

People in town say that you don't go down to the Crossroads when you're wanting something. And you certainly don't stop at them. There are too many possibilities open to you there, too many ways to invite something you don't want.

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"Why do you look like that?"

The man, standing where the roads intersect, looks down at himself and then back to me kneeling before him. He smiles. It's one that might look kind on someone- anyone- else, but it makes a shiver run down my spine coming from him. Somehow, despite the only light coming from the half-moon above us, I can see him as clear as day. His blonde hair shines in the moonlight. slicked back and kept out of his face. His skin is pale, the kind of pale that lets you see blue veins stretching along his arms like snakes. The clothes he has on are nice, a button-down shirt and black slacks, obviously expensive. I wonder if money is a concept to him, beyond the way it influences people to fall into his realm.

By all accounts, he should be inconspicuous, plain and unassuming. In fact, he could be considered respectable, perhaps handsome, even. If I were to pass him on the street, my gaze would just slide right over him. It's his eyes, though, that give him away. A clear, icy blue that pierces through my bones and into my soul, looking for anything that will help him convince me to shake his hand. The smile he sports doesn't reach his eyes. I don't think any smile has in a very long time.

"What did you expect me to look like?"

Once upon a time, his voice would have made people weep in the face of its otherworldly melody. I almost expect to see his words dance through the air between us before flowing in one of my ears and out the other. If words could shine, his voice would have been the light that made it so. But now it makes me wish to hide, to turn back the clock and never come to the Crossroads.

I suppose, if I'm having that reaction, it means I'm not too far gone. I should get up, step back, apologize for making him come all the way here for nothing, turn around, and forget ever leaving the town. I could go on with my life, avoid the Crossroads, leave the room if anyone starts talking about them. I could pretend none of this ever happened.

That isn't what I decide to do.

"I don't know. Goat legs and red skin and horns, I guess."

My knees are starting to ache from feeling the gravel digging into my skin through the denim of my jeans. Being this low to the ground, every slight breeze sends dust into my eyes, making them water just a bit. It blurs him, slightly, but I wish it wouldn't; a part of me is desperately working to commit everything to memory.

He grins. It's all blunt teeth, but somehow, I know they're sharp to the touch. They glow, too, like his hair. It reminds me of the Cheshire Cat, the way his wide grin is the last thing you see before he completely disappears. And, despite him being gone, grin and all, the after image of those glowing white teeth sticks with you, always in the back of your mind.

"That is not something that would scare you. Nothing would be inspired within you by that form."

His eyes flick downwards, like he can tell my neck hurts from looking up at him for so long, but I know better than to get up right now. I don't think I could even if I wanted to. Something is holding me down, pressing me harder to the ground, the pressure burning just slightly when I think of standing. And so, I'm forced to kneel until he decides to let me up.

"I'm supposed to be scared?"

"Of the form itself? No. Of what the form represents? Yes. What do I make you think of when I look like this?"

In the days I had spent debating with myself over the merits of coming to the Crossroads, I never thought there would be conversation. I expected him to tell me the terms of the deal and to disappear after I agree. Instead, I'm getting a crick in my neck as he asks me what I think of his appearance. I want to laugh at the absurdity of it all, but the expectant look in his eyes stops me.

"Centuries of evil, of abuse, of some of the darkest minds humanity has ever created and ones that are inevitable in the future. You represent greed and prejudice and unfathomable violence that has yet to come. There's so much hatred that I'm not sure how you can even stand looking like that."

I have no clue what possessed me to give such an answer, but he looks pleased either way. The odd formality of the words weighs heavy in my mind despite having already released them into the air. I get the feeling he had something to do with it and, based on the way his lips quirk up ever so slightly, I know that feeling is right. But, even if I could, I wouldn't take the words back. There was no lie in them.

“You speak as though you have experience.”

And I do. I do have experience with the two-faced ways of the form he’s taken. There is no way to forget how quickly eyes sharpen with hatred at the sight of someone who doesn’t conform to their expectations and standards for society. That image, that raw anger and pure hatred of my existence, is forever burned into my skin, into my brain, unforgettable.

“And you speak as if you don’t already know I do.”

The reality of the situation, of where I am and why I’m here and who I’m talking to, is not lost on me. The way I’m talking to him isn’t lost on me either. How informal it all is, how I’m mimicking some of his speech patterns, how one could even argue I’m talking back. He doesn’t seem offended, though. Instead, he looks amused, like he’s just heard a toddler attempt to cuss. It makes me wonder how long it’s been since he made a deal that started out like this.

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People in town say that he shows up like a saving grace, like he cares and only wants to help. And maybe he does. But not every time. Sometimes, his greatest pleasure is in making you know he’s only there for himself. He only cares about the bargain, about how it will give him everything and leave you with nothing. And somehow, despite knowing he’s doing you dirty, you still reach out to shake the hand he extends towards you.

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“Why are you here?”

He asks as if he doesn’t already know my reasons, the exact chain of events which brought me to this moment. As though he didn’t have some part in what lead me to kneeling before him on the Crossroads.

I don’t answer this question. Not yet, at least.

“What’ve you given others?”

This is the question that makes him change the way he looks at me. It’s subtle and I wouldn’t have noticed if I hadn’t been staring at only him for so long now. His eyes go from amused to sharp and calculating, studying me anew. I would say he’s surprised, but I think the closer explanation is that I said something unexpected.

Surely, it’s been asked of him before. Humanity has cursed this earth for so long, wanted so many unattainable things, that it must have been asked before. But maybe it hasn’t been asked very often. When desperate people call on him, they’re not thinking of the ones who surely came

before them and what those people asked from him. They aren't thinking, as I am, of those whose legs ached and whose hands shook with the knowledge of what they're willing to give for just a modicum of power.

"I have granted wealth, fame, popularity, talent. I have given people freedom and the power to enslave those who once kept them. I have granted health and miracles to loved ones and sickness and tragedy to enemies. I have granted the rise of empires only to grant their falls to those wronged by them. There are so many things I have granted, child, that your desire is not something new."

Part of me is relieved. If I go through with this, there will be at least one other person in the afterlife who understands. One other person at the end of this road who will know why I did what I did, who had done it themselves. I won't be alone. And it's this thought that makes things a bit easier.

"What'll you take?"

This question makes him smile again. By now, I have grown accustomed to his overbearing, unearthly presence. His smile still makes me want to shudder, but it's less intense now. That doesn't disturb me as much as it probably should.

"I will take your soul when you are twenty-seven. And then you will be mine, burning by my side and keeping me company for the rest of time. But first I will walk side-by-side with you, always present as you use the gift I give you."

His words make me pause, even as my mouth opens to respond. Of all the stories I've heard, being kept close is unusual. Then again, taking anything people in town say at face value is never a good idea. Maybe it's common, but there's no way for anyone in town to know this. I doubt the people who deal with him go around announcing the terms and conditions afterwards.

His offer is tempting, and the price feels small to me, given everything I can gain, given everything else that's been taken from me before I came here. I think of eyes that aren't my own, wide with fear and tear-filled at the pain of a cruel world. The memory fills me with anger, a burning inferno sized desire to make sure they never look that way again.

He stays quiet as I think. Waiting must be nothing new to him. And, if he'll get what he wants in the end anyway, what's a few minutes to let me think before dooming myself?

This thought is what makes me realize I had already made my decision. It was made long before I'd gotten down on my knees. My decision was made the moment I'd had the idea to

come out here to the Crossroads. You don't kneel in the dirt, thinking of what you want, only to deny the one who shows up.

He knows when I've come to this realization, one he was aware of the whole time. I can tell in the way his posture changes, the way his form seems to ripple. His eyes change from icy blue to an endless black with a ring of red where pupils had once been.

"Shake my hand, child, and the deal shall be made."

A hand, still pale and still dangerous, is held out to me and I reach up, taking it and gripping tightly in surprise when he pulls me up off my knees. There's a new kind of ache to them now in the absence of dirt and rocks digging into my skin.

Warmth spreads through me, unbidden but not unwelcome, before he disappears. I look down at my hand, the silence of the Crossroads echoing in the wake of yet another soul sold.