

## Chapter 06 – A Sign of Things to Come

The first day in their new workplace had come and gone. It was an exhausting nine hours of hell, one that they were not prepared for or manned to maintain. They were down two souls, and it hadn't been a few minutes before they were connected to the system and their jobs began. They had barely sat before the first ringing began. Calls streamed in from customers and they were back in the thick of it.

It wasn't an unpleasant experience – speaking to customers. It was the volume that made the situation as troublesome as it was. Each call barely gave you a moment to breathe in between, and after a couple of hours, details began to blur together. Each was more exhausting than the last, the calls never changing in tone or requirements, but seeming to cumulatively build upon one another until they became overwhelming. It was at that point that the stress of one poor call could do some real damage. Luckily, in this industry, most people were kind and happy. Occasionally, you had an angry person. They would come later though, as the season became ever more 'joyous' a time. People were stressed then. It was understandable, but something they all collectively dreaded.

For now, it was far off though. For now, there was the comfort of a cool desk and the silence of a lack of chimes from people seeking some assistance on whatever they needed. For now, it was just a moment of rest before returning home.

Mattias peeled himself off of his desk a few minutes after the end of their standard shift. He looked around to his team. Maddox was already up and heading out of the cubicle with an annoyed snarl slapped across his face. Ashley was checking something on her phone, but her computer had been shut down. Lindsay was just finishing up some things – and for now, the other two seats were empty. He realized he should say something. With all his training and experience, years of life and learning, all he could think of was basically worthless.

"Good work today, everyone. I know it was hard,"

"Yeah, yeah," Maddox said as he left the cubicle, his hand raised in the air, "I'll probably be back tomorrow. Haven't decided," His voice trailed off as he moved away from them. He was clearly trying to leave as quick as possible, brushing past people without a care and just making his way anywhere but there.

"Any other snarky remarks?" Mattias muttered under his breath, turning to the other two.

"Wasn't listening," Ashley said without looking up from her phone, though she did stand and start moving away. Her attention was glued to her other life texting back and forth with one of her friends, and there was nothing he could do to drag her back to this one. Not that he wanted to. He envied her ability to just lose this world for her preferred one. He wondered how she could keep up with anything, "Late for a dinner..." She sighed out.

Mattias tried to catch a glimpse of the image on her phone, to see who she was eating with. All he saw was a small image of a brown haired woman, and a scowl from Ashley. He held up his hands. "Sorry,"

“Whatever.” She said quickly, “Not your fault,” and then she was gone.

“Thanks, Mattias,” Lindsay spoke up after it was just the two of them. She fiddled with her fingers, twisting them in and out of one another as she stared down at the floor for a moment. “Hope we get used to it fast, and that our help gets here soon.”

“Yeah,” He responded quietly, “Me too.” She turned back towards her computers as he spoke, which intrigued him a bit. “Sticking around a while?”

“Just want to finish up some little reports on some of the calls, and little fixes I did,” She admitted very quietly.

“You sure? It was a hard day. It could wait until tomorrow, you know if you want to just take off and get some rest,” He gave a shrug as he finally started to stand. With one long stretch and a bit of a yawn, he heard her respond – though to him she was a little distorted, a little blurred from the stretching.

“No, I’m okay. It’ll be easier to leave later anyway,”

“Okay,” He yawned out as he finished his stretch, “Suit yourself. Just don’t stay too long, and enjoy your evening when you take it.”

“Okay. You too, Mattias,” The Fomorian girl said with a soft and quiet tone, burying herself in the screens again to catch up on a few things.

Mattias always felt a little bad not being the last of his team to leave – but for now he couldn’t stand the thought of being here any longer. So, he gave a little wave and began to head out. Most workers were doing the same, so there was a little bit of a delay, a little queue to move from one point to the next through the valleys between cubicles. It took a few minutes to squeeze by and get headed out. A few coworkers gathered and talked, joking about the end of the day. It was something he didn’t personally enjoy doing, but not something he really thought too much on.

He glanced over to Ed’s office as he passed it. She was less sharp at the time, her jacket off and her work strewn about her desk. She didn’t look like she would be leaving anytime soon. He gave a wave, but she didn’t notice. That was fine. Probably good. He shouldn’t have been an ass.

Then it was just a long ride down on the elevator, one crowded with other people who just wanted to get home too. He wasn’t much of one for the crowd. The absent-minded bumping of one person into the next, the weird idle conversation or nervous coughs. And the smell. He didn’t remember the smell of sweat being so prevalent when he was among the living. Now it was overwhelming with no real way to describe it except maybe as that gym clothes smell. He hated it, but it didn’t last long. Soon enough they were to the first floor, and everyone flooded out. Now that the parking lot was in sight, they all had one goal in mind. Get to the cars, and get home.

So, they rushed out. Of course, Mattias followed along without thinking, until he hit the parking lot. He felt a sudden heat overrun him, his face turning bright red, and the taste of blood filling his mouth. It made him rush back to the shade before a wave of nausea flowed over him like a dam bursting. His hand gripped his stomach and he soon enough found himself crouching in the shade just outside the doorway. He couldn’t think of anything but trying to keep himself from vomiting. So, he tried

to hold himself together, literally and figuratively. The hand on his stomach helped. Breathing slowly helped. But nothing eased it completely.

For nearly ten minutes he sat there just trying to feel well enough to stand back up. Just trying not to make a scene. He was failing at one of those, for sure, but he thought he wasn't really making a scene. When he was finally able to stand back up, he did so slowly and a bit shakily. The taste of acid in his mouth was a stark reminder that he had moved to fast into an area he knew he shouldn't have. He had to wait. At least a few more minutes.

So, he took up watching people leave. They rushed to their cars, pulling out swiftly, and often carelessly. A few stray honks and rapid-fire shouts came from close calls, but nothing interesting really happened. Everyone just rushed to their car, so they could speed out of the parking lot and sit in traffic for another thirty minutes or more. At least the inside of their car was theirs, though. Somewhere they could claim. Here, they were the item owned. And that made a big difference. At least, it did to him.

Eventually, he made enough progress to take a long step back into the light. It was similar to his last but just calculated enough that he could feel nausea and control it. At least long enough to reach his car. Once inside, the bit of shade made him feel a bit better, but he was going to need more to survive the drive home. He started the car up and then rifled through his backseat. It was a mess of things, which honestly were mostly small empty red bottles which he had drunk on the way too or from work, the occasional bag from a fast food joint or grocery store, or some other trash. In the back seat proper, he kept a stack of covers and clothes, something to fight against the cold, and just out of habit they never left his car.

At the bottom of this pile was a hooded jacket. He grabbed the cloth and gave it a yank, expecting it to come free of the pile with no issues. It did, but with the disheartening sound of a rip. There had been a moment of resistance, and the sleeve of the jacket had been caught in the space between the seat proper and its back - which folded down for trunk access. Presumably, he had lowered the seats sometime in the last year and the sleeve got stuck.

He sighed. Though he hadn't worn the jacket in a year, it still felt bad to tear the sleeve nearly off. He took a breath and gave another hefty tug, finishing the job and eviscerating what parts of the sleeve remained stuck. He flipped back around to the driver's seat and flopped down. Despite a chill in the air, he turned his airconditioning on full and began to pull off his business jacket, and replace it with the hooded jacket.

With one frayed sleeve, it covered most of him and was a bit of a loose fit. He zipped it up and pulled up the hood, tightening the strings of the hood until it pulled in around his face tightly. Luckily, his breath was always cold now, so he didn't have that annoying feeling of warm breath bouncing back against him you sometimes got with hoods over your mouth.

He needed to be as covered as possible, driving at sunset. He readied himself, wriggling to a comfortable spot in his seat and turning on the radio to drown out the loud blowing of the air. He took a deep breath through his nose and gripped the wheel.

The smell of the jacket was unique. The smell of car and abandonment intertwined with that scent things get when they've baked in the sun for months. He didn't approve. It was just a little

inconvenience, a little annoyance. It would only take a few minutes to get home. Then it was over. With the thought, he gave a curt nod and started to pull out of the lot.

And into the standstill traffic of the main roads - with only the sound of muffled Public Radio and air conditioning as his companions for the time.

Just a small wait.

Nothing he couldn't handle.

Of course, that was a lie. By twenty minutes in he was flipping through radio channels trying to find something to keep him from going insane as he slowly but surely made his way towards home. Forty minutes in, he switched to just sitting in silence. By the end of the first hour, he had settled back into the news again – repeating the news reports as those repeated every fifteen minutes or so. It took him nearly an hour and fifteen minutes to get back home. This drive, a mere few days ago, had been a fifteen to twenty-minute drive. How did people do this every day? How did people enjoy this every day?

He groaned and found his usual parking spot taken. Instead, he parked a little distant from his apartment entrance and had to walk. Not a problem. It had gotten dark as he drove home, so a walk in the shadows would do him well. He caught a glimpse of a couple of neighbors on his way, all as tired looking as he likely looked. All exhausted from the day. He wondered how his team was holding up. He didn't want to think of himself as better able to handle things than them, but he was a bit protective and hoped that they were doing better than he was tonight. They probably were.

He found himself broken from his thoughts when he reached the top of the stairwell and came around the corner to his apartment. The hall was dimly lit, but his neighbors just down the way had their door cracked and both peeked out with their eyes glued on his door, and then on him as he approached it. It made him pause for a moment until he heard one of them.

"It moved again," He heard, catching one waving him over towards them.

The vampire followed their eyes back to the door. There was a bag sitting at his door, which he hadn't left there. It was a small bag, and after a second he realized it was just a lunch bag. It was shaped like the old aluminum lunchboxes you'd see in videos of old construction teams, with a small rounded top that could be opened with a zipper, and a good sturdy handle at its peak. Which was odd. As he paused, the bag twitched and jumped up. It twisted around and its top bent back as if looking up at him, though it didn't have any eyes.

The neighbors let out a bit of noise, startled whimpers as they retreated a bit. One gave a quiet, "Watch out,"

"It's fine, just an animated... lunch box," Mattias said squatting down in front of it.

"A what?" One of them asked.

He reached out and offered a hand. The lunch box waddled forward, atop a trio of little spindly legs made of something else. It looked like they were most likely little plastic knobs. They almost looked like the sticks you might find on a controller for a game console, but a bit bigger. They might have been. Cobbling together an animated lunchbox and old pieces of a broken controller sounded up her ally.

"What are you doing here, lunchbox?"

It waddled forward a bit further and then bobbed as it came to a rest. The zipper on it flittered for a moment and then pulled across its top slowly but surely until the top of the lunchbox rose like a mouth. The flap inside pushed up a letter, and then it leaned back to show a little bag under the flap.

“Why is it moving on its own?” One of the neighbors said in a tone that was somehow both a whisper and a screech.

“It's an animated lunchbox. I don't know how to make that any simpler for you,” Mattias spoke as he pulled out the message. “Are you animated?” He asked the folded up piece of paper under his breath.

There wasn't a response.

Though his neighbors continued to freak out quietly as they watched, one finally asking out loud, “What is an animated lunchbox?”

“It's a lunchbox capable of movement. Animated,” The vampire turned towards them. “It's magic.”

They just stared dumbly at him. “It might bite you,”

“With what? It's not a mimic, it's a lunchbox.” He sighed before turning back to it with a quizzical glance, “Right? You are just a lunchbox.”

The thing nodded, causing its top flopping back and forth and waiting to be zipped back.

“See,” He pointed at it. “Not a mimic.”

“What is a mimic?”

Mattias stood up and looked at the note, but then turned to answer. “Magical creature. Turns into normal things, like a fridge or toilet, and waits for prey to come to it. Then eats them. They're all over the place.” He said with a smirk, before pointing at the lunchbox, “But this is a lunchbox. It's perfectly safe.”

“How do you know?”

“My ex-wife made it,” He waved the note, before flipping it open to read. “Watch out for mimics. The landlady said she saw one slither off not too long ago,”

That was a lie, but it got them to look away and into their own apartment long enough for him to slip into his with a little wave for the lunchbox to follow. It waddled behind him quickly, its legs not quite long enough to pull it completely off the ground each time. Instead, with little flops and scrapes it moved across the floor behind him – it's top bouncing up and down and occasionally smacking the floor behind it as it moved.

Mattias let it get in before closing the door and finally reading the note.

*In case your teeth itch. And a little friend to help make sure you drink enough at work. There was scribbling text on the note. As soon as he read it, though, the text dripped down along the page, forming*

new letters on the line below. *Don't forget what I said.* And then again, this time forming a small heart and the word *Olivia*, before the ink simply faded away.

"Huh." The vampire intoned lightly, before turning back to the little thing. He leaned over and pulled out the bag. Inside was a wrapped piece of something. Bigger than he would have thought she would have taken the time on. And he tore the tinfoil to see what it was. Soon enough he was holding a bone in rib roast, precooked for him. A nice thought. He could eat meat pretty well still, and the bones in roast would be about perfect to nibble on with his canines. His tongue slipped across the sharp point of his fangs and he took a breath. "Nice to know she still cares," He told the lunch box.

He reached down and grabbed its handle, pulling its top back up to where it would sit if zipped. Then he zipped it up. It bounced and flopped about happily, and a bit more easily now that it didn't have a few pounds of meat inside it.

"So, she wants you to stick with me?" The man shrugged before walking towards the kitchen. "It is going to be boring. Bad TV and some food were all my plans for the night. Hope to fall asleep..." He spoke, glancing back. As soon as he had said the word TV though, the little lunchbox went bounding off towards his living room and in the dim-lit room off in the distance, he could see it struggling to climb up onto the couch. And just like that he had a pet.