

I wanted to slam the door to my apartment behind myself. I didn't. I'd never really been the sort to indulge myself like that. I knew it would just make things harder for me in the long run. Dealing with complaining neighbors, with the landlord, maybe even fixing the door if I slammed it hard or often enough. It wasn't worth it.

But it would have felt *so good* in the moment. It had been a bad day in a bad week in a bad month, and if I was going to be honest, it had been a pretty damn bad *life*. I couldn't remember how many times people had told me I only had to do one more thing and it would get better, and none of it had worked. My parents finally moved out of the slums, and the few friends I had in school were gone. Moved on to high school, and the ostracization got even worse. Finally find a social niche, and it's the kind of niche where admitting you belong there is a death sentence for the rest of your social life. Graduate and go to college, and develop a major anxiety disorder before dropping out when the money cuts off.

Get a job and support myself, and I had *this* bullshit to deal with, day in, day out. Every day the same tedious, pointless crap, the same meaningless posturing and drama queens, the same petty squabbles over who was supposed to do what.

No wonder I was frustrated. A year and a half of this shitty job, and things hadn't gotten any better, and I no longer believed that they were going to.

I turned on my computer and then went to take a shower while it started up. It wouldn't take that long, but I really wanted to wash up and change out of my work clothes. I reeked like grease, and the last thing I needed right now was to be reminded of the restaurant.

After my shower I put on an old, greying bathrobe and went looking for dinner. I was a good cook, but after spending the day working in the kitchen the last thing I wanted to do was make food, so, as usual after work, I just grabbed something out of the fridge. Usually it was leftovers, but I hadn't been able to work up the energy to cook for myself in days, which made that hard. I ended up throwing a premade sandwich from the grocery store into the microwave. They tasted like crap, but after a day at work, *everything* would taste like crap.

While the food was heating, I went back to my computer and launched an Internet browser, mediated through a VPN for slightly more security. Once that was in progress, I went back to the kitchen. I flipped the sandwich to ensure even heating, and then grabbed a bottle of beer out of the fridge before returning to the computer. You weren't supposed to serve beer cold, but I was just enough of a philistine to prefer it that way, and with the kind of beer I could afford, it really didn't matter.

At the computer, I pulled up my usual assortment of sites. a couple of social networks, a couple of news sites, some comics and entertainment sites. And then there was the one I was actually here for, a simple login page. The background of the site was a simple CG picture of a mountain glen with some rocks and a stream, visually attractive without being terribly memorable. Aside from a notice that much of the content of the site wasn't available to guest users, there wasn't anything to really suggest what the purpose of the site was.

It wasn't that we were secretive, exactly. It was more that the people who actually *wanted* to be there already knew what we were there for, and people who stumbled on it by accident didn't want to know. Besides, people didn't really spend much time on the login screen. All the good stuff was restricted.

I typed in my username and password, then hit enter. It went to a loading screen, then brought up a screen that displayed:

**Welcome**, xXDarkWolf18Xx. You will be automatically returned to the previous page in 5 seconds.

Once it brought up the welcome screen, I went back to the kitchen to grab my food. I'd only waited to confirm that I hadn't slipped up on the password. I was usually fairly good about that, but it was thirty characters; the occasional miskeying was inevitable.

I wasn't entirely sure why I bothered with that kind of password anymore, really. No one was likely to try to hack my account here, after all. I supposed it was a sort of nostalgic throwback to when I'd actually had to take care that no one knew I was logging into these sites. They weren't illegal, technically, but they weren't the sort of thing I'd wanted my family to know about.

Which would have felt more excessive, if they hadn't *literally* disowned me when they found out about it. I'd sent them a couple of Christmas cards, but gave up after a few years when they were returned unopened. Enrico was the only one who was even still on speaking terms with me, and even then, there was always a certain disconnect. Any topic which even hinted at my interests or proclivities was ruthlessly avoided. When I brought them up by accident, the result was a chilly silence that could last for days.

Frowning at that thought, I got my food and drink and returned to the computer. I'd planned to browse while I ate, trying to move past the aggravations of the day, but I paused when I saw a notification window on the screen.

You have a new private message.

**From:** leporine4life

**Subject:** Made up your mind yet?

I opened the message, and found that it was blank. No real surprise there; the message was all in the header for this.

I sighed, and typed a quick response. **xXDarkWolf18Xx:** *Not sure yet. I still can't believe you're serious about this.*

I was almost halfway done with the sandwich before I got another message. **leporine4life:** *u know i am. u saw the video. y u r not convinced i have no idea*

**xXDarkWolf18Xx:** Videos can be altered. Or faked completely. I hit the send button and then took another drink.

This time the reply came almost immediately. **leporine4life:** *id have known. that is literally my job. literally. whats your problem?*

**xXDarkWolf18Xx:** *It's just...werewolves? Seriously? This can't be real. Where did you even get this video?*

**leporine4life:** *\*shrug\* some nut sent it to the paper and told us to publish it. editor wont touch it but i saw it and saved a copy. course i did right? lol*

**xXDarkWolf18Xx:** *And you're sure the video is genuine?*

**leporine4life:** *absolutely. and get this, i think i tracked down the person who made it. took some work but its my job anyways so whatev. girl in colorado sent it in n from her note i think she maybe knows the werewolf. you live around there right?*

My heart sank a little, and I took another bite before writing my reply, giving myself a second to make sure that it wasn't too obviously disappointed. **xXDarkWolf18Xx:** *Not really. California isn't that close.*

**leporine4life:** *in the US at least. you could visit there and see whats up. or move. we both know you don't have a lot to stay for.*

**xXDarkWolf18Xx:** *I don't have the money to move right now. And before you ask, no, I can't take out a loan even if I wanted to, which I don't. My credit is shit. Why don't you go?*

**leporine4life:** *i cant even get in the country. its easier for u than me. ...look, i should maybe not be mentioning this, but i think i know someone who can help with the money. paybacks a bitch (no offense) but he doesnt give a shit bout your credit score or whatever. you want me to shoot him an email for you?*

**xXDarkWolf18Xx:** *...maybe. Why do you care so much about this anyway? And don't say it's for the paper. We both know a Dutch newspaper isn't printing a story about this, and even if they were there are easier ways you could do it.*

**leporine4life:** *u caught me. this is personal, not business. any chance werewolves are real i have to check u know? lol of course you do. look where we are there are like 100 threads about that in the forum right now. ppl here would give their right arm for this n u know it.*

**xXDarkWolf18Xx:** *So why not go yourself? You could get a visa if you really wanted one.*

**leporine4life:** *roflmfao what? me? you know im not the canine here you dweeb. this has u written all over it. don try and deny it iv seen your faves on this site u perv.*

**xXDarkWolf18Xx:** *You're one to talk. You think I didn't watch the video you uploaded last month? Never mind canines, some of the rabbit pictures you get off to make me throw up a little.*

**leporine4life:** *to each her own my friend. look, iv gotta go to bed. work in four hours. you want me to send my guy an email n send you what iv got about the girl that sent that vid?*

**xXDarkWolf18Xx:** *...Yes please. Don't know whether I'll follow up on it but I should at least look into it, I guess.*

**leporine4life:** *cool. good luck with work.*

**xXDarkWolf18Xx:** *Lost cause with that, I'm afraid. Almost stabbed the new waitress with a carving knife today. She grabbed a plate before I put sauce on it and then had a hissy fit when the customer flipped out on her! Who does that?*

**leporine4life:** *lol send pics if you do. gnight.*

It still creeped me out that leporine's mysterious loan shark had arranged the meeting in my own damned restaurant. I supposed it was *possible* that it was a coincidence, but not even I believed it. There were so many restaurants in Los Angeles that you'd have a hard time picking the right one if you meant to. And it wasn't like it was a particularly good venue; the place was just another mediocre Mexican place that was more cheap than good.

It was a pain in the ass for me, too, in that anyone who recognized me would be a disaster. I'd ended up putting on heavy makeup, sunglasses, and a hat; hopefully that would keep the other employees at bay. I'd briefly considered wearing a fursuit, more as a joke than anything, but in the end decided it wasn't worth the risk. The restaurant wasn't in the really *bad* part of LA, but there were still some things you didn't do. Fursuiting on the street, especially after dark, was definitely one of them.

I didn't have a party name, but it was very easy to find the man I was here to meet. Pasty pale and dressed in a black suit that must have cost more than I made in a month, he stood out from the mostly poor, mostly Latino clientele of that joint like a shark in a tank of goldfish.

I sat down across from him, and he smiled warmly. "Ah, Miss Rossi," he said. "How good of you to join me. I have taken the liberty of ordering food for you; I trust you will not object. I will, naturally, cover the price."

Less than five seconds later, the same waitress I'd been complaining about to leporine set a plate on the table. Steak fajitas with rice and refried beans, glass of soda.

I stared for a couple of seconds before stuttering out a thank you to the waitress, who sneered and walked away without replying. Not only was this one of the very few meals that I could still stand to eat here, it was a particularly annoying one to serve. The fajitas were served in a hot skillet that could and routinely did leave burns on the waitresses' arms.

Somehow, I didn't think that was a coincidence.

"Now," the man in the suit said, "I believe you had something you required financial assistance with, is that correct?" He was staring at me with an intensity that I would have called lecherous in anyone else, but there was no hint of lust in his grey eyes. This reminded me more of the way that a cat watched a mouse, which was somehow even *more* uncomfortable.

I didn't miss that he had no food in front of him. The only dish on his side of the table was a glass of water, untouched, which had been sitting there long enough for the ice to melt.

"Maybe," I said cautiously, not touching the food. "Is that something that you could help me with?"

"Certainly I might consider it," he said. "But let us consider this more carefully, Miss Rossi. Now, it is true that I could extend you a loan, and perhaps that would suffice for your immediate goals. But in order to move to another state, you would require more than simply a sum of wealth. You will need transportation, as you have none of your own at this time, as well as lodgings and employment in your new home."

"How do you know all this?" I asked suspiciously.

He smiled. "I know many things," he said. "And before you ask, no, your rabbity friend did not betray your trust. I have my own resources, which I believe you will find to be quite considerable."

"Okay," I said. "And you're talking about this...why?"

"Because I can offer you considerably more than simple money. I am prepared to give you one hundred thousand dollars in cash, transportation to your destination, a one-year prepaid lease on an apartment, and an employment position comparable to that you currently have."

"And this would cost me...what?"

"Why, Miss Rossi, it would cost you nothing. All I ask is that in the future, you perform a favor for me in turn, and ask no questions about it. Three times, and your debt will be paid in full."

"Okay," I said slowly, "this is getting a bit more of a Godfather vibe than I'm happy about."

He smiled, and this time there was a hint of sharpness to that smile, an edge to match the one in his eyes. "Oh, that is where you are mistaken, Miss Rossi," he said. "An organized crime syndicate could, perhaps, have offered you what I have mentioned thus far. However, they most likely could *not* promise what I will now. Accept my bargain, Miss Rossi, and you will achieve your true goal. The road may be hard, and it may be long, but one day it will lead you to the end you seek."

"Right," I said. "And...what mysterious goal is this? Because last I checked I just wanted out of this shithole of a town."

"You wish to leave humanity behind," he said calmly. "And I can make that happen. Three favors, Miss Rossi, in exchange for your heart's desire. A bargain, is it not?"

I took a deep breath. "Okay," I said. "This is...we're leaving Godfather territory behind now. This is starting to sound like I'm talking to the *devil*."

"A better analogy than your previous one. But I am not your devil. Now, Miss Rossi, do you agree to my terms?"

I took a deep breath and then nodded. "Yeah," I said. "What now?"

He smiled and handed me a thin paper envelope. "There is your bus ticket," he said. "Good day." He collected his cane, a fancy wooden one with a grip in the shape of a wolf's head, and walked out the door.

The second he was out of the building, I rushed to the window, looking for him.

He was already gone.

I looked at the piece of paper, then frowned and looked again. It still read the same way. *Call your brother tonight at 9 P.M. Ask him to join you in Colorado Springs.*

That simple. I didn't understand. But it had been in the envelope with my bus ticket when I made the last transfer, and it definitely *hadn't* been there before. So I supposed this must be the first of my three favors. I hadn't been expecting to pay it back so soon, but I couldn't say I was sorry about it.

I didn't expect it to do much good, either. Enrico and I were still on speaking terms, but I didn't see him leaving everything behind to follow me halfway across the country. I could ask, though; the note hadn't specified that I had to be successful.

I waited with my phone in hand that night in my new studio apartment, and pushed the call button exactly as the clock hit 9. I had no intention of letting him tell me it didn't count because I was off by a minute.

It took almost thirty seconds for Enrico to pick up, long enough that I didn't think he was going to. When he did, he sounded tired. "Hey," he said. "What's up?"

"I don't know. Is something wrong?"

He sighed. "Not really, but the police force just laid me off. Or something. They didn't give me a whole lot in the way of reasons, but I don't have a job anymore."

"That's weird," I said. "But interesting timing. Is there anything keeping you in LA now that they fired you?"

"Not really, now that dad's dead," he said cautiously. "Why?"

"I was wondering if you wanted to join me in Colorado," I said. "I just moved out here today. One of my online friends hooked me up with a job. Sorry, I meant to tell you sooner, but it was a really short-notice kind of thing, and it's been crazy hectic for the last few days."

"Oh," he said, a little awkwardly. *Online friend* had long been our code for people I met on websites and at conventions that he'd rather not know about, and any mention of them could get that instantaneous awkward pause in the conversation. "Um...okay. You have somewhere to stay?"

"Yeah, that was all set up in advance. It's not big enough for both of us, but you could stay here while you get a place of your own."

"Oh," he said again. "Huh. You know, I might just take you up on this. It'd be nice to get out of Cali for a while."

I stood in the parking lot and glanced back at the slip of paper I was holding. It had appeared on my keyboard the previous evening, and though it didn't have a name on it, I knew *damned* well where it came from, literally.

At first the favor had seemed easy. Go to a certain address and talk to the guy there. No commitment about what to do once I got there. Harmless.

Except there was *nobody here*. The guy in the suit was nowhere to be seen, and I didn't see anyone else interesting, either.

And then I suddenly spotted a guy cutting across the parking lot. He was carrying a cardboard sign and whistling, badly.

It seemed ridiculous, but I didn't see anyone else, so I walked up to him. Up close, he looked a little more interesting. I'd seen the grey hair at a distance, but his face looked younger than mine, and his eyes were a shade of almost-gold that didn't look quite human.

"Hi," I said. "I'm Anna."

He glanced at my face and then looked away awkwardly. "Hi," he said. "My name is Winter."

I stood by the side of the grave and watched as they lowered the coffin inside. *Well*, I thought bitterly, *there goes the last of the family. Guess that's done with, anyway.*

I wanted to believe it wasn't my fault. The two scraps of paper in my pocket, both worn by years and covered in creases but still legible, said otherwise. I might not have meant to, but I'd been the one

to bring Enrico and Winter together, I'd been the one to give my brother the idea that there were werewolves in this world, and in the end those two facts had undeniably been what led to him dying.

*That's what you get for making a deal with the devil, I told myself. Did you think it would be a good thing?*

I wanted to cry, found that the tears didn't come.

**leporine4life:** *hey. seems like i never see you on here anymore. you get busy or something?*

**xXDarkWolf18Xx:** *Sort of. Busy with the new promotion. Also my brother died recently. Just finished sorting out the estate and everything.*

**leporine4life:** *oh damn im sorry. put my foot in it there lol. you want me to go away now?*

**xXDarkWolf18Xx:** *No, it's good. Something to take my mind off it, right?*

**leporine4life:** *now that i can do. so how's that werewolf lead working for you? damn im sorry to have sent u on that. didnt realize it was a hoax.*

**xXDarkWolf18Xx:** *I don't know...there's a lot of videos coming out now. Could be for real. That'd be something, right?*

**leporine4life:** *piss on that iv seen those vids. edited to hell or total frauds, every one of them. and they wont let anyone look at the actual film? i smell a hoax. betcha money it blows over in a few months and everyone that fell for it feels real silly.*

**xXDarkWolf18Xx:** *Maybe. I don't know...some of it looks very convincing. But I'm not the expert here.*

**leporine4life:** *damn straight. im telling u its fishy as hell. no way this is all legit.*

**leporine4life:** *shit i have to go. kids are gettin out of school soon and im supposed to pick them up. g2gbye.*

It was a long drive to Wyoming. I had more than enough time to think about things. I had enough time to move past second and third thoughts into the mid teens.

But I kept driving. It was scary, to finally take the plunge, but it was better than living the rest of my life knowing that I'd had the chance and I hadn't taken it.

I reached the edge of town and pulled over, getting out. Edward had told me that the pack would find me, and I trusted him on that. I'd seen some of what they were capable of.

I took my last dose of poison before I got out of the car. I'd taken the time to research what went into that concoction, and I knew what it was doing to me. They said it made it easier to make the change from human to werewolf. They didn't advertise that it did so by killing you a little at a time. They were natural poisons, raw plants rather than pills, but the effect was the same. With how much had been in that last dose, I'd just killed the person I was.

The only question was whether I'd come out as something else, or I was just plain dead.

I supposed I'd find out soon enough.

I stood by the side of the road and waited. Within minutes I started to feel dizzy, and had to lean against the car to stay standing. My balance was bad enough already, since I lost the toes.

About the same time, I heard the howling start. The wolves appeared minutes later, great creatures that dwarfed any dog, watching me with bright, intelligent eyes. One of them stepped forward and locked gazes with me, and I knew I was looking at Edward.

I nodded, once, and then lost the last bit of control in my legs and slipped to the ground.

The wolf moved in and bit me, tearing and savaging. It was painful, but the poisons I'd taken numbed it, made it feel distant.

Then the moonlight poured into me, and filled what the wolf had emptied, and for the first time ever I felt whole.