

Chapter 07 – A Fifth of November

As expected, the next few days of work were no better than that first. They were exhausting. Each built on the last, and the cumulative stress was already beginning to show on his team. They could handle it though. It was that second week that really started to show the cracks. It was here they began to be tested. The ramp-up had begun for the month. Once Thanksgiving hit, all hell would break loose. That wasn't the kicker, though. That wasn't the part that drove them up a wall and started really getting the stress flowing.

It was Ed's news.

Of course, Mattias kicked himself for not realizing it would happen. He knew when she said they would get two more team members that no such thing would ever happen. Her news was simple.

"Mr. Holland," She said walking into their cubicles as most of the team worked on the phone with guests. It was almost as if she had planned it that way, so they wouldn't have any chance to respond to, "Our outside candidate opted to go another direction, so you'll only be getting a single new team member. I'll give you an update on them next week."

Which of course, was code for *something went wrong there too, and I don't know what that means yet.*

For course, that next week no updates came. It was the week after when she peaked in for a split second to add, "I don't have an update yet. Sorry, guys. Keep it up," She had said before disappearing back towards her office.

There was a long moment of silence with the group, broken only when a phone call came through and a loud sigh fell out of Ashley's throat. Her usual tone was suddenly gone after that, a click and a sickly polite, and excited tone taking the place of the unhappy sigh from the seconds earlier. "Yorokobi Guest Enrichment Center. This is Ashley. How can I help you this afternoon?" The rest of the team looked over towards her for a second, before she began to nod. "Oh, I see. Yes, let me see what we can do about that for you. Can I have the name the purchases were made under?"

"Are they really saying we aren't getting any help?" Maddox asked in a practiced hushed tone that they had developed over their time. It was just quiet enough to not be picked up by another person's headset but clear enough to understand over the short distances between the desks in their area. He groaned, leaning back in his chair and kicking the seat back slightly, waiting for a response.

"They most definitely are not saying that," Mattias responded with a dismissive wave-off towards the executive offices, "They just are hoping we don't notice that's what they actually mean."

"Of course. And you don't think they'll actually bring anyone over either, do you?" Maddox asked quietly.

Mattias tapped on the keyboard in front of him. On the address bar in his browser, above the work documents he had been looking at, he typed the same letter over and over. Just the letter F, a new one appearing with every rapid tap of his forefinger as he thought about what the best course of action

was. He should just go complain, though that would require effort. It wasn't something he particularly wanted to do. He didn't want the conflict, he didn't want the work, he didn't want the job. Tapping away, it was hammering at his mind, echoing that he should do something.

"Yorokobi, Guest Enrichment, this is Lindsay. How can I help you?" He heard the Fomorian say. Her voice was clear and precise, nothing like her normal shy self. She was confident and polite. While he could see the fake smile on her lips, he'd never had a guest or employee think it was anything but sincerity. He took a breath and glanced over to Maddox as she continued, "Oh, we're always glad to hear that! Thank you. I'd love to hear more about your experience at the location,"

Maddox was dour, his eyes cast at the screen just watching his console for a moment. There was a distant ringing. His eyes fell on the corner of the screen, where the alert was flashing. An incoming call. He groaned and closed his eyes, and then took a deep breath. "Yorokobi, Maddox speaking. How can I assist you today?" Again, his tone was completely different. The ass that was their coworker off the line was gone. His voice was warm and open, he sounded genuinely excited to talk to the guests. "Oh, really! What exactly happened?" He asked, "Oh, no! I understand that. I'm sorry about that. No, we take that very seriously."

As warm as he was being, it seemed something had happened. Mattias glanced at him, but only got a shake of Maddox's head in response. "No," The man said quickly, "That cancellation policy is something I can waive for you. One of our team here is Fomorian, and she's always out on Moving Day. I hate that it fell like that for you."

Mattias bit his lip and let his eyes close. If there was one thing he had learned over the years, it was that the best people for this job got eaten alive. They gave a damn about the people they were helping, and sometimes that stress built up and broke them. That just happened. With too much on their plates or no support from the higher-ups, there was no way they would survive. He scooted back a bit and gave a glance across the little pathway between cubicles.

He clicked his mouth and waited a second before Halil leaned back from the section just across from him. His old manager mouthed the words, *What's up?*

"Watch my team for five?" Mattias spoke in barely a whisper, but slowly and clearly, with his hand held up with all five fingers spread.

Hal gave a quick couple of nods, a warm smile, and gave the thumbs up. He rolled back in his chair so he could keep an eye on both sections, and that was all that Matt needed.

The vampire stood and dusted off his suit a bit. He took one step forward but had to stop. Behind him, he heard little patters of tiny plastic feet. He turned back and his lunchbox had started to follow him out, as any pet would when their master got up to go on to something else. He shook his head and pointed down, then over to Lindsay. "No, stay here, listen to Lindsay."

It seemed a little dejected. Its form shrank and bent, and it backed off for a moment and watched as the man moved off towards the offices.

He steeled himself on the way. He fought back a mix of nausea from stress and sunlight and came to the door of Ed's office. She was on the phone. He took a minute and just watched her talking to someone. She sat with her hand holding the phone and one elbow on the desk. She would run a hand

slowly through her hair from time to time and pull at it as she did. Her face distorted, twisted as it was clear she spoke louder, and then the hair pulls would bring her back to more of a level tone.

“Oh, sorry. Didn’t know you had a meeting too,” A familiar voice said, emphasizing the word you in his sentence.

“Kelly, we keep meeting like this,”

The older man just made a note and didn’t say anything. He stepped away, not standing close to the vampire, and keeping a steady eye on him constantly. He really hated that defensive stance. He knew that worried look. It was discomfort, worry about being prey. Luckily for the old man, Mattias didn’t care much for hunting. He never did. He was as human at heart as anyone here. Still.

He noticed Ed finish her call and glance up to the men waiting outside her window. One second of frustration taken out of the wrong person... He thought, with a flash of his fangs before he reached the door. He turned swiftly to grab the door, a bit of an inhuman flash of speed. He saw Kelly’s eyes widen slightly at the image. The man hesitated, and by the time he realized what was happening, Mattias was in the door and shutting it behind him.

Ed spoke up, “What is it, Mr. Holland? I have a meeting.”

“I realize that,” He replied quickly.

“Make it fast.”

“Why the hell aren’t we getting two more team members? The team was designed for five. We don’t have the staff to survive Christmas.”

Ed stood up and put her hands on her hips. “I told you. We are working on it.”

“Corporate speak for don’t hold your breath, right?”

She didn’t say anything for a moment. “I don’t have time for this, Holland.”

“No Mister?”

“Not when you’re coming in here all aggressive.”

“Look, we need two guys. My team will burn out if you don’t get us more members – and you’ll have zero for the holidays.”

She paused, “I know that.”

“Then why aren’t you getting us more people? What’s the reason?”

“I’m trying. Corporate doesn’t think they’re needed. Numbers don’t show it.”

Mattias smirked. “Ah, because I’ve got three good team members, they think we’re doing fine.” He shrugged and rolled his eyes. “So, when things go bad and numbers fall, then they’ll start looking?”

She paused and shook her head. “I get that you’re frustrated. I am doing my best – but you aren’t the only team leader that is dealing with the Holidays coming fast.”

“Yes, but my team cleans up the messes that other team members make,” Mattias realized that was unfair after saying it, and shook his head. “I mean, we’re damage control. We have a stressful gig. Just...”

“Mr. Holland, I promise, I am trying my best to get you two team members. If I could, I’d hire two today. But Corporate won’t give the sign-off, and I can’t pay them without accounting, and they won’t move without HR, who won’t take an action without first asking Operations Higher-ups, who can’t do anything without Corporate directors breathing down their necks.”

He took a moment to think and shook his head. He wondered if she was just trying to get rid of him, or if she really was trying. She didn’t sound any fonder of the process than he was. “Any way to tip the scales?”

She shook her head but then paused. “Would you get back on the front? Rather than management?”

“What? No office, no raise, and now you want me back on the front? In the trenches and trying to do all the back end at the same time?”

“It’d show that your team is desperate and in need of help...”

Shit. She was right. It might have been worth a try, but he absolutely hated the idea. He groaned and glanced back out of the office, with his eyes trained on the direction of his team. “Fine, whatever gets them the help they need,”

“Good. Start taking calls as soon as possible,” She said, “Once your account is showing more activity, I can use that as an argument.” She waved her hand softly and then pointed to the door. “Now, out. Send in Kelly.”

“Fine,” Mattias replied, “Thanks for trying,” He added at the end.

“We’re in this together,” She said sternly, “That includes Kelly. Don’t flash your teeth at him again. It just complicates it for the rest of us.”

“Right,” Mattias didn’t wait for anything else, just pushing his way out of the door and back into the cubicle farm. He barely acknowledged Kelly, “All yours,” was all he said as he walked out and back towards his team.

That didn’t go like he had planned, or imagined, or hoped. Actually, he wasn’t sure at all how that went. He assumed she would be the bad guy. Or at least a bad guy. For whatever reason, he felt she might have been being honest. Then again, she was originally from Corporate. That’s why she was here. She was their plant. Wait, did she just play him? Damn it. How did he miss that? He let his emotion take over, that was how. Now he was stuck in the trenches.

He felt his hand clench and he shook his head. He paused near the break room and glanced over to the other employees in there. Right now, there were just a few people on break. None noticed him. None could have cared about what was going on. So it was as good of a place as any to brood, while they checked their phones for whatever it was they could find to waste a few more minutes before going back to work.

He eventually sighed and stepped back out and rounded the corner to his cubicle area, hearing his team talk. His lunchbox excitedly ran around in circles under Lindsay's chair. His team all spoke on the phone. Each had moved on to a new guest or problem from the sound of it, but each was smiling and working through the problems set upon them. They were a good team. He could help.

"How'd it go?" He heard Hal's voice.

"Awful," Mattias said quietly, "But, I might be able to help get my team what they need. So, I guess decent. Maybe. We'll see."

"Good to hear. Also, that's a cute lunchbox. Tell Olivia I want something someday."

Mattias smiled a bit and glanced back over to Hal as he moved back towards his own desk. Not a bad idea, he thought to himself. Not a bad idea at all.