

## Chapter 1 ~ The Curse

The snow was swirling through the darkened sky, drifting across the stone bridge. The old woman made her way passed the guards, ignoring their stares as she made her way to the large oaken doors of the castle. Knocking on the heavy doors, she waited. When the servant opened the door, she requested in a frail voice, "The King... prithee may I have audience with the King?"

"Forgive me, Crone. I shall ask." The servant taking pity on the poor woman left the door ajar to provide warmth in the growing chill while he ran to request the presence of the King. "Sire! Sire, there is an old woman at the door requesting to speak with you!"

"What does she want on a night such as this?" The vain and spoiled Fae monarch looked down from his throne tiredly.

"She refused to tell me, my lord. She would only speak with you."

"Very well," he grumbled haughtily as he rose. Going to the door, he growled at the servant. "You let the chill into the castle you fool!" Kicking the servant in the behind, he shoved the man away. "Get to the kitchens and stoke the fires!" Turning to the old woman, he tried to hide his sneer of disgust at her haggard appearance. "What do you want here, old woman?"

"Kindly King, I am but a poor old woman with nowhere to sleep in this cold, cold storm. Please allow me to stay in the warmth of your kitchens until the storm passes. I will repay your kindness."

The King scoffed at her words. "If you are so poor old woman as to have to come begging to your King for a place by his fires, how then can you repay me? Be off with you! I do not suffer beggars free rides!"

"Beware, your Majesty. Kindness begets kindness... cruelty begets cruelty. All I ask is a place beside your fires for the night."

"Be gone old woman!"

The haggard appearance melted away to reveal a beautiful enchantress.

The King fell to his knees before her. "Forgive me, my Lady! Had I but known!"

The enchantress had seen into the King's heart, however, and seen not an ounce of compassion. "You are not a just King among the Fae, my lord. I lay this curse upon your castle, your lands, and all that reside therein. Jareth... King of the Fair Lands... until such time as you learn to love another and be loved in return these lands shall be as twisted and cruel as your heart. Your castle shall lie at the center of a labyrinth so twisted and deadly that none shall navigate it. You shall be tasked with taking unwanted wished away children and finding them homes where they will be loved and safe."

"You can stay! Please give me another chance, I beg of you!"

"What's said is said! Jareth, Goblin King!" With the wave of her hand she transformed his kingdom and subjects. "You have until your 2000<sup>th</sup> year to fall in love and be loved in return." She produced a rose in her nimble fingertips. "This rose will bloom until you either reach the right age or until you break the curse. Live well." Twisting her wrist, she disappeared.

## Chapter 2 ~ Beauty

Sarah was a young girl when she and her father moved to the little village, just after her mother had died. When she was twelve, her father remarried and her new stepmother had a baby soon after. She became more and more enamored with her books. Reading became her passion. When she was sixteen she found a book that told her of a Fae King who had angered a beautiful enchantress, she fell in love with it. Tasked with keeping track of her new sibling, she was often left at home alone while her father traveled to keep food on the family table and her stepmother socialized with the local gentry.

Toby, the youngest child of the family slept a peaceful sleep in the sunshine while Sarah wandered the field reciting lines from the book she had all but memorized. Suddenly his bassinet was overthrown and he rolled into the flowers.

The plaintive cries of the boy drew her immediate attention. Dropping the book, Sarah lifted her skirt and ran to her sibling's aid. "Oh Toby! What happened?" Lifting the struggling child from the long grass, she noticed a red rash appearing on his face and arms. "Bother and damn! Karen is going to kill me!" Returning to her place, she swiped the book from the grass and stomped into the house. "All right, all right! I don't know what happened, but let's get you cleaned up before your mother gets home!" She took a soft cloth and dipped it into some cool water from the well. Rubbing it on a small cake of soap, she proceeded to clean the small child's exposed skin. As the rash faded, she put some soothing salve on it. "There, there little man. Are you hungry?" Taking a small bladder of milk that had been left for her sibling, she fed him and rocked him in the chair that had been her mother's. When he was asleep again, she laid him in his crib and went out to retrieve his bassinet. Bringing the damaged item inside, she soon set it to rights and put it by the wall.

Karen swept into the house as the sun was setting. "Why aren't the candles lit yet!"

Sarah growled softly. "Shh! I was just about to light them! I am almost done stirring the soup. Why don't you sit down and make yourself comfortable, Karen? I will see to it." Without waiting for a reply, she set down the ladle she had been stirring with and set to lighting the candles. "Did you have a good time today?"

Karen gave her stepdaughter an indifferent look. "As if you would understand, but yes. The mayor's wife asked me to tea tomorrow. I think I'm going to wear my new rose-colored dress. You of course will do my hair. Something up, perhaps."

"Yes, Karen. Would you like some of the wonderful chicken I baked and the soup?" She heard her brother crying. "I also made homemade bread. I'll be happy to cut you some as soon as I get Toby."

"Tobias, Sarah. How many times do I have to tell you his name is Tobias not Toby?"

"Sorry." Leaving the room she took care of her brother. Returning with a changed and clean baby, she set him in the small chair her father had built for him. "Now master Tobias, are you ready for your supper?" Pinning a cloth around his top she set a small bowl of porridge on the table before him and gave him a spoon. "Let's show your mommy what you learned today, shall we?"

Karen glared at her stepdaughter. "Really Sarah. Talk to him like he understands you? He's only two. He isn't even old enough to say his first word yet!"

The dark-haired girl smiled. "Really?" Looking down at the boy, she smiled. "Toby?"

The baby gurgled and banged his spoon on the table. "Sasa... sasa..."

The girl beamed and looked at her stepmother. "He says more. Toby, say mama...Ma...ma..."

"M...ma...ma...mmmm...ma!"

Karen rolled her eyes and glared at the girl as her stomach roiled. "Tricks! Nothing more! I'm going to clean up! Your father should be home tonight. Perhaps you can entertain him with your parlor tricks."

Crest-fallen, the girl settled at the table and helped the boy scoop food from his dish into his own mouth until he got the hang of it. Once he was going on his own, she turned to the pot of soup and stirred it again. Hearing horses outside, she looked out the window to see her father's wagon pulling up. "Karen! Daddy is home!" Rushing out to meet her father, she was worried when she saw how weary he was. "Oh, Daddy! You are exhausted! Come inside and warm yourself by the fire. I have supper ready and a fine nut brown ale that you will enjoy."

Robert smiled gratefully and tried to hide his wince as he climbed down from the wagon. "Thank you daughter."

"Father, you are injured."

"I will be fine, Sarah. I am simply tired and hungry. I have brought you a gift."

She shook her head. "Daddy, you know that I don't require anything from your trips. All I want is you to come home to us."

He patted her cheek and settled into a chair before the fire. "Where is your mother?"

The words trapped behind her teeth as she fought to keep the snide response at bay, Sarah breathed through her nose. "I will see what is keeping her. Pausing by the table, she wiped the baby's face with her apron. "Toby, Daddy is home."

"Dadda, ome!"

Robert smiled. "Did you teach him that, my girl?"

She nodded tears of pride in her eyes. "He says a few words, and can feed himself porridge as you can see."

"I bet your mother is proud."

Sarah shrugged. "I'll go find out what is keeping Karen." Trudging up the stairs, she rapped on her parent's door. "Karen? Father is home and is asking for you."

"Tell him I am unwell."

Sarah heard the sounds of retching from inside the room. Opening the door, she stepped hesitantly inside. "Karen, are you all right?"

"Oh," the blonde woman groaned, "perfect! I'm with child, you twit!"

Sarah grinned. "That's wonderful news isn't it?"

"How would you know? Have you ever been with child? Carrying a cannonball in your stomach? It's terrible! The marks left on your body! No matter how you try, no man will ever look at you the same." The blonde woman sneered. "Well in your case dear, no man will ever look anyway."

Sarah fought back tears. "I think it is lovely that you are going to have another child, and I believe that Daddy will be happy to be a father again. I'm sorry that you aren't feeling well. Would you like me to tell father that you are lying down and will see him in the morning?"

Karen shook her head. "No! I better go down and see him. You'll probably just make a mess of things and tell him. I can't trust you to keep this a secret anyway."

Sarah fisted her hands at her sides. "Why should it be secret? Forgive me for not being a 'proper lady'! I'm just ever so popular. Like you! I have so many friends all alone here on the farm! What with all of the chickens and pigs and cows to keep me company! I barely eat... I barely sleep! The only person I see is Toby, and he's only two. Heaven forbid I actually enjoy anything! I cook and slave for you Karen, so you don't have to! I hate you!" Turning on her heel, she stormed down the stairs and ran out the front door into the darkness. Unhitching the horses, she led them into the stables, rubbed them down and fed them. She was still standing in the barn hours later when her father came to her.

"Sarah, it is late, come inside to bed."

"I'm not tired, Daddy."

"Come on, honey. I heard the argument you had with your mother..."

"She isn't my mother! When you are gone, she is never here. I take care of the house, the farm, Toby. I hate her! She doesn't care about anyone but herself... and now you're going to be a daddy again... I'm going to matter even less." She sobbed into his shoulder.

Robert held his daughter close. "Shh... I'm so sorry Sarah. I didn't know it was so bad. Come inside. Tomorrow we will talk about this as a family and we will make some changes."

She nodded reluctantly and allowed him to lead her inside to bed.

### Chapter 3~ Everything Changes

The days passed turning into weeks and then into months. Sarah grew tired of Karen's constant complaints and nagging. It seemed to her that nothing she did was right. One morning, she woke to a rainstorm, dreary and bleak. Hearing Karen banging around on the ground floor, she sighed and dressed quickly. "Good morning, Karen. I'll go gather the eggs from the hen house and milk the cow."

"Good, because that god awful storm is getting worse. I wish your father was home."

She smiled at the nervous woman. "Don't worry, we'll be okay. Daddy will be home this afternoon, and we will have lots of fun together."

"Fun," the largely pregnant woman rubbed her distended belly. "I haven't had fun in a very long time!"

"Would you like me to rub the liniment on your belly again?"

"Later! Go fetch the eggs and milk now!"

Upstairs Toby began to cry.

The blonde woman sighed. "Oh!"

Sarah hustled out the door into the quagmire and trudged to the hen house. Gathering the eggs, she stuffed them into the pockets of the apron she wore. Slogging through the mud she made her way to the stable where the cow was and milked the sad beast. Squashing her way through the muck, she did her best not to spill any of the milk in her pail as she made her way back to the house. Opening the door, she carefully set the pail inside and stepped out of her muddy clogs. Stepping inside, she carried the pail to the counter. "The cow didn't give as much milk as I expected, but we have twice as many eggs." Reaching into her apron, she missed her stepmother rushing into the room and fell into the table as she was pushed from behind. There was a resounding *Crack* as the eggs broke in her pockets.

"You clumsy little fool!"

The girl pulled two unbroken eggs from her pockets. "Two survived. I will make them for you and Tobias."

"No thank you! I will make them!" Karen snatched them from her hands. "You can go without!"

Sarah stared at the cruel woman for a full minute as what she said began to sink in. "I'm sorry I fell against the table when you pushed me. I'll try to be more careful next time. Do you want me to do anything else before I go get cleaned up?"

"No! You've done enough already! Get out of those filthy clothes before you make the rest of my house dirty!"

"Your house? Your house!" The girl scoffed and spun on her heel. "You wouldn't know the first thing about how to take care of this house by yourself, you ungrateful witch! I hate you!" Stomping from the room, she fumed up the first flight of stairs and swore silently as she cut her hand on the ladder in her climb up to the attic where she had been relegated so that her stepmother could turn her bedroom into a sitting room. Flinging herself onto the damp hay that was her bed, Sarah lamented the indignities of her morning. Pulling off her soiled apron and dress, she went to the cracked basin of rainwater and dipped in the cloth she kept there. Washing off the remnants of the sticky egg, she put on a clean housedress and prepared her soiled clothes for washing in the creek. The sound of the rain on the roof alerted her to the passing of the storm and she sighed. Wrapping her shawl about her thin shoulders, she made her way outside to complete her task.

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Winging across the dove gray sky the white barn owl surveyed the rain swept countryside. The creatures of the forest still in hiding, he was unable to enjoy his usual sport of hunt and peck, however a lilting sound captured his attention near the edge of the forest forcing him to land or crash like an owlet just out of its nest.

*I fell asleep down by the stream  
And there I had the strangest dream  
And down by Brennan's Glenn there grows  
A briar and a rose*

*There's a tree in the forest  
And I don't know where  
I built a nest out of your hair  
And climbing up into the air  
A briar and a rose*

He watched a dark-haired young woman kneeling on the banks of a swollen stream singing the soft song. Cocking his head as he listened, he hooted along with her. The tune was not unfamiliar to him, and after a time, he slipped out of the tree to transform into his Fae form and leaned against the tree singing softly under his breath.

*Well I don't know how long it has been  
But I was born in Brennan's Glenn  
And near the end of spring there grows  
A briar and a rose*

*I picked the rose one early morn  
I pricked my finger on a thorn*

*It had grown so high  
It's winding wove the briar around the rose*

*I tried to tear them both apart  
I felt a bullet in my heart  
And all dressed up in springs new clothes  
The briar and the rose*

*And when I'm buried and in my grave  
Tell me so I may know  
Your tears may fall  
To make love grow  
The briar and the rose*

As Sarah finished the dress, she rose to wring it out. Wiping a hand across her brow, she caught a flash of movement from the corner of her eye and turned to look. As she did so, her foot slipped and she toppled backwards into the swiftly moving current of the rain swollen stream. The frigid water stole the breath she would have used to scream as she was sucked along to the right away from her family's farm. "Help!"

The young Goblin King jerked as the girl went into the icy water. Shoving away from the tree, he crossed the distance in a few strides and lunged headfirst into the water. Long powerful strokes took him to her side in moments. Slinging his arm around her shivering, unconscious body; he dragged her to shore. Laying her on the wet grass, he forced the water from her lungs and began rubbing her arms and legs. "Easy... easy..."

"Oh, gods!" Coughing up the freezing water, she tried to lever herself into a sitting position. "It's s...so c...cold!"

A fire suddenly blazed beside them. "Sit by the fire. It will warm you."

Sarah pushed her wet hair from her eyes, as the melodious voice drifted over her and found herself struck speechless.

He flashed her a crooked smile. "Forgive me, you precious thing. I should have taken care of this first." Snapping his fingers, he not only ensured they were both wearing dry clothing, but had wrapped them both in a large warm fur with his arm around her. "Would you care for something warm to drink... or to eat perhaps?"

She shook her head, mute. Her stomach rumbled loudly in protest and she blushed.

He chuckled. "Please, allow me?" Waving his hand with a flourish, he made plates of meat, cheese, and bread appear, and a pitcher of warm mead as well as two goblets. Pouring some mead into a goblet, he held it out to her. "Here, precious one. Drink this, it will warm you."

She cradled the goblet and looked at him over the rim as she sipped the warming liquid. "Thank you."

He smiled and ran a finger down her cheek. "So beautiful." He marveled at her blush. "What is your name, my lady?"

"S...sarah, m...my lord."

"Princess," he breathed. "Very fitting." He smiled and ran a finger down her cheek again. "Are you feeling warmer?"

"Yes, thank you." Her eyes began to feel heavy. "I feel..."

"Shh..." Guiding her head to his shoulder, he slipped the goblet from her limp fingers making it and the food vanish. Lying down, he pulled her slender body flush with his and wrapped the soft fur tighter about them. Bringing the flames higher, he let her sleep, keeping a watchful vigil.

Sarah turned on her side and wrapped her arm around the warm solid object beside her. Pressing her cheek against the cushion beneath it, she smiled and murmured warmly.

The King ran his fingertips over her arm. "Awake, my Precious thing."

Her eyes flickered open. "Oh!" She sat up with a jerk, the fur falling down around her lap. "I...I..."

He sat up with her. "Relax, Precious. You are safe." With the flick of his wrist, he made the blanket and the fire disappear. Wrapping his arm around her shoulder, he pinned a woolen cloak in place. "There! That should keep you warm."

"Th...thank you kind sir, but I cannot accept such a costly gift!" She blushed.

He frowned for a moment before running a leather-clad hand down her soft cheek. "Please think of it as payment for both your company and your lovely song, fair Sarah. What kind of a Fae would I be if I did not repay your kindness with my own?"

She blushed crimson under the discerning gaze he gave her. "Forgive me... milord... for I do not even know your name."

Lifting her fingers to his lips, he brushed them with the whisper of a kiss and smiled. "Jareth, my Precious girl." Releasing her with a bow, he disappeared in a puff of smoke. "We shall meet again."

"Jareth," she breathed with a girlish giggle.

## Chapter 4 ~ Goblin King

Jareth perched on the edge of the forest in his owl form watching the girl retrieve her wet clothing with a satisfied smirk. *I must find a way to make her mine. She is perfect!* When she moved off, he followed her to the farm where she lived. Landing on the thatch of the lower floor roof, he walked over as close to the open window as he could without going inside.

"Where the devil have you been, Sarah? Where did you get that cloak?"

"I fell into the stream washing my clothes, Karen. A nice young man helped me out and he gave me his cloak when mine was lost in the current."

"Liar! You probably stole it in town!"

"I did not! How dare you!"

"Give it to me right now you impudent little trollop!"

"Ow! You have no right!"

The Goblin King heard the tearing of fabric and peered in under the eave to see a tall blonde woman holding the cloak with a large tear where the pin had held it closed. His keen owl eyes also saw the red marks on the girl's throat from the cloak being torn away. Narrowing his gaze he spread his wings prepared to enter the modest kitchen. Sarah's words stopped him.

"Fine! Keep it then! You're a selfish spoiled harpy; Karen and I hate you! I bet that baby isn't even Daddy's!" Turning, she stormed up to the attic.

The raw pain in the girl's voice infuriated the King, but it also gave him an idea. Swooping upward to the apex of the house, he listened intently to figure out where in the structure she had gone. Hearing her moving around just below his claws, he hopped to the edge of the roof and looked down to see if he could find a way in. There was a window, which had been left open a crack. Flying down, he nudged the window open a bit more and landed on the ledge, hooting softly.

Sarah spun around, wiping futilely at the tears on her pale cheeks. "Oh! Hello, little one, you must be lost."

"Who...hoot!" He ruffled his feathers and stepped onto the edge of her washbasin. "Hoot!"

She giggled and stepped forward cautiously. "Now don't you bite me, okay?" She held out her hand. "I'm just going to close the window to keep out the cold. I'll let you out when you want to leave, I promise."

The owl hooted softly, surprising the girl when he leapt onto her shoulder as she leaned in and latched the window to the frame.

Sarah squeaked in fright and stumbled backwards, wincing as the bird's sharp talons gripped her shoulder painfully. Staggering to her knees she reached up and petted the bird's soft feathers, cooing gently, "Easy my friend, easy." When he hopped off, she pulled the shoulder of her dress aside and looked at the puncture marks. Biting her lip, she rose and put water in the basin. She was cleaning the wounds when she felt a hand on her shoulder.

"Forgive me, Precious."

She screamed.

He clamped his hand down over her mouth and pulled her back against his chest. "Easy, my lady. I mean you no harm." He almost sighed when she went limp in his arms. Removing his hand, he turned her to face him. "Let me see your shoulder, Precious."

She pulled the edge of her gown away, exposing her creamy skin to his view.

His arm slipped along her back, pulling her closer, his eyes never leaving hers. "Forgive me, my clumsiness, my dear precious thing. I have repaid your kindness with cruelty time and again. Please," he drew out the syllables, "allow me to repair the damage I have caused, my lady Sarah." Dipping his head, he brushed his lips over her bare shoulder.

Wherever he touched felt like fire was brushing her skin.

Dragging his long tongue over the damage, he tasted her blood. His magic responded forcefully. Tightening his hold, he bit his tongue and ran it over the wound again, mixing their blood. When he heard her moan softly in his arms, he knew that he must remove himself before he press too far too soon. Pulling her gown over the now healed shoulder, he tangled his fingers into her hair and pressed his lips below her ear. "You turn my world, you Precious thing. I will find you again, I promise!" Lifting her into his arms, he laid her on the bed. Conjuring a small crystal figurine for her, he left it in her hand and disappeared with the whisper of a kiss on her cheek. "Mine!"

"Yours," she murmured dreamily.

Karen jerkily stitched the cloth together. "Stupid little brat! This is her job! She's been shirking too much of her work around here lately! I wish she was doing this instead of me?"

"You're selfishness is going to be your downfall, Karen. You haven't the skill of the young woman who slaves to take care of this home. Be careful what you wish for."

The blonde looked around for the owner of the dark rich voice. When the cloak was jerked from her hand, she raised her eyes to the hand's owner and found herself stricken by his beauty. She smiled seductively. "Surely kind sir, you are not going to punish me for my stupid step daughter's perfidy? I was repairing your lovely garment so as to return it to you whole."

Raising an elegant brow, he looked down his nose at her. "Really madam? I gave this to milady Sarah to see her home. I do not believe it was her that ripped the broach from it, was it?" He re-clasped the now impeccable item about his shoulders.

Karen rose ponderously. "Why, kind sir, I have no idea what you mean."

"I'm sure." Sweeping towards the door, he glanced at her. "Know this Karen Williams, I do not take kindly to what is mine being damaged. Mend your ways lest you find life becomes unbearable." Running a gentle hand over the hair of the young

blonde child in the bassinet, he softened for a moment. "Value what you have before you lose it entirely." With that he disappeared. In moments he was winging away from the house towards the town. The first snow of the year was beginning to fall and he let out a screech when he saw the weary traveler on the road below him. Flying closer, he saw that it was Sarah's father. *Ah, there it is... my chance...* Weaving his magic, he made the storm worse and "helped" the man become lost in the outskirts of the Labyrinth surrounding his castle. Flying from tree to tree, he ensured that the man found the castle at the center. Leaving strict instructions with his servants that the man was to be taken care of, and no one but Killik was to be seen, the Goblin King went to handle other business.

Robert Williams, weary from traveling through the heavy snow and battered by the less than lucrative trip that he'd made to sell their meager trade goods was glad to find the castle at the end of his journey through the twisting maze he'd found himself in. Pushing open the doors, he stumbled inside and collapsed on the elegant rug.

A group of small and medium goblins broke away from the shadows. The largest straightened and began barking orders. "Kinky says to makes man comfortable. Gives him food and shelter. Takes him to sitting room. I's have cooky makes him trays. Puts him nears fire so's he warms ups. Is too cold tonights. Makes sure he no sees Kinky though. Kinky was adamants!"

"Yes Killik!"

Seeing the smaller goblins begin carrying out his commands, the larger goblin hurried to the kitchens.

"I work and I slave all day long, and for what? His majesty never eats nuthin I cooks!"

"Oh stop yer grouching! We haves a guest! Makes up a tray of foods and tea for the poor gentleman and sends it up to the sitting room, right away!"

"Y...yes Killik!"

The goblin Steward hurried away to see to the rest of the King's commands.

Jareth frowned at the woman who stood before him holding the babe in her arms. "I normally do not like to appear before my subjects like this, but I am pressed for time this evening!" His black cape swirled around his leather-clad legs. The light glinting off the diamond hard black armor he wore. "Now, you have wished away the child to me. You must make the choice... do you want the babe to be turned into a goblin forever or are you willing to run my Labyrinth in order to regain her freedom?" The white lie usually garnered results. The Wisher would realize just how much they really wanted the Wished-Away and run the Labyrinth in order to rescue them. Taking pity on the inept Wisher, the King would make the maze less or more complicated depending on the person's intellect.

"I don't want this squallin' brat! She's the biggest mistake I ever made!"

Jareth looked at the quiet child in the odious woman's arms. "Very well." With the snap of his fingers the child was in his arms. Conjuring a crystal on his fingertips, he tossed it at the woman. "For your troubles." Turing with a flourish of his cape, he faded from sight. Reappearing in his castle, he made his way to the East Wing. "Beatrice?"

"Yer Majesty?"

"Make sure this babe is taken care of. I will be in the Throne Room hearing petitions for her adoption."

"Yes Majesty."

He turned away and caught himself against the wall.

## Chapter 5 ~ Wishes and Innocence

The goblin nursemaid laid the babe in a bassinet and hustled to the King's side. "Now, none of your lip, Yer Majesty. You're not well."

He glared down at the small woman. "I'm fine!"

"Yer still not too old for me to bend yer royal self over my knee, Jareth Kinwellen! King or no, I will not allow you to lie to me! Now, you sit down here for a minute and let me takes care of you!"

He sighed, but gave in as another wave of dizziness washed through him. "Bea, what's wrong with me?"

The little goblin woman snorted. "It this damnable curse you gots us all put under, Majesty! It's killing ye! Ye have to finds a way to break it!"

He quirked a brow at her. "You know, you're the only one aside from maybe Killik that has the courage to talk to me like that?"

"Well, considering that we's been with you since you was just a wee thing, yer Highness..."

He waived away any apology she was about to make. "No don't! I appreciate it. I would have been lost all these years without you two." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Quite honestly, I know I have to break this curse. I believe the man that is currently in the sitting room is the key... or rather his beautiful daughter is."

The woman narrowed her intense golden eyes at the king she had raised from a babe. "What sort of trickery are you working up, yer Majesty?"

"None... per se. Just allow things to play out. Now, I really must go lie down... I am sorely tired... I did too much this day." He rose, staggering.

"Killik!"

The Goblin Steward popped into existence in the middle of the room startling the child to wakefulness. "Ye bellowed, Bea, my loves?"

"I did, ye ignoramous! Ye jest woke the new babe from its slumber, and ye needs to takes the King to his chambers."

The Steward looked at his feet for a moment. "It's sorry Bea. Come along Kingy!" Taking Jareth's hand, he popped them out of the room before he could get into more trouble.

Bea went about settling the baby.

Killik made them appear in the King's chambers just as another petal fell from the enchanted rose, and swore as his monarch crumpled to the floor. "Get in here and give me a hand!"

Several smaller goblins appeared and helped him get the king out of his armor, into a sleep shirt, and onto the bed. Killik dismissed the other goblins swearing them to silence with the threat of being fed to the Minotaur if they spoke of the King's state of health. Tucking the blankets about the King's shoulders, the Steward sat beside him. "Oh Jareth, what are we going to do? What is it that you plan to do with the human that you allowed into our castle?"

"He is the key to our salvation, my friend. His daughter must come to the castle... she must break the curse... it must come to pass... soon."

The Goblin Steward looked at his King who had lapsed into a deep slumber and frowned. "I will take care of everything, my King." The fairy had granted certain powers to him for aiding the king in his tasks of taking the unwanted children after all, perhaps he could bend the rules just this once and use them to help his King break the curse. Taking his human form, he popped into the throne room and sat on the throne. "Show in the first applicants."

A pair of well-kept peasants from the village came in slowly.

Sighing, Killik growled. "Come closer!"

The couple scuttled closer. "Forgive us, my lord! M... my wife and I are unable to have children. We came after we received this message." The man held up a scroll with the Goblin King's sigil on it.

Killik smiled. "Magard? Bring me the girl child."

When a goblin in full armor brought in a blanket-wrapped bundle, he smiled again. "Do not fear. This is your new daughter, Evangeline. She will be strong and healthy. Go with the King's Blessing."

"Thank you, milord!"

When they were gone, he gestured. "Let the next couple in."

A farmer and his wife came in. "I thank you for seeing us, milord."

Killik recognized the man as one who had wished away his eldest son. "Guards, show this man out. We do not cater to those who wish away their children." When the room was once again clear, he looked at his guards expectantly.

"There is one last couple, milord."

"Let them in."

A young man and his pretty wife came in slowly. "Thank you for seeing us, milord."

Killik steepled his fingers considering the two. "Come forward."

"Y... yes milord." The man guided the woman to the base of the dais.

Killik smiled down at the couple. "Magard? Bring me the boy." He looked at them. "This child is a little older than most. He needs parents who will love him unconditionally. Do you think that you can do this?"

The woman straightened and revealed the disfigurement of her right hand, arm, and face. "Milord, unconditional love is not a foreign concept in our home. My own family threw me out in the street for my disfigurement after I saved the life of my vain



eldest sister from the fire that claimed our home. My Rudolpho is my savior. He has taught me much about life and love... I cannot give him children of our own. So I prayed for a child."

Killik waived a hand. "I believe that you will be perfect parents for this child." Gesturing the General forward, he smiled. "Gabriel, these are to be your new parents, Rudolpho and Sarina. You will be happy in your new home."

The little dark-haired boy ran up the short steps and threw his arms around the seated man. "Thank you," he mouthed.

"You're welcome." Turning to the couple, he guided the child down the steps to his new parents himself. Tipping the child's chin upward, he pointed out a scar. "He was two years old when his mother was killed and his father cut his vocal chords. The boy is unable to vocalize. He may yet heal, but he does communicate. You will learn in time. Be patient... kind, and loving. Teach others as well." He smiled down at the child. "Good luck to you all."

When the goblins had closed and locked the door, he sighed and dropped his form for a few moments. "See to it that this room is cleaned from ceiling to floor by morning. We will be having a special visitor. Also, someone will need to see to it that the stables are cleaned and readied for one occupant."

"As you command, Master Steward."

Taking his human form again, he disappeared and reappeared in the shadows of the sitting room.

Killik stood in the shadows and watched the human glancing about himself nervously as he sat on the sofa. After several minutes, he stepped into the firelight. "Please partake of the meal. You must be weary after so long a journey, Mr. Williams."

Robert Williams jumped at the sound of the soft almost ethereal voice coming from somewhere behind him.

"Wh..wha...what? Who's there?"

"Forgive me for startling you, my good man." The King's Chief Steward came around the large chair and sank into it.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I am the King's Chief Steward. My Liege is indisposed this evening and has asked that I see to your comforts. Please," he gestured to the covered tray on the table. "Partake of the repast I have seen laid for you. I assure you, there is no need to worry for your safety."

"But I have no way to pay for your kindness." Robert rose hastily. "Forgive me! I must get home to my family."

Killik rose. "While I do understand your concern, it would be in both your best interest and theirs for you to stay the night." He led the way to a large window. Pulling back the heavy curtain, he showed the snow swirling in a heavy blanket from the darkening sky. In the morning, our guards will take you back to the road and you will be shown the way home. For now, eat and rest."

Robert sighed, resigned. "Very well. I thank you for your hospitality."

"Come, my friend, it is good to have a friendly face in the castle after so long."

Robert sank onto the sofa again and as the lid was removed from the tray, his stomach grumbled. "It would appear that I am indeed hungry. Thank you."

"Nonsense. It is the least we can do. Do you mind some conversation while you dine?"

The tired merchant tucked into the meal, but shook his head. "No, sir, I don't mind. What would you like to talk about?"

"Tell me of yourself."

"Me, milord? I am a simple merchant. I have a wife, a grown daughter, a young son, and another child on the way."

"So you have a large family?"

"Sometimes I think it is too large." Robert sighed. "My oldest girl should be married by now, but..."

"But?"

"I don't know... It just seems as if no suitors will seek her hand. It isn't that she is an ugly child. She is quite pretty. She has a lovely disposition, and she is quite capable when it comes to taking care of the house and a family. I don't understand it myself." He drank from the goblet of mead.

"She sounds like a paragon of virtue, this daughter of yours."

Yawning, the merchant set down the goblet and wiped his lips on a napkin. "My Sarah is a beauty with a kind and gentle heart. I wish she could find the happiness she seeks. Her stepmother, my wife, and she do not get along. It makes my Sarah miserable." He yawned hugely. "Forgive me, milord."

"Of course. Think nothing of it." Killik waived his hand and the tray disappeared. "Come, let me show you to a room where you might be comfortable for the night."

Robert nodded and allowed himself to be guided from the room. When he was tucked up safely in the bed, he quickly fell into a pleasant dream-filled slumber.

Killik reverted to his goblin form and went about the remainder of his planning. Making sure that all was in readiness for when the man arose, he finally sought his own bed in the early hours of the morning.

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The morning dawned bright and beautiful. Robert Williams rose and dressed preparing to trudge home in the snow. Looking out the window, he was astounded to see clear grounds, not an ounce of snow in sight. "What the devil?" Hurriedly retrieving his belongings, he accidentally missed a leather thong with a polished stone that he always wore. The necklace had been a gift from Sarah for Michaelmas two years earlier. Rushing down the halls, he burst through the doors into the bright sunlit courtyard where his horse waited for him, fully rested and ready. Leading the horse away, he was struck by the heady scent of roses in full bloom.

*Wouldn't Sarah love a delicate bloom such as this? Such a pretty trifle... surely no one would miss just one...*

The voice sounded in his head, lulling him, guiding his steps. Dropping his horse's reins he stumbled towards a large garden that appeared to be slumbering for the fall. Moving down the paths like a marionette, he stopped before a single rose bush that held several large blooms in different shades. Oblivious to the thorns, Robert reached out and picked a blood-red bloom from the bush.

In a swirl of glitter and black cape the Goblin King appeared behind him. "Thief! After I shared my hospitality with you for the night, this is how you repay me? Stealing one of the Goblin King's roses is punishable by death!"

Robert cradled the delicate blossom as if it were a fragile thing and fell to his knees before the enraged King. "Please, your Majesty! I beg of you, spare my life! I have a wife and children to provide for! Please," he offered up the flower. "I did not mean any harm! I would never steal from you, oh mighty King! What may I give to repay your hospitality and the gift of this lovely rose for my beautiful daughter?"

"A gift for your daughter, you say?"

"Yes, Majesty! My Sarah... my oldest child... she never asks for anything. I would repay your kindness however you ask, if only you would allow me to give her this rose."

The King tapped his chin as if in thought. "For stealing the King's rose, you have a choice... You will return here in three days to pay the price for your insolence yourself, or I will come and collect the payment of my choice." With that the King disappeared.

Robert Williams found himself and his horse on the snowy road at the end of the lane leading to his home. Kicking his horse into a gallop, he rode the remainder of the distance in minutes. Dismounting, he led the horse to the stable. "I will be back in a short time to take care of you, Goliath." Turning for the house, he sighed and turned back to the horse for his saddlebags. Careful not to crush the rose he still held, he trudged through the snow to the front door.

Sarah opened the door. "Daddy! Come inside and warm yourself by the fire! I will take care of Goliath."

"No, daughter. I will take care of Goliath in a moment. For now, you must sit down. I have things to speak with you and your mother about."

Sarah's face fell. "Karen and I are not speaking, Daddy."

"Now what happened?"

The girl unwrapped her shawl, and showed him her neck. "I am afraid I yelled at her after she ripped a cloak that a kind stranger gave me, from my neck yesterday. I took her breakfast this morning in her sitting room. She hasn't spoken to me all day. I tried to apologize to her, but she dismissed me after giving me a list of my chores. They are lengthy. I don't have time to sit down with you until suppertime, I'm afraid."

Robert Williams growled and rose from his seat by the fire. "This is unacceptable! She is your mother! She has no right to harm you like this! I want a full explanation for what happened!"

Sarah shook her head. "No. It isn't worth it, Daddy. Better to simply let it go. How was your trip? Did you get what you expected for the goods you sold this time?"

He sighed and sank back into the chair. *I must get my daughter out of this house... and away from Karen.* "Not really. It was better than I hoped, but not nearly as much as I had wished for. I did find this for you, though." He pulled the rose from inside his cloak and handed it to her.

Sarah took the perfect rose and brought it to her nose, inhaling its magic fragrance. "It's beautiful, Daddy! You really shouldn't have!" She lowered it when she saw sadness in his gaze. "Daddy, where did you get this rose? They don't bloom this time of year."

He gave her a wistful smile. "It is from the Goblin King's garden, my dear."

She blanched. "What? What did you say?"

"The rose is from the Goblin King's garden. I have to go back to him in three days as payment for the rose." He looked up at her, a sad sort of hope in his eyes. *You are honorable, my girl... can I goad you into doing what I know you must in order to get you free of your stepmother?* "I know that I'm leaving things in capable hands Sarah. You are a bright girl. You'll find a suitor... someone who will help take over the farm and Karen... she doesn't need..."

Sarah stomped her foot. "No! Absolutely not! You will not finish that sentence! I may not like her... I may think she is selfish and spoiled, but she, Toby, and the new baby need you." Her eyes filled with tears as she looked at the rose in her hands. "I cannot allow you to pay the price for this gorgeous gift. No..." Racing out of the room, she ignored Karen standing outside the kitchen doorway.

"Sarah, no!" Robert rose to follow her.

Karen stepped into his path. "My love, you're home! I'm so glad to see you! You have no idea how... Oh!" She winced and doubled over in pain. "Oh God! The Baby!"

Robert caught his wife as she collapsed. "Sarah! Fetch the healer! The baby is coming now!"

Sarah flew down the stairs and ushered her father into a room next to the kitchen. "In here, Father. Lay her on the bed. I've been preparing for days. We do not have time to get the healer. Do not worry, I know what to do."

"You?"

"Yes, Father. I have delivered many of the calves and foals of the neighboring farms, and our own sheep. It is not as difficult as you might think. Now, go into the kitchen and get the large basin I put by the sink. Then bring me the kettle I keep by the fire there. It is hot and full of water, so be careful. Use a towel to carry it... and then bring me the knife on the table. I will need something to cut the cord with, and the ball of twine."

He stared at his daughter as if he didn't know her. "I...um..."

Karen let out a loud wail.

"We don't have time to waste. Daddy, if you love this new child, you must do as I say and not ask questions till later. Just trust me."

## Chapter 7 ~ The Rose

Sarah fought back the tears as she looked down at the twins. *Bethany and Castor... a boy and a girl. Daddy was so proud. I've never seen him so proud.* She sighed sadly. *I see the fear and pity in his eyes when he looks at me these days. I cannot let him go and pay the price for this rose.* She looked at the delicate flower in her hand. *No! I will not let him pay the price for me. He has Toby and these two new precious babes to keep safe.* Wiping away her tears, she put a folded parchment under her father's hand while he slept and crept from the room. "Farewell, my loves." Wrapping her cloak tighter around herself, she hurried out into the pre-dawn chill and made her way to the stable. Leading her horse from its stall, she guided her to the path at the end of the lane. Above her on a branch she saw the white barn owl she had befriended. "Hello, my friend. This will be the last time I will see you, I fear. I must away."

"Who...hoot!"

She smiled sadly. "I must repay a debt. Forgive me, little friend. Fair flying." Pulling herself into the saddle, she headed in the direction her father had given her, praying that it was correct. When she noted the owl flying overhead, she couldn't help the small smile that graced her lips. "Thank you my friend," she murmured as she wiped away her tears. "I did not wish to be alone, either."

The owl, really the Goblin King in disguise, hooted at the girl when she got to the correct path.

"What is it, little friend?" She began to go passed.

The owl hooted again and took wing further down the path.

"You want me to follow you?"

"Hoot...hoot!" He flew back to her, landing on her shoulder and nuzzling her cheek.

She giggled. "All right, have it your way." Turning her horse towards the forest, she applied her heels. "Come on Felicity. We must hurry. The Goblin King only gave Daddy three days, and already one is up."

The King re-ordered the maze to allow the girl the easiest path through the Labyrinth to his castle. Flying above her in his owl form, he safeguarded her from the Minotaur and dangers she knew nothing about.

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Sarah arrived at the castle as the sun was passing mid-day on the third day. Throwing the hood of her cloak back, she reveled in its warmth for a moment before she slipped off the horse and led it forward to the steps of the great edifice. "Oh, my lord! This place is huge!"

Goblin guards rushed out the doors, spears at the ready. "Halts! Who be you trespasser!"

Jumping back in surprise, Sarah released the reigns of her horse and tripped over the hem of her cloak at the same time. Landing on her rear in the damp gravel, she cried out and scrambled backwards away from the loping advance of the terrifying guards.

"Guards halt!"

Her eyes huge and terrified and her breathing shallow, Sarah screamed as the spear tips halted only inches from her chest. Falling back in a dead faint, she wasn't aware of the tall man who came to her rescue.

"Fools! How dare you charge the King's guest! See to the lady's horse!" Lifting the prone woman from the ground, Killik carried her up the steps into the castle and spirited her away from prying eyes into the same sitting room where her father had first stayed. Settling onto the table beside her, he patted her hand. "Come, my dear... awaken."

Sarah's eyes fluttered open. "Wh...what... where am I?"

"You are in the sitting room, My Lady."

Her breaths came in rapid pants. "Who..."

He smiled. "Forgive me for startling you. I am Killik, the King's Steward."

"Sarah... Williams, milord. I am here to..."

"Ah... I see. You are here to negotiate with the King."

She sat up and pulled her hand away. "No, milord. I am here to take my father's place. My stepmother gave birth to twins last night. My father is needed at home. They do not need me, and since the rose was to be a gift for me... I would offer myself as a replacement for my father."

The Steward was taken by surprise. "You would do that?"

"I would like to speak with the King... please."

Killik frowned. "He is indisposed at the moment. I will let you know as soon as he becomes available. However, until then, please allow me to see to your comfort." Offering her his hand, he guided her out of the sitting room and showed her to the same room that had been her father's. "You may stay here for now. I will send a maid to attend you." He paused at the door. "Would you care for something to eat or drink, My Lady?"

She shook her head. "No thank you."

Killik bowed slightly and closed the door behind him. Disappearing and reappearing in the King's chambers, he tapped his foot expectantly. "Your Majesty! What devilry are you playing at?"

"I play at nothing. I assume you found the girl to your liking?"

"She is too young!"

"She is a woman, Killik! She is old enough to know her own mind, and be married thrice over by now. Do not speak to me as if I was a child! This young woman is sweet and gentle." The King sighed wistfully... "I will never deserve her."

"Sire, you have to do something... and tricking the girl is not the right thing to do."

"She must stay here, Killik! There is no other way!"

"I hope you know what you are doing sire."

Jareth waived the man away. "Leave me alone. Make sure that I am indisposed until right before the deadline. I want her to be stuck here."

"She has already come to take her father's place willingly, sire."

The King turned. "What? Willingly?" Disappearing, he reappeared in Sarah's room. "You would willingly take your father's place? He stole that rose from my garden for you, Precious, and yet here you stand in his stead... why?"

Her heart stopped as she heard his voice. *He's the King!* Turning around, she stared at the man she had dreamed about for many months. "Milord!"

"Why would you take his place?"

"B...be...because I delivered my stepmother's twins last night and he is needed at home." She avoided his gaze. "I am not needed... nor wanted at home. I gladly come in my father's stead."

"The price is forever, Precious. Did he not tell you that?"

She shook her head. "It doesn't matter. I will pay the price. My freedom for my father's." She turned towards the window.

He stood watching her, processing what she'd said. *That bastard!* "My dear, I will leave you to rest. If there is anything you need, my servants will attend you."

"Th...thank y...you, y...your M...majesty." *Do not cry before the King! Do not let him see that you are weak... Do not let him see that you care.*

He stood for several minutes unsure of what he should do. When he saw her shoulders start shaking, he sighed and wrapped his arms around her. "Shh... it's all right, Precious."

Sarah pulled out of his arms. "No! Nothing is all right! I'm... oh just forget it!" Pacing away from him, she wrapped her arms around herself, periodically wiping furiously at the tears falling down her cheeks.

Her rejection stung. *She hates me... she blames me for this fate...* "Very well. We will speak again, Precious. You will join me for dinner." Turning, he started for the door.

"No!"

"That was not a request, madam!"

"Get out!"

He whipped back around. "You are in my kingdom now, Precious. You will do as I wish. You will join me for dinner this evening..."

"No thank you!"

"Then go ahead and starve! If you do not eat with me, you do not eat at all!" Turning, he slammed the door and was gone.

Sarah flung herself on the bed and sobbed, all of the built up pain and frustration from dealing with Karen, and the heartache of leaving her family behind finally pouring out of her until she was asleep.

The King in his frustration appeared in his own room flinging furniture and storming around in his rage. Twisting his wrist, he conjured a crystal and watched the young woman weep. "She hates me. She is my prisoner and she hates me. She'll never love someone like me." Throwing the crystal against the wall, he watched it shatter as he slumped into a chair before the fire, his head in his hands. Behind him, on the table, another petal fell from the wilting enchanted rose.

## Chapter 8 ~ Never Alone

When Sarah awoke it was dark. Her cheek was pressed to something hard on the bed and she wasn't sure of where she was. Pushing upright she saw vague outlines of furniture in the room dimly lit by the moonlight coming through the window. Groping on the coverlet for the hard thing, she came across a necklace. Carrying it to the window for a better look, she was surprised to find the amulet she had given to her father two years prior. Tying the leather around her neck, she hung the stone over her heart and felt strangely comforted. Her stomach grumbled its continued discontent at not having been filled in two days. Giving in, she made her way to the door and opened it slowly expecting to see a guard outside. When she saw the hallway was clear, she ventured forth leaving her door open a crack so as to find her way back later.

Jareth nodded in the chair before the fire. His anger was long since spent and now he was just incredibly weary. Sighing as he woke to the sound of footsteps outside his door, he rose to investigate. *No one is awake at this hour. Who would be wandering the halls this late at night?* Opening his door a fraction, he peered into the dimly lit corridor and saw a flash of midnight flicker passed at eye level. "Who goes there?"

Sarah spun around, a frightened squeak escaping her lips. Seeing who was coming towards her, she turned and ran.

Dropping his hand from the door, the King returned to his chair and sank further into his depression. "Killik?"

"Majesty?"

"Go find the girl. She is running somewhere in the castle." He gestured towards the door. "She took one look at me and ran away. I give up, Killik. I'm a failure. I'm never going to break this curse!"

The older man sighed. "Majesty, have you ever thought that maybe if you were to just talk to the girl..."

"Talk to her? Killik, do you know what I've already done to that poor terrified girl? I saved her from drowning... and when I visited her in my owl form I hurt her. I healed her... and... shared..."

Killik groaned. "Oh, my King... you didn't? You shared your blood with her?"

"I did."

"Does she know?"

"No."

"You are playing a dangerous game, sire. Be honest with the girl and yourself."

"Go find her and make sure she is safe, Killik. She doesn't want anything to do with me. Make sure she eats something, as well. That harridan her father married was denying her meals."

The man bowed low. "As you command, Majesty." Gone with a soft pop, he appeared in the corridor in front of her as she ran. Absorbing the impact of her running into him full force, Killik grunted softly, "My Lady? From what do you flee? Is there someone or something chasing you?"

Unable to contain herself any longer, Sarah broke down. Burying her face in her hands, she sobbed. Had he not been supporting her, she would have fallen to the floor in a heap.

Killik lifted the young woman into his arms and transported them the opulent rooms that had been made ready for her. Settling her into a chair before the roaring fire, he knelt before her. "My Lady Sarah, what is it that troubles you so?" He held her hand gently. "Surely you can tell me what it is that brings forth such heart wrenching pain?"

She met his eyes, revealing emerald green orbs filled with such pain and longing that it tore at his own heart. "I have to tell someone," she sniffed softly.

He produced a handkerchief and handed it to her. Settling into the chair beside hers, he folded his hands. "I promise, I will listen to everything you have to say without judging you, My Lady, and I will not tell a single living soul... not even the King."

She favored him with a watery chuckle. "I couldn't ask you to keep secrets from your King, Master Killik, but I would like someone to talk to, so I thank you." Fingering the pendant around her neck, she began with the death of her mother when she was but a maid and ended her tale with coming to the castle. "I don't know what to do. He terrifies me. One minute I thought he was a kind stranger... a gentleman whom I could be friends with... now... he is the King... Killik... the Goblin King. What am I to do?" She shuddered. "I've grown up on tales of what he does. Karen used to tell me that if I didn't behave that she would send me away to the Goblin King. Now..." her voice broke and she looked away into the flames.

"Now you are here in the castle of the Goblin King forever." Killik frowned. "The stories that the villagers tell are meant to frighten little children into being good. The King is really a very gentle soul if you get to know him."

"Does he steal children?"

"He takes wished away children, yes."

"What kind of monster takes children away from their homes and is still a good person?"

Killik rose from his seat to tower over her. "Now you listen here, young lady! That man may have been rude and selfish and cold at one time, but he has never been a monster! He doesn't take the children because he wants to! He is cursed! We all are! The children who are wished away by parents or caretakers who don't want them... He comes to take them and gives the Wisher a single chance to reclaim the wished away. He looks into the Wisher's heart and asks them if they truly want to wish away the child. If they do he takes the child and finds them a new home where they will be loved and cared for. If the Wisher repents, they are given the chance to run the King's Labyrinth and reclaim the child. If by the end of their run they truly do not want the child, then the child will go to a new home, but the Wisher will forever remember the child they wished away and regret. The King never forgets... He remembers every child... every Wisher... every trauma and heartache. He is **not** a monster, My Lady, people are!" With those parting words, Killik disappeared and in his place sat a leather bound book.

Stunned by his harsh reaction, she sat with her mouth hanging open for several long moments. Snapping her lips closed, she picked up the red leather book and stroked her fingers over the silver embossed cover. Opening to the first page she lost herself in the tale of the spoiled King.

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Killik reappeared in the King's chambers. "The next time you want someone to talk to that infuriating female... do it yourself!"

Jareth raised his tear-soaked sable lashes to look at his long time confidant. "Gods, Killik. I never knew. I never knew that parents could be so horrible to their children and keep them. There is no way I will ever be good enough to deserve her." He rose and crossed to the crystal encased enchanted rose. "I'm nothing but a spoiled, selfish, useless King, Killik. I've never done anything good with my life."

"What about all of the children you have saved, sire? What about the compassion you have learned for others? Have you gained nothing from this curse?"

"Perhaps so, my friend, but I fear it is too late for me. Already I grow weak. The rose has begun to wilt, and before long, like it, I will be dead. I waited too long to even try. I... you cannot change what is wrong with me. After all, the only thing she will ever see is the Goblin King... the monster."

"You must help her to see passed that. Help her to see the man she befriended... the man who saved her from the raging stream... the man who visited her every day because he couldn't keep away." The shrewd little Steward smiled. "You didn't think I knew, but I watch you, my boy. It is my job to make sure my King is safe."

"Killik," the King whined, "she hates me and everything to do with me."

"Then change her mind! Start out by being nice to her... don't be a boor. Be suave... genteel... and don't lose your temper!"

The King sighed. "Fine! Later!" Quickly changing forms, he effectively cut off conversation as he flew out of his open chamber windows.

"Don't think this conversation is done yet, boy!"

"Hoot!"

"Brat!"

Flying around the castle, he made for the window to Sarah's room. Relieved to find the balcony doors open, he alighted on the stone wall and let out a soft throaty hoot.

Sarah's head came up as she heard the familiar sound. Tucking her finger into the book, she closed the cover and walked to the open balcony. Seeing her little friend, she crumpled to her knees. "Oh... my friend... my friend..." Her words were choked by tears as she stroked his feathers tenderly. "You shouldn't be here, little one! The guards might see you and hurt you! I could never live with myself if you were hurt!" Pressing a gentle kiss to the top of his beak, she ran her fingers over his silky feathers lightly. "Fly, my friend. I will see you again... I promise... I don't know how, but I promise." Rushing back into the room, she dabbed at her eyes with the handkerchief.

Jareth felt his heartbeat accelerate when she gave him the innocent kiss on his beak. Her concern for him was also cause for the warmth that flowed through his veins. In a flash of glitter he stood on the balcony. Taking a step forward, he hesitated. *Be a gentleman.* Raising a hand he knocked gently on the balcony doors. "My Lady?"

Whirling, Sarah clutched the book and the handkerchief to her chest. "Y...yes?"

"May I come in?"

"Y...you m...may."

The King stepped inside from the balcony, dressed in tan breeches, a white poet's shirt with ruffles that opened to the waist, and a black leather vest. His fair hair hung about his head like a cloud. He bowed. "My Lady."

She curtsied. "Your Majesty. You honor me."

He strode across the room to stand before her. "It is you who honors me. May I join you by the fire, My Lady?" When she nodded, he guided her into her chair before taking a seat himself. "I see you are reading. Is it a good book?"

She glanced at the books she held. "Y...yes." Putting the books aside, she faced him squarely. "Your Majesty I owe you an apology. I should not have said all of those terrible things to you before. I was overly emotional and let my tongue run away with me. I beg your forgiveness for my hasty behavior and glib tongue."

He reached over and took her hand. "Sarah, you were right. I was rude and insufferable. I took you from your home and then gave no thought to how you were feeling. Instead I ordered you about. I have not treated you like the guest you are. Please, it is I who beg your forgiveness." Rising, he offered her his arm. "Please allow me to escort you through the castle. I'm sure you would like to see something of your new home?"

She took his arm and allowed him to show her everything. By the time they were done, they ended up in the kitchens, laughing and starving. The Goblin King opened the pantry, raiding it for a loaf of bread, a small wheel of cheese, and some small fruits. He was turning around when the cook himself came stomping into the room.

"Whats are yous doing in mys kitchen?"

The King, Sarah, and the pilfered food disappeared and reappeared in her chambers. Sarah giggled. "That was close."

"Indeed... Now, let us partake of this purloined feast and get you to bed."

She flushed a bright crimson. Reaching out, she touched his gloved hand. "Majesty?"

He paused in the act of cutting slices of bread. "Hmm?" He looked up.

Her fingertips traced over his cheek. "Thank you."

His breath caught. "Y...you're welcome."

She took the bread and put some cheese between the slices. "Let me show you a trick." Placing the sandwich on the rocks before the fire, she waited a few moments for the cheese to start to melt, then flipped the bread over. Lifting the sandwich from the hot rocks with her bare fingers, she hissed in pain as cheese oozed out the side and she was burned. "Damn!"

He took her burned hand before she could put it in her mouth and brushed his lips over the tender flesh. The moisture from his lips cooled the burning and healed the damage. "Are you all right, Precious?"

She trembled at the husky way he spoke. "I..." The tears that sparkled in her eyes spilled over and trickled down her cheeks.

"Don't cry, Precious, Sarah. It tears me apart to see you cry." He leaned forward and brushed his lips over her cheeks drying her tears with his soft breath.

Yearning forward, she closed her eyes. "I...m sorry M...ajes...ty."

He captured her lips in a tender kiss. Desire to deepen the touch got the better of him as he slid his hand into her hair and pulled her closer. He felt her stiffen and immediately released her. "Forgive me... I..."

She put her fingers to his lips. "No... I don't want you to apologize... I just..." She shook her head. Rising with her arms around herself, she walked to the balcony and stared up at the night sky. "No one has ever kissed me... much less wanted to kiss me before. I don't want you to be... I am too inexperienced."

He turned her around to face him. Taking her into his arms, he stood in the moonlight holding her. "Thank you for sharing that with me, Precious. Come, I think that it would be best if I tucked you into bed."

"I'm not a child, your Majesty," she retorted.

He chuckled. "No, my dear, you are anything but a child. I merely want to make sure that you are safely tucked away in your bed where I cannot get at you."

"Oh...um..." She turned bright red and ducked her head.

Taking her chin in his hand, he met her gaze. "Precious girl, you have no idea how you turn my world. I promise I will never do anything you don't want."

She feathered her fingers through his hair. Searching his gaze, she leaned in close to hold him and whispered in his ear. "I promise you will never be alone."



## Chapter 9 ~ Heartbreak

The months passed and Sarah grew closer to the King. Her spirits rose and she could almost say that she was happy. Once in a while she would turn away with a tinge of sadness in her eyes. As it happened one evening, they were in the library reading together when the King went rigid.

"Dammit! In the name of all the saints! Sarah, go to your room! I will come for you when I return!"

Startled, she dropped the book they had been reading and rose. The Goblin King stood across the room from her now in his armor with wild hair and a dark gleam to his eyes. "Y...yes Majesty!" She ran from the room as if all the hounds of hell were nipping at her heels.

Jareth felt like a heel. *I will fix this later.* Disappearing, he reappeared in a familiar looking house. Turning his attention from the disastrous house to the blonde woman standing over the bassinets with the crying babes, he focused. "I have come to take the children which you have wished away. Tell me, Karen Williams, do you truly wish your children taken away?"

"God yes! I cannot do this by myself! With Robert gone and Sarah run away! I'm alone here! I cannot... I will not take care of these squalling brats any longer! Take them away from me! I want nothing to do with children ever again!"

He growled. "Very well, you are barren!" Calling several goblins to take the children, he conjured a crystal. "Take this as a consolation on those dark nights when you are truly alone, Karen, for you will never know a moment of peace from this moment forward!" Waiving his hand, he made them all appear in the castle nursery leaving the selfish woman to scream and sob at her own misfortune.

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Sarah crept down the hall towards the nursery. She'd heard the cries of tiny babes. Peeking in the doorway, she saw the small goblin woman trying to take care of the two smaller babes and a toddler grasping her apron. "Would you like some help?"

The toddler turned around. "Sarah?"

"Toby?" Rushing in, she knelt and threw her arms around the boy. "Oh baby, what are you doing here?"

"Mommy... mommy wished us away!"

Sarah froze. "No!" Tears fell unchecked from her eyes. "Oh, Toby!"

Beatrice was at a loss for what to do. Quietening the two infants, she changed, fed, and laid them into bassinets to sleep.

"Young man, it is time you were abed. Come now. You can see Mistress Sarah tomorrow."

Toby stubbornly shook his head. "No!"

Sarah frowned down at the child with stern disapproval and love. "Now Toby. You must be polite. Bea is trying to take care of you. Come now, Bethany and Castor are sleeping. We want show Bea what a good boy you can be right?"

The boy nodded sheepishly. "Yes, Sarah."

"That's my good little lamb. Off with you now."

"Would you tell me a story?"

She smiled sadly and looked at the goblin nursemaid.

Beatrice nodded.

"Sure baby." Taking the boy's hand, Sarah led him to the cot that had been set up for him. "Lay down and I will tell you a story." When he was asleep, she walked stiffly from the room. Once out of sight, she slumped against the wall and sobbed.

Beatrice waited until she was gone before she disappeared from the nursery and reappeared in the King's study. "What were you thinking?"

Jareth looked at the goblin that had raised him. "Bea, what are you talking about?"

"Those babes you just brought to the castle, your Majesty! Do you know who they are? Do you know who just found them?"

His eyes grew huge and owlish. "No! Those are her siblings... tell me you didn't let her near them!"

"I didn't know, Jareth! I had no idea those wee babes and that little tyke, were her siblings! I had no idea to keep her away from them!"

"Oh Gods, Bea... she delivered the two wee ones not four months ago... the boy she practically raised..." He paced away from her. "I haven't even told her yet that her father is gone." He gripped his hair with both hands. "What am I going to do?"

"You're going to go find that girl right now and comfort her. Then you're going to be a man and tell her the truth."

He stopped and looked at her incredulously. "She'll hate me."

"Why ever for?"

"Because I cannot let her keep them. They must go to other families. I will try to keep them together, but I cannot let her keep them."

"Go!"

He slumped. "Yes ma'am." Snapping his fingers, he disappeared and reappeared in the rooms he had given to Sarah. She wasn't there. Frowning, he formed a crystal to find her and was surprised to see her running across the stone bridge towards the Labyrinth. "Damn me!" Throwing the crystal he appeared behind her. "Sarah?"

She stopped. "You! How could you? You stole them!"

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