

# *The Waitress & the Werewolf*

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When discussing rebirth, holy texts never mention anything about the itching or vertigo involved. In fact, there isn't anything about the practical aspects of resurrection. Mia had some notes.

However, someone like Jesus probably didn't have a separate identity with paws and teeth and a penchant for digging up flower beds. That is, unless Jesus had a second secret identity, after being the son of God. The son of Dog, if you will.

Mia itched her newly regrown skin and limped forward. It was never a good morning after her own wolf came out. The scraggly yellow grass scraped the soles of her soft human feet and made a sound like someone chewing on granola with each step.

She prickled in a soul-deep kind of way.

The early morning smelled of parched earth and a colorless breeze brushed against her skin like lukewarm milk poured over sunburns. Everything always burned the morning after, tingling and itching like she was swallowing Pop Rocks in her entire body.

Her senses came back in a fuddled mix. The reds and greens of the world returned in a slow bloody dawn, her nerves lit up one by one from the depths of numbness, and the scents of the world slowly dried up and left her. The sharpest feeling of all, though, was the hunger.

Ache gnawed at her insides and rumbled with the force of war drums. *Oh, I don't want to lay siege to your village and massacre your crops, it said, but I will.* The hunger was all-consuming, distracting her from any thoughts of a nap or shoes or a shower with soap. It was a hostage situation.

Bodies demanded payment for their magic tricks.

The sun was a suggestion on the horizon, the faintest fingertips of light brushing across the treetops. The old-growth forest was closely knit here, and its eyes seemed to watch her warily. She had the sense that perhaps it had tolerated the wolf, but her human form was far less welcome.

She staggered away from the undergrowth and toward the only other light in the whole unfriendly area: a neon yellow sign. It blared in the distance, the color of American cheese that was 50 percent chemicals and 50 percent yellow.

Mia followed the sign like it was a beacon to wise men looking for saviors or very drunk men seeking toilets. The building drew closer as her ears finished popping and the copper taste on the roof of her mouth dulled.

She managed to stumble into the parking lot and right herself, shoving the humanity back in. *No biting the burrs off your pants or growling at passing trucks, Mia dear.*

Mia tried to clean herself up as best she could. She scrubbed her face of most the mud and blood, secured her ragged pants and scraps of shirt, located her wallet still tucked deep in her pockets, and wiped her hands down. She became as person-passing as she was going to get that night.

The light of the sign bathed her face and Mia dawdled on the outskirts of it, dancing back and forth in place. Her system flooded with thoughts like *hungry* and *aaaaaagh*. It was hard to ignore.

Mia gritted her teeth. She forced herself to cross the boundary between the world into the glow of a long, squat building. It had giant glass windows peering in at a spotless counter with fixed stools and overstuffed napkin holders. Shiny red booths sat along the walls, their material sparkly—it no doubt squeaked when you sat. Black-and-white photos cluttered the walls, depicting smiling famous people in the genre of Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley.

The whole place was an imitation of classic diners that the 1950s would have spit out by the dozen and probably appealed to some prominent demographic she couldn't quiet picture.

It was mostly empty except for a single customer at the counter. A broad, slumped man with a knit cap, work boots, and a large mug in front of him. He was hunched over and wearing a pair of sagging jeans that could only be described as *doing their best*. He looked half-asleep in front of his coffee and probably wouldn't yell "wolf!" when she walked in.

The restaurant was bright, alien, and a little cheap looking.

Mia didn't care how it looked. It was roughly five in the morning, and this was the only thing open, the only option really. She ducked her head down and steeled her nerves. She was hyper aware of her dirty bare feet and the fact she looked like she wrestled the sludge-monster from a Ghibli film to get here.

Her stomach cramped, noisy as a garbage disposal because the transformation took more calories than she liked to count. Oh yes, bodies demanded payment for their fancy parlor tricks.

Mia took a deep breath, looked down at herself, cringed, and pushed the door open. A bell dinged gently, and she blinked into the blaring-white fluorescents. She shuffled inside and wiggled her toes against the cool, clean tiles.

The room was rank with scents of grease and black coffee, chemical cleaners and burnt toast, and a hint of candied perfume. The perfume lodged itself in the roof of Mia's mouth and tasted of sunscreen and sugar. She shrank at least a foot and a half at the sight of the owner.

A woman stood with her back turned behind a small kiosk by the door. She wore a blue collared shirt, fitted jeans, and a red company apron tied around her waist. Long red hair piled high on her head in loose curls, and freckles speckled across every piece of vacant skin.

Mia heel-toed her way in front of the kiosk and ran her fingers through her two inches of tangled hair.

"Booth for one," she said, quick and as pleasant as she could.

The waitress turned.

The young woman had exceptionally wide eyes, owl-like and probably prone to expressions such as shock or confusion. Her chin was softly rounded with a fine mouth, princess-like, and smeared with splotchy lip gloss.

She caught sight of Mia and made a face that could be summarized as *an atheist meeting God and being deeply unimpressed*.

*It's not my fault*, Mia wanted to plead to Son of Dog. *It's been a long night. A long life. A lot more fur and fangs than I originally signed up for*. She couldn't say any of that, of course.

It might be a long month in Nolan, West Virginia.



Lionel was counting down the minutes, which was unfortunate for her since her shift began at 5 a.m. and ended in eight hours and twenty-eight minutes. She usually tried to avoid counting until after the sun came up, but sometimes she indulged herself.

It did not, in fact, improve the work experience, but it did manage to amplify her sheer awareness of time itself—and the idea she might be stuck in some kind of endless *Groundhog Day*. Loop after loop of similar faces, usual complaints, and aching feet. The only difference was that there was no moral at the end except to buy good insoles (the gel kind).

The first few hours of a morning shift were the worst—slow, boring, and the chef was often taking a nap in the back. The late-night truckers didn't even compliment her eye makeup or try to find out her phone number, home address, and whether she had a boyfriend—and if he was big. *He's big, Chuck, don't you worry. And he was signed by the Cardinal shortstop*.

5 a.m. wasn't a time, though, it was a *place*, and they were all one person there, similarly weary, adrift, and waiting for the second hand on the clock to tick forward. Even when it never really did.

Lionel listened to the chef turning up his podcast from the back, and she hoped to God it wasn't the one she thought it was. However, there was a lot of girlish giggling and syrupy slow voices coming in from the back. *Ugh*.

She had eight hours and twenty-four minutes left.

The door chimed dimly. “Booth for one.”

Lionel whipped around, preparing herself for something to keep her busy and away from the clocks. She stopped, paused, and held herself very still.

She couldn’t stop herself from wrinkling her nose since apparently the monthly weirdos were appearing. The scent of fresh dirt filled the entrance along with something distinctly visceral, heady.

A girl looked back at her. She had deep-set eyes, a ski-jump nose that looked like it had been broken once or twice, and pale olive skin. There was a certain firmness about her gaze. She was wearing a tattered shirt of unknown color with holes in it and khaki pants with strips of fabric dangling off. Smears of dirt splattered her shins and collarbone. Lionel fumbled for her first words.

“Booth for one,” the girl repeated and drummed her fingers against her leg.

Lionel had a decision to make, and she had to make it quick. She was technically the manager on duty since it was just her and the chef right then, but this felt like something for a more manager-manager, an adultier-adult.

Lionel cleared her throat. The girl’s pinched lips somehow became pinch-ier. She pointed down at her ragged clothes with fabric strips hanging off. It looked like a war movie where they forgot to add the rest of the set around the actress.

“Construction,” she said weakly as she gestured at her neo-grunge appearance. “Hope y’all don’t mind.”

Lionel considered it for a second longer. *Construction* was hard to believe, but who hadn’t walked into an establishment completely wrecked and looking for a little bacon? Lionel

didn't have time to judge strangers—she still had twenty minutes left in that hour. She made a snap decision. “This way.” She turned and spread a practiced smile across her face that could put the plastic back on Barbie. “Tough morning?”

The girl shrugged. “Just a bit of a mishap.” Her eyes darted around. “The boss gave me the day off after.”

Lionel opened her mouth to ask why she didn't just go home, but it felt a little cruel to poke at her lie.

“Well”—she seated the girl at a booth no one could see from the front door—“I'll be your server today.” Lionel placed a menu in front of her and nodded down pleasantly. “Welcome to Millie's Diner.”

“Thanks, um,” the girl said and squinted at Lionel's name tag. “Xena?” Lionel forgot she was wearing one of the other waitress's name tags. It was a pastime of sorts. “Like the warrior princess?”

Lionel chuckled and touched her hair absently. “Yeah. Exactly like the warrior princess. You got me.”

The girl's face lit up for the first time and a smile broke across it like a cracked egg. “Cool.”

“This job is just my side hustle, of course,” she said blithely. “Warrior princess gigs don't pay the bills.”

“Naturally.” The girl straightened up and a little life returned to her movements.

“Speaking of jobs”—Lionel flicked her notepad open—“can I get you started with some coffee? Juice?”

“Just some water.” The girl shifted and went back to mumbling. “And some fried eggs, ham steak, and toast to start with.”

“You got it.” Lionel jotted it down even as her mind wandered back to podcasts and counting. Did mathematicians have a purgatory? She had a feeling she’d end up there.

“Then a stack of pancakes and a fruit bowl. Do y’all have those flavored syrups?”

“Yeah, our syrups come in blueberry, strawberry, and peach.” She kept writing.

“Strawberry then. A plate of bacon, two sausage links, and a, uh, hmm, okay, a rocky mountain omelet and breakfast burrito. Extra sour cream.”

Lionel blinked a couple times. “Should I expect anyone else to be joining you?” she asked without missing a beat.

The girl shook her head sheepishly. “Nope. Just me.”

Lionel looked down at her notes and scanned them as a long silence stretched out. Fortunately, she discovered she must run on some sort of sinkhole where fucks-given went to die.

“No problem. I’ll put those right in.” She snapped the notebook closed.

“. . . Thank you.”

“Be back in a jiffy with your water.” Lionel stuffed her pencil back into her apron. She turned toward the back to prompt Robby to heat up the grill because they were apparently feeding at least three people in one.

“I appreciate it,” the girl mumbled as Lionel left.

Lionel slipped away, put the order in, and watched the strange girl from afar. She felt like she should have binoculars out. The stranger was barefoot. She was as muddy as a dust bowl. She was eating sugar packets raw.



Was this weirder than the one customer who kept eating loose cheese out their pocket? It was hard to say.

When Lionel brought her food over, the stranger descended on her breakfast with the fury of a small tractor flattening a field.

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