had a lover. Jareth put those rumours to bed with characteristic viciousness. They were not felt it promised wondrous change. That great fortune would come. That the magic would, for the first time in ages, overflow.

For her part, Sarah fluctuated between worry and joy, buoyed by the connection to the spark within her. And Jareth's reassurance that all would be well – that he was thrilled. She wasn't sure he even believed his own words but she was glad he offered them.

As though the fates had a sense of humour, the child was a girl. To say it was a first was a gross understatement. Jareth could only stare wide-eyed and silent as he cradled his dark-haired daughter in his arms. Sarah watched him warily, her pains and fatigue forgot. "She's…"

"Beautiful. She's," Jareth swallowed awkwardly, "beautiful." He did not smile.

"She is, isn't she?" Sarah's eyes glossed. "But… what is she?"

Jareth's brow furrowed.

"She is our daughter, Jareth. A daughter. But what place does she have here? What does this mean?"
Jareth still hadn’t smiled, nor did he acknowledge her question. Sarah could not help but compare it to the birth of their son; the surfeit of joy that had been in his face; in his gait. Its lack made her both sad and incredibly angry, and she was on the point of demanding he give her the baby and leave them both.

When a tiny hand closed reflexively around his finger Jareth lips twitched and then bowed. He turned so she could see and Sarah bit back her words.

"I do not know what it means," he said after another hesitation. "I only know that she is mine. She is a gift. A precious one."

Sarah smiled, wincing as she sat up. "She is ours. And you did not answer my question."

"Only because I do not know." He carefully eased beside Sarah on the bed. "I only know that she will fiercely carve her way. And all will tremble in her wake," he laughed. "Just like her mother."

"I will take that as the compliment you did not mean it to be. " Her brow furrowed suspiciously. "You aren't… upset?"

"I will not take that as the insult you meant it to be. I am… overwhelmed. I should have expected it, I suppose. You were ever anything but normal. But how could I be upset?" He swallowed again. "I am in awe. She is…unique. One of a kind."

"And if some Fey lord comes to steal 'our one of a kind' away?"

Jareth's eyes darkened. His fingers curled, eliciting a sound of discomfort from his daughter. He immediately relaxed his hold apologetically, his expression lightning. "If anything, I imagine she will do the stealing." He looked at Sarah. "It's in her blood. On both sides."

The baby gripped his finger again, tiny wrinkled fingers clutching. "And if a man were to be so daring and foolish, I'd wish him good luck. He would most certainly need it."

Sarah smiled at his hypocrisy. Some things were not so different from above.

Oran was absolutely thrilled with his sister and grew to adore her. The pair would one day move the stars, their father sagely predicted.

If, somewhere along the way, a certain young man with a penchant for glam rock and stripes made his way to Ireland, and just happened to board with a lively little landlady in Dun Laoghaire, only to stumble upon a very ancient Hill – well that's a rabbit hole for another story.

The days would stretch on, filled with fierce love and moonlit dances, until the cycle began anew.

Goblin traditions must not be broken…

The Hill still waits, fires burning.
Fruit still ripens, juices curing.
For the queen has power,
Two babes in the tower.
And the High King smiles,
Having passed his trials.
Their tale is told, their story writ,
But that is not the end of it.
For it will all play out again,
Once the magic begins to wane.
Until that time, when the fruit starts turning,
The Hill will wait, with fires burning.

Oh, the Hill will wait, with fires burning.

An Deireadh

"In any light, in any weather, any smallest piece of Ireland, hideous or ordinary or lovely, looks like only Ireland, and like nothing else at all. For the real beauty of Ireland is much more than skin-deep. And it can hide itself. And I truly think that Ireland at its best is still a secret for connoisseurs."

Kate O'Brien, My Ireland

Chapter End Notes

It might have been a stretch that Sarah would try and domesticate the Cravlings, but I couldn't get that scene out of my head. So deal with it. She had a momentary lapse in judgment. Hormones, whatever…

"And powerful things always had such small beginnings" – Is a play on the line from the movie Prometheus (David was such a great character).

Oran is a real name and does in fact mean song (in slang form) - but it's Scottish Gaelic, not Irish.

Lia Fail – Stone of Destiny

I have mixed feelings towards this whole chapter/ epilogue. The true end of the story was last chapter.

The poem at the close is my own clumsy attempt at poetry/ traditional Irish ballad.

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