

E.R.I.E.

A cut scene from *Ritual Dues*

“Focus, Milla.”

Ezra tapped her knee. Once, twice, thrice, and then flicked between her eyes.

“I’m trying.” She grunted, straining to hold the voided flame in her palm. Sweat dripped from her temple to her cheekbone, to her jaw, and Ezra followed it with his eyes. Without saying a word, without warning, he reached out and traced the path with his thumb, catching up to the bead before it fell from her jaw. Electricity followed the wake of his touch. Milla sucked in a breath, biting her lower lip. The necrous flame in her hand fizzled out, leaving an ashen score mark on her palm.

“I need you to try harder, Milla.” His voice was low, calm in the way that set her on edge. Ezra was lightning in a cracked bottle, a witch with a loose leash restraining the explosion of his power, and didn’t Milla know it. Time and time again, her failure to concentrate, to manipulate her Way into something else, caused that explosion. Milla had lost count of the migraines and cluster headaches that had plagued her over the last year.

Goddess, had it only been a year?

In that time, aspirin had become a part of her morning routine, and the white spots dancing in her eyes were old frenemies. Their absence meant Ezra was off working, which meant Milla was alone, and she could breathe.

They were back now, tickling behind her eyes and in her sinuses like a pent-up sneeze.

But it was good because it meant she was using her Way, albeit poorly, if the angry flash of teal in her mentor’s eyes was anything to judge by.

He sighed, ducking his head and smacking a mosquito from the back of his neck before scratching, deep in thought. Milla dropped her hands to the earth, sighing at the surge of energy the ancient graveyard offered. Leaning back, she watched Ezra think.

She liked these moments, when his features relaxed and she saw the witch rather than the mentor. He had a habit of pinching his lower lip and rolling it between his forefinger and thumb. Or he would scratch the back of his neck like he was doing now, or draw sigils in the dirt like he was working through a math problem. Her favorite was when he'd lurch to his feet, stare down at her with a queer expression, and then begin pacing. Stopping every few passes to stare at her again, like Milla was a puzzle to be solved.

In those moments, she filled his thoughts, and something dangerous bloomed in her chest.

Dangerous, silly, and all too easy to imagine. His room was right upstairs, and it would be so easy. She'd caught him watching her and Leigh doing yoga in the backyard, seen his frown deepen when he walked in on them making out on the couch. He'd even begun joining them on their runs.

But he was never rude to Leigh's face. He chatted with Milla's girlfriend while they had dinner, and had even gone to the effort to lie to Leigh.

Ezra hated lying. Lies were cheap, he would say, but he told Leigh he was a grad student at the University of North Florida. Lied that his and Milla's parents were friends and they had offered him a discount on rent to share the duplex. He welcomed Leigh when she came over and left them to their own devices.

He was polite and kind, but still Milla wondered.

Ezra pushed her, in general, but never harder than in those training sessions after she'd spent a night at Leigh's apartment as if he felt the need to make up for lost time, even though she had yet to miss a lesson and Ezra had missed dozens.

"C.R.O.W. business," he would say, throwing clothes into a bag while Milla leaned against the doorframe. "I should be back in a week. Work on your returns. When I get back, I'm going to need to see you heal a minor wound."

"How would you even begin to test that?"

"With a knife."

And, again, Ezra hated lying.

Milla had learned to disguise a reverse enervation as a chronomantic return very quickly.

"Let's try this." He looked up at her through his lashes. Obnoxiously thick, dark brown lashes. Teal magick limned bright amber eyes, and Milla couldn't look away. "A witch I worked with on that last job wanted me to test out an app."

"An app?" Milla blew a puff of air at her bangs, fluttering them off her forehead. "Like on your phone?"

"That's what I said." Ezra tapped at his screen, then laid the phone between them. "It's supposed to track signatures of various Ways. So far, they've only attuned it to chronomantics, hippocromantics, Green Witches, and an obnubilari."

Ezra tapped on the screen again. A chart displayed a waving parabola, swooping and rising in steady arcs. "That's an obnubilari baseline."

"Like you?"

"Not like." His mouth quirked, a little twitch of approval. He traced the waves of his signature, hovering just over the screen. "Watch."

Without warning, the world around her grew foggy and hazed. The tombstones of Tolomato all but vanished, and there was nothing to see but Ezra sitting under a weeping Spanish Oak.

He smiled at her, achingly sweet. The expression so genuine, so fitting for his face that Milla's heart skipped a beat. He'd smiled at her before, an aloof, distanced thing, but never like this. The abrasive flare of his teal magick paled and softened into an inviting cornflower blue that mimicked Milla's own ghost-lights. His brows lowered, and the creases of laugh lines that Milla hadn't known existed appeared.

Ezra held out his hand, beckoning her to take it, and Goddess help her, she did. She let him pull her to her feet and guide her through the haze, trying not to think about how her hand fit so well in his. How his grip was guiding and strong, his palm over-hot against her ever-clammy skin. They paused in front of the only tombstone visible in the fog, a jagged, crooked slab of stone with a barely legible year beneath the lichen and kudzu.

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“Poor idiot.”

“Why do you say that?” Ezra looked down at her, one thick eyebrow arched, a half smile burrowing into the side of his cheek. Milla's stomach flipped.

“To come so far, to sail across the sea with a madman and only his dreams to fill their sails, and then die the moment you get here?” She set her hand on the tombstone, feeling the ache of a forgotten Soul and regretful Shade against her palm. “What a fucking rip.”

Ezra laughed. He never laughed. The most Milla had caught was a chuckle or derisive huff. His laugh was disarming, and the sound buried itself in between Milla's ears where it would

remain for as long as she could remember. “You have such a way with words, Milla. My mother would call it unseemly, but I find it refreshing.” He wiped at the corner of his eye. “Truly.”

“Happy I can be of some amusement.”

“Oh,” he grinned at her, “you are no end of amusement.”

Ezra raised his hand, placing it against her cheek. Milla froze, unsure what to do, what he meant by this. His fingers trembled. Teal magic danced and brightened until it hurt to look him in the eyes, and then he trailed his thumb from her temple to cheekbone to jaw.

“Now try harder.”

Pain flared, the white spots bursting and blooming with blistering heat. Milla bent at the waist, clutching her head to back away away away a—

“Milla.” Ezra barked. “Stop daydreaming and open your eyes.”

She did. When he used that tone, she did what he said. It wasn’t worth the trouble to do otherwise. The sun hurt her eyes, burning bright overhead. She wondered where the fog had gone, but then remembered it was noon. On a Saturday. And St. Augustine never had fog so thick you couldn’t see the world around you.

“Hey!” She jumped to her feet, pointing down at Ezra.

“Yes?”

“I told you not to do that.” She spat near his feet. The grass hissed and smoked where the glob landed. “It’s not fair.”

“How is it not fair for me to use my Way?”

“Because you can, Ezra.”

“So use yours.”

“I can’t outside of this wretched cemetery. You know that. That’s why you have me disguising my dreadfire as a spalování party trick.”

“No. I have you learning how to mimic the Ways so you can truly use yours, and it starts with simple party tricks.”

“Oh, and I suppose it ends somewhere?”

“Yes. With you changing the world,” he snapped back. “The Deadly Way is the crux of magick, Milla. It is not a thing Forbidden and Foule, but the soul and the shade and the body of what we do. It sets the rules for how we do it, which is why it scares C.R.O.W. so much. You could travel untold power, if only you were willing to learn how. Now sit, and look, and learn.”

She did. He showed her the chart on his phone, the obnubilari signature disappeared and was overtaken by another, steeply peaked line.

“What is that?”

“That is obfuscatio.”

“I don’t understand.”

“C.R.O.W. will always seek a way to put the Wicked and the Weird in their place,” Ezra explained, using his favored phrase in place of. Forbidden and Foule. She liked that about Ezra, that he didn’t judge her for what she was, but saw her as a puzzle to be pieced together. Wicked and Weird and a little bit Wild. “There will always be witches who disagree, who think the Ways should be open. And those witches are many and they are everywhere, Milla.”

“So why...?”

“The witch designing this technology”—he tapped his phone—“is one of those witches.”

“Okay, but how did you change the signature?”

“I confused it.” He clutched the grass beside his knee, tearing it free. With a wave of his hand, the grass became a muddle of green in his palm. Another wave had the grass disappearing altogether. Beyond that, it was hard for her to look at his hand, to recognize it as a hand at all, much less a hand holding something.

Had he been holding something? No. Ezra had no hands. She knew that. Bless his heart, he had no hands, so why was she even wondering what had been there?

He dropped a palmful of grass, and Milla blinked.

She hated when he did this, but she understood the lesson.

“You worked a weak allure, then ran a grander hex behind it, a—a truthblind? Further obscuring truth with an allure-to-hex sequence?”

Ezra nodded, eyes bright, tongue pinched between his teeth as he grinned. Milla was glad she was sitting, because her knees felt curiously weak. “Now you try.”

“Now?”

“No time like the present.” He gestured to the ruin of grass between them. “Work a necro-return, step only so far as to grant falselife, and then spin it into an allure. A weak willful malediction and we’ll see how it reads.”

So she did. Muttering “*návrat, návrat, návrat*” under her breath, her palm floating above the torn blades of grass while her eyes watched the screen. Nothing appeared, but Ezra did not seem concerned. He nodded, eyes twitching between the grass and his phone. Blades withered and dried, crumpling to dust and disappearing into the earth.

Milla switched her intent, stepping elsewhere in her Way and pooling an allure. A lullaby, quiet and whispered. A benediction to life, to growth, to resurrection. Green spears wiggled from the ruin, thickening and lengthening, and then the patch of earth was grass once more.

Ezra's hand gripped her knee, squeezing gently, and Milla smiled. "Did I do it?"

"You did." He laughed again, the sound cementing itself in her head, and showed her the screen. A line threaded across the chart, its bell curve so slight as to be nonexistent.

"Congratulations, Millapet. You're a Green Witch."