

Chapter 10 – In the Shadow of the Valley of Christmas

“Alright, it’s time to see who this year’s Black Friday sacrifices are going to be,” Mattias spoke as he rolled back in his chair. “You all know the drill. Volunteer for Christmas or draw from the pile. People that work on Christmas don’t work Black Friday, and vice versa.” He smirked, “And, day after Christmas starts Hell Week, so, we’re all on full shifts every day until New Years Day,”

“Yay,” The sarcasm in Maddox’s voice as he twirled in his seat was thick enough to smack someone with. It wasn’t a sentiment that was missed by anyone.

“Wait, I don’t get it. Is Christmas...” Helena raised her hand as she spoke as if she had needed permission.

“Not working Christmas is the reward for working Black Friday,” Mattias explained.

“Oh,” Helena paused for a moment. She was new and naïve, so she raised her hand a little higher, “I’ll volunteer for Black Friday.”

Maddox laughed, and Lindsay just shook her head. It was Ashley who spoke up.

“Oh, honey, you’re new, so we’ll pretend you didn’t do that.”

“How bad could it be?” She asked, lowering her hand softly.

“Sales start at ten on Thanksgiving this year. Corporate is giving us two hours of on-call time, then one of us has to be here midnight to ten, then someone ten to six. They won’t cough up the cash for all of us to work holiday overtime and night hours, so,” Mattias said quickly.

“So we get screwed. Hard.” Maddox wasn’t particularly helpful.

“He’s not wrong though. Black Friday, for us, will be bouts of quiet. Phones won’t be on, so you’ll just be taking calls from locations. So... until something goes catastrophically at a location it’ll be slow and boring.” Mattias finished with a quick, “Any examples?”

“I had a manager call me a couple years ago. He was vomiting on the phone, because a guest got trampled, and he thought calling us first was a good plan. Instead of his Regional or Legal,” Maddox shrugged, “Like, literally, on the phone. He described it in detail too, and I had to use another account to call his ASM to come in because he was useless. An ambulance took him to a hospital too for the shock.”

“Yeah, that’s nothing,” Ashley chimed in.

“Not a competition,” Mattias tried to cool them down, but there was no stopping them after he asked for examples. He realized his mistake too early.

“I had a team member call me crying because the manager never showed up to unlock her store and the guests had her surrounded in her car and she freaked out. Police showed up. It was weird.” Ashley said quickly, with a nod, “You could hear idiots outside her car yelling at her and threatening her. I told her just to drive off, but she wouldn’t.”

“Again. Not the best advice to a panicked person,” Mattias said, waving over to Helena.

“Aw... I don't get mine?” Lindsay protested.

Mattias sighed and dropped his head, moving his hand over towards Lindsay instead.

“I got a call. The manager just said, ‘The Store's on Fire’, And hung up. I had to scramble. Turns out he set the fire.” Lindsay added with a smile. “Okay. That's my weird story. I'm done. Thanks.”

The vampire shook his head and turned back to Helena, “Long story short, you are on your own and weird shit happens. You must deal with it. No managers above us are in the office. So, we're on our own. Same with Christmas, but it's a slow day all in all. You know, people have families and such.” He smirked a bit, “Still want to volunteer.”

“I mean...”

“No, she doesn't. And she gets to draw last,” Ashley kicking the edge of Helena's chair to twist her away from the conversation a bit. “Let's do this thing so I can go home.”

“Yeah. I don't want to be here. I can drown myself in videogames at home to keep from thinking about the shitty holidays,” Maddox spoke up, stopping his twisting and leaning forward and holding out a hand. “Me first.”

Mattias tapped the side of his leg. His lunchbox scrambled from under his desk and tripped over the leg of his chair, tumbling back to its little knob feet and twisting up to look at him. If you could describe it as looking. He leaned down and gave the soft box a little pat. He slipped his hand to the zipper and pulled it open. The box's top lulled back and it bounced around. “Everyone gets to get a strip of paper,” He said to the box before waving it off towards Maddox. “Don't look until everyone, including me, has one.”

“Oh good,” He replied as the lunchbox wobbled across the cubicle to him, “I get to put my hand in the weird living lunchbox.” He didn't hesitate though, reaching in and pulling out a small slip of paper. He held it in his fist.

The lunchbox then waddled over to Ashley. She was less hesitant, even giving the odd little arcane creature a pat on the head. As a Wu, it was clearly not her first animated creature. She even gave it a little smile, “Your Matron just likes animating everything doesn't she...” She spoke in the same cutesy voice one might to a puppy or a kitten. “Bet you used to have a family of weird little wobbly things that weren't supposed to move, didn't you,” She pulled out a strip of paper between two fingers and gave a nod to the box to send it on.

Lindsay was a little less receptive to the thing, reaching in quickly and pulling out a strip before pulling away from it. She gave a stern point over to Helena and the box tapped over to the final member of the team.

Helena just stared at it, and then carefully reached her hand out towards it. Her fingers brushed across the bag and she pulled away with a small gasp as it moved. It was alien to her, but she tried again and quickly pulled out a piece of paper from the lunchbox. It stood there for a second before moving back to Mattias and setting itself down under his chair.

He reached in and pulled the final piece of paper out and sighed. "Okay," He spoke quietly. "Everyone can look,"

The team collectively flipped their papers around to read them. Each person took a moment to see, and the calm looks on some people's faces were all he needed to see to know what they had gotten. His eyes glanced down at his own – and it simply said Black Friday. He could have guessed that was the way his luck would fall on a month as grim as this one had been so far. But then, his eyes raised to see that everyone was glancing at Helena. She seemed nervous. She hadn't looked at hers yet but had seen everyone else – except maybe Mattias – looking relieved.

Ashley reached over and snapped the paper out of her hand and quickly handed it back, "It says Christmas." She spoke, handing it back over. "You got lucky newbie." For a split second, Mattias thought he saw smoke on Ashley's hand, but when he saw the ink run along her palm he knew what he had seen. "Guess it's me and the boss."

"Hah. Two years in a row sucks to be you," Maddox said jumping up from his chair and grabbing his jacket. "See you all tomorrow," He grinned and began to walk off. It was only a second before Lindsay and Helena were also packing up and heading out.

"So, how bad are the five days after Christmas?" He heard Helena ask Lindsay as the two walked out together.

"Just insanely busy. Like... a hundred guests per day for each of us probably. It's exhausting, but the pay is great."

"Really? And then that's basically the worst time of year for us? Like, volume-wise?"

"Yeah. Blockbuster season sucks too, but it's a different kind of suck."

His attention turned back to Ashley after the other two had left, their voice growing distant and hard to hear. He watched her for a second as she sat at her desk. She wasn't in a rush, despite how much she had acted like she was a moment or two before.

"You didn't have to do that, you know," Mattias spoke quickly. "I was going to be here. She would've been okay,"

"Do what?"

"The ink-shift charm. It's how Olivia sends every letter,"

"Ah, shit. You noticed, huh?" Ashley sighed, "Probably a waste of magic... but I didn't want her to be stuck here doing it. Besides..." She trailed off and didn't say anything for a long time. It must have been twenty seconds before she took a breath. "I don't think my Holiday season is going to be very... well... good. So, I might as well be here, right?"

He paused. He didn't really remember Ashley being open about her outside life much. "That's my usual excuse, so I know it's not a good sign. Everything alright?"

"Yeah," She said as she grabbed her bag and tossed it on her shoulder, "I just." She shook her head, "At least you guys don't suck." That was all she said. She didn't give him a chance to give any

additional questions or comments, "I'll see you tomorrow, boss." She said, only pausing to point at him, "Don't tell Helena I did anything, got it."

"Got it."

She turned and rushed out of the cubicle and away from there.

He sighed and stood up, glancing out of the cubicle and down after her. After she was far enough away, she slowed down. She was in no rush to leave, but she didn't want him to notice that. Something was wrong, but he couldn't push beyond that. He just gave her space. She deserved that much. After a few minutes she was gone, and he was there alone. Or, at least outside of his team. He gathered up his things and picked up his lunchbox. He zipped it up with a quiet, "Sorry buddy. Got distracted," And tucked the creature in his arms.

As he was finishing up, Hal peeked his head into the cubicles. "Hey, Mattias. Who got the bad news on your team?"

"Me, and..." He paused for a moment, "Me and Ashley, sort of."

"Sort of?"

"Helena, the uh," He adjusted as the lunchbox squirmed in his arms, "The new hire originally drew the short straw. But, Ashley stole it. Even used magic to hide that fact."

"Really? I don't remember her using magic much when I was a manager."

"That's what I thought. She kind of admitted she'd rather be here than with her family, or whatever."

"Ah." Hal said with a long slow nod, "I suppose that happens. People have rough relationships outside of work. At least they know we're all in it together here, right? That's what I always wanted you all to think, anyway."

"Right. I suppose it makes sense," Mattias felt his pocket vibrate.

Sorry man, work is hell. Can't make it tonight. I'll catch you next time. A text message lit up his screen with the name Rory under it. He sighed a bit.

"Everything okay,"

"Yeah, Rory just canceled on me again," Mattias spoke for a moment and glanced up at Hal, who was quiet and just nodded. He had given a half-hearted noise that sounded like a bit of condolence. He was worried about his team and his own sanity, so he did something out of character, and something he knew he should have done years ago. He still didn't really want to, but maybe it would be good for him, "Want to grab a drink, Hal? There's a place that will make rare burgers and has a pretty good selection of..."

"Sure, let me grab my jacket," Hal responded quickly.

"Good deal," Mattias said as he hit reply. *No worries. I'll grab a drink with Hal. Got on the Black Friday shift.*

Good luck, man. I know that shift sucks. We'll grab drink another night.

Right. Take care.

"Ready," Hal said in a bright yellow coat with a fluffy white collar. It matched nothing he wore, or that Mattias had ever seen him wear.

"Alright. Burgers fine?"

"Can you eat burgers?" Hal asked quickly.

"I can eat anything if I've had blood lately. Rare meat is the best though. I'm sure I've explained this to you before,"

"I don't think so,"

"Really? Huh," Mattias grinned. "I guess three years is longer than I should have kept you in the dark, right?"

"I knew you'd open up when you were ready."

"Weird way to put it,"

"I know. I thought that as soon as I said it."