

Something Fishy

A cut scene from *Ritual Income* by B.L. Brown

The afternoon was a typical Floridian winter's day: low seventies, puffy white clouds drifting across a cerulean sky, and air that had achieved equilibrate perfection — enough humidity to keep her skin from drying out but not damp enough for a permasweat. A nice enough day that Darkly was sunning himself in an Adirondack like a lizard on a rock, wearing board shorts that tested the bounds of good taste.

The geometric print was bad enough, but coupled with varying shades of neon some poor designer had deemed fashionable, they were a downright horrific, albeit cheerful, travesty. She couldn't be too upset, however, as the shorts were short enough to show off muscular thighs and the curious arc of a scar along the inside of his right knee. He had eschewed shoes or sandals altogether and completed the ensemble with a white v-neck and pitch-black sunglasses.

Milla sat sideways in her chair, legs dangling over the armrest. She had kicked off her checkered slip-ons and was begrudgingly enjoying the feel of the sun on her bare skin.

“You need sunscreen?” Darkly angled his face towards her. His sunglasses were impenetrable. He could have been talking to Milla through closed eyes for all she knew.

“I'll be fine.” Her daily lotion boasted an SPF of fifty, and she'd had the foresight to bring her black sun hat for the walk to his rental. It was only a mile — less if she cut through the Flagler campus. “Did you put some on?”

Darkly hummed and Milla immediately decided she didn't believe him. Though she was pale, her skin had had close to two decades to acquaint itself with Florida's peculiar brand of Vitamin D. When putting in the effort, Milla could go from ghostly to normal to pleasantly tanned without burning.

Darkly, on the other hand, had developed an alarming pinkish-hue, like a flamingo. Considering he had mentioned an allergy to shellfish in an earlier meeting, the current neon state of his skin meant that, yes, he was sunburnt and too proud to admit it.

Another few minutes passed in silence.

“Was there a syllabus for today, or are we just going to sit here?”

“What d’ye want to talk about?” His voice was thick as if he were close to falling asleep, which, Milla realized, would explain the distressing color of his skin. The idiot had likely been passing out in the sun every day since he’d arrived. She stretched out her legs, wincing at the soreness in her hamstrings, and dropped one foot to the ground, the dead grass scratching at her sole.

“Iunno.” Milla pulled a lock of hair between her fingers. She picked at the broken ends, rubbing them between her fingers and letting the dead hair flutter to the ground. “Did your call go alright?”

Darkly rolled his head along the chair back to look at her. One eyebrow arched over the frame of his sunglasses. “Concerned about me, Ludmilla?”

“No.” *Yes.* “You just seemed out of it when I left, and since you’ve barely been doing your job, I thought it would be polite to ask.”

“Well, if you must know, my call was fine,” he turned his face back to the sun, “but thank you for asking.”

“You’re welcome.”

“What’s your issue today?”

“What do you mean?”

He lifted an arm from the Adirondack, counting off on his fingers. “You showed up on time, didnae complain when I said we’d be outside, barring your comment just now, you have barely sassed me, and you just asked after my well-being.” The arm flopped back down, and he smirked at her.

“So being concerned with the welfare of others is alarming?”

Darkly sat up, pulling the sunglasses away and pinning her with a bright, green gaze. “It is when it’s you.”

Milla opened her mouth to snap at him and realized she had nothing to say. The seagull from her run had shaken her, and the day had been off-kilter since then.

“Out with it,” he goaded, propping an ankle on his knee.

“Just a weird morning.” Milla pulled her sunhat lower, choosing to look at her scarred palms rather than his intense stare.

“What counts as a weird morning in your demesne?”

“You’d know if you ever came out to see how I tend it.”

“I would if you invited me.” He smirked. Milla frowned. “Walk me through it. Did you go for a run?”

“I did,” she shuffled her feet in the dead grass. “It was good, actually. Really good. I felt —” Milla pursed her lips, searching for the right words to describe how wonderful those first few miles had been. The amount of energy she’d had upon waking, how her gait settled into a long-legged stride, and for a moment, it felt like she was flying. “Great,” was the best she could come up with.

“Brilliant.” His voice held a smile as if her run had anything to do with him or these inane meetings. “So why the haunted look?”

“I don’t know, I just —” she wavered a hand in the air. “Feel off today, I guess.” She pulled her legs up and hugged her knees, lacing her fingers together as if she could fully hide under the brim of her hat. Darkly watched this, his eyes hard and his mouth tucked to the side.

“When my parents died, I would go dark sometimes.” He leaned forward, knees on elbows, and studied the ground between his feet. “Gray Days, my sister called them. When she couldnae get a smile or a laugh out of me. Just ... nothing. The world had nothing in it for me anymore. Not without them.”

He opened and closed his hands, eyes still focused on the ground. A black coin appeared between his index finger and thumb, and he began absentmindedly rolling it across the knuckles of his left hand.

Definitely a summoner. She had figured as much, but this was the confirmation. With the card, the disappearing towel, the pencil. A long-dormant part of her was jealous. The weeks she and Morgen had spent trying to tease practical summoning out of her Way were some of the most frustrating she could remember.

“How did she break you out of them?”

He paused and angled his head in acknowledgment of her question, waiting.

She took the hint.

Horned God-damned quid pro quo.

“After the incident, when I moved in with the Morgenhexe, I stopped eating meat.”

“Didnae ken you were vegetarian.”

“Ovo-lacto, mainly. Something about cold cuts, salted meat, hunks of steak, whole roasted chickens.” She gagged. “Haven’t had the stomach for that since I was a kid.” Darkly looked up, eyes shining like jade in the Florida sun. But Milla wasn’t done. He must have seen it

on her face, in the twist of her mouth, because he sat back and waited for her to go on. “Ezra loved a good steak, medium rare. Thanksgiving turkey, craw boils, tacos lengua, pho with tripe.” Milla swallowed, nauseous at the memory of all of those meals. A part of her still shied away from the outbursts of annoyance that would never, ever happen again. Ezra was Gone. “He would cook food I couldn’t eat as if it didn’t matter. Always trying to fix me.”

“How do you mean?”

“When we were in Hong Kong, he took me to a Japanese restaurant in Kowloon.”

“Seems like a risk.”

“You would think.” Milla lowered one leg, letting the grass resume tickling her skin. “It’s easy to eat vegetarian in Asia, thankfully, and I’ll eat fish if pressed.”

“Good to ken.”

A minute passed. Milla pursed her lips in a taunting smile. Darkly blinked, taking the subtle hint. He sat back, magicking his sunglasses out of nowhere.

“Haggis.” He slid the shades over his eyes.

“Haggis?”

“Cannae stand it. The whole thing is a conspiracy. A joke made up by the Scottish National Party in an attempt to get England to disown the entire nation of Scotland.” He made a face of such disgust that Milla couldn’t help but laugh, which earned her a genuine smile in return. “So this Japanese restaurant.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” she countered.

“Aye?”

Milla stared at him until he had the good grace to lean back, ready to listen. She stretched out her other leg and scooted to the edge of her chair. The grass softened against her soles, warm

from the sun. “It wasn’t the best trip we’d taken. I had annoyed him somehow, and I couldn’t figure out what I’d done. We went out, suit and tie, dress and heels. The whole thing.”

“Would’ve liked to see that.”

She flipped back the brim of her hat and raised her eyebrows.

“What? I cannae appreciate a witch in fine clothes?”

Nodding her head in a manner that was brimming full of sarcasm, Milla mouthed, “Okay.”

“Restaurant.” Darkly leaned back and crossed his arms.

“Right, so we order. Gyoza, edamame, udon, donburi, sushi. He wanted to go all out. Said it was a celebration. I remember that, as I spent half the meal wondering if I had missed our anniversary, his birthday ... I couldn’t figure it out.” She swallowed. “And then the most awful dish I have ever seen in my life was placed on the table. Right in front of me. Odori-don.”

“Odori-don.”

“A whole-ass cuttlefish served with a tiny pitcher of soy sauce that you pour over its legs to make them writhe and dance.” She danced her fingers like tentacles, shuddering. “Like it’s alive.”

“Horned God,” Darkly whispered.

“I didn’t know what it was. Ezra told me to pour the sauce over it, and when it came to life, he had the gall to laugh when I darted back from the table. I knocked my chair over and caused some poor businessman to ruin his suit.”

“Milla —”

“Don’t.” She raised a hand. “No pity, you’re investigating me.”

“Aural Insurance —”

“I don’t care.” Milla glared at him. “In my grayest of days, I sometimes manage to remember what an asshole he could be. That he had a cruel streak buried deep beneath that smile and charm and skill.” Her voice cracked, and she closed her eyes, not wanting Darkly to see her cry. But tears fell, rolling down her cheeks, one-two, and dripping from her chin. Heat rose on her neck and her chest, surging down Milla’s arms in an embarrassed wave.

When she opened her eyes, prepared for his pity, Darkly was half-risen in his seat. The sunglasses were gone, but the witch was not looking at her. His black eyes were trained on the ground between her feet.

Milla looked down at the lush green grass and the writhing earthworms wriggling to the surface. A burying beetle clawed up out of the earth, its red and black carapace glinting in the sun like low-burning embers as it stitched itself back together.

And she ran.