



Cat piss and cabbages.

It was the only way to describe it, really. Even on a good day, the bookstore smelled like a mix of dust and dirty feet. The AC had coughed its last an hour ago, leaving me the proud employee of an ad hoc sauna. A drip above the lintel had forced me to keep the door closed to avoid a miniature lake from forming on the warping hardwood floor. The remainder of the morning was doomed to be a soggy, stinky mess.

The weathered sign hanging from the shutter outside read PROSPECTUS INTELLIGENTSIA TABERNUS. I called it the Pit for short. Probably unkind, but God knows the place reeked like one this morning. Still, the stale odor didn't seem to stop my steady stream of customers from leaving wet trails and dripping umbrellas in their wakes, though I suspected their visits were more of an effort to get out of the rain than driven by any great desire to find a coverless copy of a Dean Koontz novel.

The rain let up just before lunch and with it went the last of my customers, an old man waddling into the wet with a paper sack full of ancient sailing books.

Bliss.

Time for some retro Tom Jones. I loaded up my latest playlist on the silver iPod mounted on the counter and wriggled my way to the front window, tinny speakers blaring. Flipping over the CLOSED FOR LUNCH sign, I mock strutted my way to the minifridge in the storage room for a couple of Cokes and a sandwich, my hips swaying counterpoint. I was half a can and three verses into “She’s a Lady” before the main door creaked open again.

The bells chimed in their plaintive way, somehow cutting through the rumbling growl of the music. A man drifted across the threshold. The grace of his movements caused the hair on the back of my neck to rise. He seemed a shadow, sucking up all the light from the room. The exquisite darkness of his ebony eyes swept over me, primitive and uncompromising. And overdone as all hell. Still. The silken fall of his hair just brushed the top of his shoulders and I’ve always been a sucker for good grooming and potential wangst.

What the hell. I’d bite.

“What’s new, pussycat?” I purred.

“I need to talk to Moira.” The timbre of his words pushed past me, heated and hollow.

“I’m afraid Moira isn’t here.”

His eyes narrowed, the line of his jaw shifting almost imperceptibly. The alarms in the back of my head suddenly went off. I’m not shy, but the thrum of desire that started beating through my veins as he approached the counter wasn’t normal or natural. If this guy was human I’d swear off bacon for a month.

I turned down the music in a futile attempt to distract myself from the elegant curve of his cheekbones and the smooth paleness of his skin. He glided toward me, each rolling step filled with a lazy arrogance. A faint shimmer of

silver dusted his hair, fading in the damp light that trickled through the front bay window. I blinked.

He'd been traveling the CrossRoads. I'd never been there myself, but the silver snowflakes were a dead giveaway he'd been moving between worlds.

My smile was polite, but I couldn't quite keep the stiffness from my voice. "If you'd like, I can take your information and I'll let her know you stopped by." I tapped my pencil on the notebook in front of me. He'd asked for Moira by name, not her official title of Protectorate. I was under no obligation to answer his questions, and as far as I was concerned, the less involved I got in the offshoots of Faery politics, the better.

Truthfully, some of the OtherFolk freaked me the hell out, especially when they insisted on walking around in broad daylight like this. For that matter, I didn't even know *what* he was. Looks aside, he couldn't have been a vampire. Even vampires with TouchStones didn't go walking around at noon. Not like that, anyway. Fae, maybe? Lycanthrope? Oh, what difference did it make? Usually the best policy was to just be polite and wait for them to go away.

That being said, I really hated it when they started trying to magic me up. It's rude and nothing pissed me off faster than when one of them tried to get in my face about it. I knew they couldn't always help it, but this guy wasn't even attempting to tamp it down. Glamour oozed out of him, the magic rolling over me in soft waves of lust. Kinda pleasant in its own way, but distracting as all get out. My mouth tightened; I was suddenly very impatient.

A frown marred his handsome features, and he looked down as though seeing me for the first time. "When will she be back?"

"She's *not* here," I repeated, a hint of annoyance creeping into my tone. I'm not exactly the most outspoken person in

the world, but store clerk or not—human or not—I wasn't some invisible piece of dog shit on the bottom of his shoe either.

"I don't know when she'll be back," I added. The truth of it galled me because I really didn't. The Faery woman had left nearly four months ago and, except for that last note taped on her office door, I hadn't heard from her at all. But this guy didn't need to know that. Hell, none of them needed to know that. I could barely get the OtherFolk to give me the time of day as it was. God only knew what they'd do if they realized Moira wasn't here to hold them in line. "If you'd like to sample some of her . . . other wares, I'll be reopening the shop around back from midnight to one A.M."

"Will you, now?" He stepped closer and I shivered, the quiet power coiling behind the words dancing over my skin.

Sweat beaded on my forehead, cool and clammy. "They don't call it the Midnight Marketplace for nothing." I thrust out my chin in subtle challenge, ignoring the rising panic that fluttered at the base of my throat. *Piss him off, Abby. That will be brilliant.*

His face was quiet and brimming with secrets like a Cheshire cat's. "You're her TouchStone, aren't you?"

"Of course I am," I agreed pleasantly. "And now that we've established the obvious, let's get back to business. Who are you?"

"Tsk." He wagged a finger at me, and I rolled my eyes. Something about the gesture was very familiar, but if I'd met him before I couldn't recall. Then again, I'd only been Moira's TouchStone for six months and I'd seen an awful lot, much of which had become a muddled mess of fancy sparkles and obscenely beautiful people. Anchoring an OtherFolk to the mortal realm wasn't an easy—or straight-forward—task.

“Fine, I get it. Names have power and all that, but it makes it a bit hard to leave a message, don’t you think?” I pointed out.

A flicker of a smile showed on that perfect mouth as his gaze roamed about the bookstore. The store itself was fairly plain, but it had high arches, a giant stone fireplace with overstuffed cushions on the floor, and thick crown molding around the top where the paint was peeling off. I had told Moira the whole thing needed remodeling, or at least some fresh paint, but she insisted the place had “character.” Shabby chic, maybe. Sounded like laziness to me, but whatever. It wasn’t my store. I just worked there.

The man wandered through the stacks for a moment. I seized the opportunity to take his measure, or at least attempt to stare at his ass, which was currently encased in delectable black leather pants. Or I assumed it was, based on what I could see below the fall of his duster. Had it been anyone else wearing it, I would have said they were trying way too hard, but he was working it pretty well so I gave him a pass.

The duster hung open, inviting an easy view of his chest, a white T-shirt sticking to the muscled ridges of his abdomen. *Definitely* my type. His dark eyes flicked sideways at me, the edges crinkling in silent laughter, and I shrugged, not bothering to hide the fact that I’d been checking him out. Hell, he’d probably been expecting it.

He lingered over a coverless paperback about a French vampire. It was one of those overblown stories that had been really popular about ten years ago, complete with ruffling white shirts, long dark ringlets, and outrageous accents. Even a duster or two, actually. I’d thought it marvelous and horribly sexy when I’d read it, my sixteen-year-old heart near fit to bursting at the idea of some dashing angel of the night feeding from my inner thigh.

The reality had been a whole lot messier. It didn't involve my inner thigh either.

He blew the dust off the pages, snorting softly when he read the title. I'd always thought Moira had an absolutely craptacular taste in books. From the looks of it, he agreed. My opinion of him rose a notch.

"It has a happy ending, you know," I said.

His brow furrowed, lips pursed at me, before his attention flicked back to the book. "Does it?"

"All the good romances do."

"There are no happy endings. And vampires are over-rated, bloodsucking tools."

"Can't argue with that." I sighed. "But the vamp in this one runs off with an emotionally constipated angel, so I suppose it all works out in the end. If you don't like that sort of thing, maybe I can interest you in one of these great 'how-to-massage' books from the seventies. It has pictures, if that makes it easier for you to understand."

He ignored me, his expression cryptic. "Very clever of her." He tapped the book with his fingers.

"Clever of who?"

"Moira. Hiding in plain sight like this." His hand made an eloquent gesture as if to encompass the room. "And all thanks to her little mortal TouchStone, so willing to throw herself away—and for what?" He pointed at me. "Rumors of a magic iPod and seven years of agelessness?"

I bristled. "*Enchanted* iPod, thank you very much. And what I'm willing to throw myself away for is absolutely no concern of yours." The barb had taken, however, and I looked down at the counter before that little sliver of regret could show itself.

He chuckled softly. "Not as good as you had hoped, is it?"

"Neither is your outfit. Did you learn to dress that way

in Leather for Bad Boys one-oh-one?” My upper lip curled in derision, suddenly bold in knowing my place. “Sounds to me like someone doesn’t have a TouchStone of his own.” I noted the time with a little sound of pity. 11:57 A.M. “How are those CrossRoads treating you?” I asked. At this time of day, any other folk traveling the CrossRoads sans TouchStone would have a helluva time.

“Not nearly well enough, apparently.” His gaze met mine. “Shall I show you?”

I hesitated, watching those dark eyes flare gold with power. For a moment, I was pinned beneath them, drowning in the sudden promise of things best left to the protective shadow of night. It left me raw and aching; my hips trembled with the urge to submit to him. I blinked and realized he had moved closer.

Crap.

I stood my ground. Maybe if I didn’t move, he’d back down and I’d pass whatever preternatural bullshit test he was running.

Or maybe I was in big trouble.

His cheeks curved up in amusement as he reached out to run a lightly callused thumb over my lower lip. “Pretty Dreamer,” he crooned. He leaned close to my face so that his exquisite pout lay within inches of my lips. An electric jolt shot from my breasts to my groin, sliding over my flesh with wicked intent.

Yup. Big trouble.

I swallowed hard, my eyes closing of their own volition. Inside, my brain was working overtime to come up with something—*anything*—to say, but all I could manage was a strangled groan. I was helpless against the rolling wave of pleasure pulsing low in my belly.

The room began to spin, and I staggered backward. My foot slipped on a loose pile of paper, and I grabbed the edge

of the counter. The world tilted with a familiar lurch, and my jaw clamped down against the vertigo.

He captured my wrist, fingers digging hard enough to make the bones ache. Fire lanced all the way to my elbow as my eyes snapped open with a cry. The arrogant stranger lunged over the counter to steady me, his face ashen. Whatever he'd intended, this wasn't it. The thought was somewhat comforting.

"Hold on, Abby," he whispered.

I had only a moment to wonder how he knew my name before my vision faded into blackness.

. . . his fingers were sliding down my thigh, his voice husky with whispered promises as his tongue slipped into my mouth. I spread myself beneath him in wanton desperation, filled with the ache of well-used flesh. He moved over me, inside me, through me. I was losing myself in the golden thrum of his eyes as he thrust into me. Somewhere in the distance was the chiming of bells, and my bones vibrated with the implication. I fell away, wrapped in his scent and the dim edge of twilight as something snapped into place . . .

"Enough." His voice reverberated like a thunderclap, abruptly breaking the . . . trance? Dream?

"And here I pegged you as the shy, unassuming type." I pulled back from him as the darkness receded, gagging at another wave of dizziness. Admittedly, I hadn't taken my seizure meds that morning, but whether the reaction was caused by my condition or his influence didn't matter. It hadn't felt like a seizure anyway. Balance slowly regained, I glanced up at him, and slid my hands into my pockets to hide my trembling fingers. "What the hell was that?"

Surprise flickered across his face, quickly replaced by

something a bit more appraising. "I don't know," he said finally. "It wasn't supposed to happen."

His gaze lingered on me, somehow managing to be impudent and measured at the same time, but the overconfident cockiness was gone.

"Wow. I find myself strangely not reassured by that." I crossed my arms, hunching my back protectively. I was Moira's TouchStone, by God, marked by a sacred OtherFolk bond that should be beyond contestation and this asshat had just violated every precept that I was aware of.

I was outraged.

I was livid, even.

I was hopelessly out of my league.

The golden edges of his eyes faded away. "Are you all right?"

The sudden change in his demeanor left me suspicious. "Right as rain. Why the . . . you know?" I tapped my head and tried not to blush.

"Side effect. I'm afraid I got a little carried away." He eyed me cautiously, all peaches-and-cream polite. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry."

"Understatement of the week." I reached out, clinging to the edges of the counter like a barnacle at high tide. "And how the hell did you know who I was?"

His mouth twitched. "Name tag."

Idiot.

I shut my eyes, cheeks burning. "Where's a nice bottomless pit when you need one?"

A sharp rap sounded from outside and I started. The figure at the door was young and female and far too perky for a rainy day.

"Shoo," I hissed at the stranger, uncertain of how much attention he would attract. "Shouldn't you be moving along now? The CrossRoads will be closing any minute."

He shrugged and leaned against the wall, a wolfish grin on his face. He raised a finger to his lips as he motioned toward the door.

I rolled my eyes. Leave it to me to attract the tall, dark, and obnoxious ones. I pointed at the sign in the window, hoping whoever it was would cut me some slack and come back after my uninvited guest had left. No such luck.

“Wow.” A head poked through the doorway. “It totally stinks in here. You should open the door or something.” Blond, top-heavy, and rather leggy on the whole, she looked like she’d wandered off the set of a *Girls Gone Wild* audition, wrapped up in denim cutoffs and Skechers. Her eyes were wide and imploring, the color of warm hazelnuts. Innocent.

“Ah, yes,” I said, ignoring the soft snort coming from the corner. “You know, we’re kind of closed right now.”

“Yeah, well, I need some information. Do you have any books on Celtic myths?” She breezed her way in and trotted up to the counter with the self-serving air of the young and stupid.

I chewed on the question, a low throb at the base of my skull signaling an oncoming headache. Or a seizure. Crapshoot as to which one was going to come first. I wasn’t going to get rid of the headache, but I could eliminate the pain in the ass standing in front of me. “There should be a copy of Lady Gregory’s *Gods and Fighting Men* back behind the mirror. It would be a good place to start. Unless you’re looking for something specific?”

“Well . . . uh. Actually, I was kinda hoping you might have something a little more . . . *real*?”

I raised a brow at this. Truth be told, I did; I had books that would damn near bite your nose off if you put them too close to your face. But those were locked away in the back, not for public consumption. Moira had drilled that into my

head often enough, but I would have figured it out on my own. I'm lazy, but I'm not a moron.

"Real?" I mimicked.

"Yeah." She leaned in so I could see the roots of her hair. Her voice dropped to a conspiring whisper. "You know . . . *OtherFolk*?" She turned her head to take in the quantity of shelves. "You have a lot of books here." Her gaze became slightly unfocused as it slid past the corner, and I realized my visitor must be hiding behind a Glamour.

"I'm not quite sure what you mean," I said, deciding to play dumb.

"Oh, I get it." She winked at me. "It's okay. Brandon sent me. Said you would set me straight. Something about TouchStones?"

"Brandon," I repeated, my voice careful and quiet. I would have to have a little chat with that sometimes furry bartender. I don't mind helping out, but I didn't have time for another one of his strays. "And just how did you run into him?"

"I tried to get into the Hallows last night." She flushed beneath my stare. "Everyone knows this town is full of weird shit. Why shouldn't I be a part of it?"

"Did you find your way there by yourself?" I phrased it casually, but my estimation of her slowly began to rise when she nodded. There was a pretty heavy Glamour on the *OtherFolk* nightclub, geared toward warning away an ignorant mortal public. If she'd had the determination to push her way through it . . .

Still. Even if she was right about people being aware, I wasn't going to go shouting it from the rooftops. The *OtherFolk* guard their secrets well. Spilling them was a really awesome way to end up on someone's private shitlist. And that didn't even include the one currently laughing his ass off in the corner.

“Listen, you don’t want to get involved with them. Trust me. It messes with your head and the only thing you’ll have when you’re done is a big pile of regret.” I held up my hand to forestall what would surely be a whining protest. “However, seeing as Brandon sent you my way, I’ll throw you a bone.” I resisted the impulse to giggle at my own pun, though something told me the werewolf wouldn’t have approved. “What did you say your name was?”

“Katy.” One perfectly waxed brow arched, daring me to make an issue of it. It would have been more impressive if the expression on her face wasn’t flitting between hope and suspicion.

“How old are you, Katy?”

“Seventeen.” I glanced over at the mirror in the corner, as though to argue with my reflection. Seventeen. Jesus. Had I ever been that eager to throw myself off the cliff? I let my gaze go slightly fuzzy, the blue of my eyes fading into the glass of the mirror, the pale, freckled face curving away into some far-off piece of my past.

Yes.

My reflection stared back without blinking. The mirror itself had always given me the creeps. It was carved of black wood with silver gilt edges, on a curved stand with a wide base. There was nothing particularly ominous about it at the moment, just my face peering from its cold depths, familiar and smooth. I shook my head and turned back to the girl.

Girl, hell. I wasn’t all that much older than she was, but her innocence nearly overwhelmed me. I was jaded and weary standing next to her like that. Funny what a difference a few seconds can make on your outlook. One moment you’re cruising along enjoying the sweet carelessness of youth, and the next you’ve got a gimpy leg and a metal plate in your head, and everything you’ve ever known is in shambles. Life can be a real bitch, I guess.

“All right. Come with me.”

She let out a muffled squeal and followed me behind the mirror. “Are there any here now? You know. Watching us?”

My hand hesitated inches away from the book I wanted. The stranger’s merriment wrapped around me like a ribbon, and I bit down hard on the inside of my cheek. “Oh, no. I don’t think so. It’s nearly noon, after all. They don’t like being caught out in the daylight hours.” I glanced behind me, avoiding the corner by the door. Her mouth twisted into a scowl of disappointment, and I gave her a wry shrug as I pulled out a volume of poetry. “Believe it or not, in a lot of ways they’re just like us. It’s not like they’re hiding in your closet or under your bed.” I paused. “Or at least, not most of them.”

Her upper lip curled as she looked at the book. “What’s this?”

“A book. And you’re going to read it.” I flipped through several pages, marking them with a couple of spare Post-its from my pocket before handing it to her.

She stared at me and then glanced at the first marked page. After a moment of silence she began to read aloud:

*O see ye not yon narrow road,
So thick beset wi’ thorns and briers?
That is the Path of Righteousness,
Though after it but few inquire.*

*And see ye not yon braid, braid road,
That leis across the lily leven?
That is the Path of Wickedness,
Though some call it the Road to Heaven.*

*And see ye not yon bonny road
That winds about the fernie brae?*

*That is the Road to fair Elfand,
Where thou and I this night maun gae.*

*But, Thomas, ye shall haud your tongue
Whatever ye may hear or see;
For speak ye word in Elfyn-land,
Ye'll ne'er win back to your ain countrie.*

Her brow furrowed impatiently. “Yes, yes, I know this part. I’ve read this before, you know.”

“Then you should have some of the answers you’re looking for.” She looked at me quizzically. I sighed and went on. “How many paths are there?”

“Three. Duh.”

I closed my eyes. “Yes. What are they?”

“Faeryland, Heaven, Hell. Yeah, I get it. Light Path, Dark Path, and Middle Earth or whatever. What does it have to do with the CrossRoads?”

“Everything,” I said quietly. “Thomas stood at the CrossRoads with the Faery Queen and he chose her. Not the angels. Not the daemons. The Fae.”

“And that means?”

“The Fae are in control. Or at least they have the most influence, the most to gain from TouchStones. They are the Keepers of the CrossRoads, the liaisons between the OtherFolk and us.”

Thomas the Rhymer had been the first mortal TouchStone to record a Contract with the OtherFolk. And he had fulfilled that contract—for a full seven years—gaining the gift of Prophecy as a result. The irony of the situation wasn’t lost on me. From his perspective, the Fae were probably the most amusing of the bunch. Heaven knew just about every angel I’d ever met damn near had a stick up his ass. And really? However pretty the daemon girls are, it’s

almost always a guarantee they're going to come back and eat your soul one dark night, and who wants to deal with that?

"You can Contract with whoever you wish, of course, but the Fae watch over it all. Depending on who and what you choose, though, there may be political ramifications." My mouth thinned. "And if it goes badly, then the Faery Protectorate has to get involved."

She chewed on her lip thoughtfully. "And what would my Contract with Brandon be?"

I shrugged. I had no idea what sorts of things a werewolf might require of his TouchStone, though I could think of a few responsibilities she probably wouldn't want to take on. "Regardless of the specifics of each individual Contract, the mere fact that the two of you are TouchStoned will allow him to move between our world and the CrossRoads without waiting for the Hours. Aside from that, I can't say. Each Contract is individualized."

Katy's eyes darted toward the door. "So *that's* what he meant. If he has a TouchStone, he doesn't have to worry about being weaker in the daytime?"

"That's one part of it," I agreed. "Each Path has their own Hour, where traveling is easiest. TouchStones ease that transition. Something about having a soul, I suppose. The angels prefer Dawn. The daemons, Midnight."

"And the Fae like Twilight, I suppose. What about noon? How does that fit in?"

"There's a fourth Path," I said, watching her try to work it out. "Can you tell me what it is?"

"Um, no?" She scowled. "It doesn't say anything about a fourth Path."

"Yes it does," I said. "Come back and tell me when you figure it out. It's all in there, I promise."

Katy gave me a dubious look and clutched the book tightly. “How much is it?”

“On the house,” I said, waving her off.

“And if I do this, you’ll take me to the CrossRoads?”

“I can’t do that. Most of the Doors are hidden, so that’s something you’ll have to figure out on your own.” *That, and the fact you’ve never been there*, my inner voice said snidely. The Doors to the CrossRoads themselves were fluid enough—transitory gateways that opened and shut at the Hours—but finding them was another matter altogether. “Truthfully, it’s probably best if you TouchStone to Brandon first. And take it from me—read the Contract and understand just what you’re getting into. Being a TouchStone isn’t for the faint of heart.”

A fierce smile spread across her face. “I’ll be back soon.” She squinted as she peered at my shirt. “Abby?”

“That’s me,” I said dryly, pulling at my name tag. The eavesdropping man candy pointed at me and then tapped his head. I suppressed a sneer.

“Thank you so much, Abby. You won’t be disappointed, I promise.” Katy beamed at me and I couldn’t help but feel like the wolf in Red Riding Hood’s story. *The better to eat you with, my dear?* But no, that wasn’t right, either. I recognized that determined look in her eye, and even though I was fairly new to the whole OtherFolk scene, there was a part of me that would have loved to have had help instead of stumbling through it like I was.

And fucking it up royally, even.

“Will you be around tonight? You know, in case I figure it out?”

I snorted. There’s enthusiasm for you. “Not really. I’m going to an art gallery showing at the Waterfront. And I need to go get shoes for it first.” Small talk was not my forte, but I seemed to have momentarily adopted a friend.

“Oh,” she said. “Well, you should check out that new place on the corner of Canon and King. They’ve got some really nice stuff. And turn on the fan or something—it’s gross in here.”

“I’ll do that,” I said with a wan smile. She thanked me again and left, the door clinking shut behind her. I took a deep breath. It *was* entirely too damn hot in here. Of course, the main reason for that was still in the corner. Watching me.

I was going to have to remedy that *soon*.

“Well, this has been fun, but technically I’m working, so unless you’re going to buy something, you need to leave. Since you couldn’t be bothered to give me your name, I’ll just tell Moira that an extra from the porno version of *Something Wicked This Way Comes* was looking for her.”

“Extra? Hell,” he muttered. “I’d be the star.”

I coughed. “Emphasis on the word ‘comes,’ of course.”

The amusement rippled from him, rich and dark, but there wasn’t anything menacing about it now. “I suppose I deserve that. Did you want that name?”

“Color me excited,” I retorted. “Seems only fair, though. Generally I prefer a handshake and a hello *before* I hop into metaphysical bed with someone.”

“I don’t.” He shrugged and held out his hand. “Brystion.” He trilled the *r* sound, giving it an exotic rumble. *Brrrist-e-on*.

“Just Brystion?” I let my hand slip into his, holding my breath as I waited for the mind roll to happen again. When it didn’t, I relaxed. His skin was warm to the touch, but somehow not unpleasant even with the heat of the day.

“For now. And don’t worry about telling Moira, Abby.”

“Why?” My pulse jumped at the delicious way my name rolled off his tongue.

He smiled. “Because she already knows, now,” he said gently, shaking his head at my ignorance.

Before I could ask him what he meant, he was gone. I craned my neck toward the window, catching a glimpse of his dark form striding down the street, heedless of the oncoming drizzle—or the dull thudding of my heart.