

## Chapter 17 – It's a Wonderful Afterlife

Mattias had needed a few extra days to recover from the damage dealt to him by his unfortunate and uncontrolled transformation into his more bestial side. He had forgotten just how disconcerting such an event could be. For his recovery, he didn't feel like himself at first. He was tormented by fear. Countless what-ifs flooded his mind and gnawed at his sanity for those nights after. His friends were kind enough to visit him and watch over him.

Not just Olivia and Rory either.

That part surprised him. Ashley stopped by to stay with him for a couple of day shifts once he was back and awake. That filled in one of the scents he hadn't been able to identify - the vanilla. She admitted she felt a bit at fault when she heard what had happened, but he quickly quashed that line of thought. It was no one's fault but his own. Even then it was debatable. She understood that though and seemed to respect it. She didn't wish to push the topic at the least, and that was all that really mattered to him.

She did always seem to arrive around the time Olivia was coming, and eventually got a few tips on animating objects from his ex-wife. He had some visits from other people as well. Hal dropped by and spent a couple of nights. He had apparently been one of the first people that offered and spent some of the nights when Mattias was still completely unaware of it. Rory had even taught him how to draw blood in case Mattias had needed it while the others weren't around. He didn't seem to remember his scent from that time though. That may have been a hint of selective memory, though. Hal wasn't a foul-smelling person, but he did choose a scent that the vampire didn't particularly relate to fond days.

In their conversations, though, Hal admitted that the office was different without him. That people were worried. Lindsay and Maddox constantly asking for updates, and Ashley pretending to be a hard ass. Ed and HR both asked but did so carefully. And Ava had been relentless wanting updates, but Ed asked that Hal only give her 'minor' updates at most. Which he didn't understand. It was kind of nice to know that his absence had meant something at least. It was nice to be missed, and something he didn't think that would be the case.

He had prepared for his first day back more than usual. Olivia had come over the night before and stuck around to help him get ready. He couldn't see himself anymore, and his body was still torn up and scarred from the transformation. So, an extra pair of hands was essential in getting himself prepared for work. She even offered to drive him. He didn't want to take that bit of charity though. By all means, he should have been willing to take it. He hadn't driven for a while and jumping right back into rush hour traffic with sunlight beaming down on him was likely a really bad way to start getting back out there. He was nauseated, hotter than he wanted to be, and nervous to be driving. It didn't give him much time to think, though.

When he got to work and joined the throngs of people. It was uncomfortable for him. He felt like all of them were looking at him. He could see every little thing they did, and he could almost hear the blood pumping through the veins of the souls in the room with him. The elevator ride was even worse. He held himself back and close to the inner wall of the elevator, concentrating on Lunchbox in hopes of being ignored and left alone. For a moment, there was a sudden clarity as to why so many vampires chose a more secluded life. This was challenging. People were challenging to be around. For

countless reasons. He watched them eat, drink, chat, and stare. He had never been fond of humans, but something was different with this twist. He didn't feel close to them.

He glanced at the bronzed walls of the elevator. Despite the smudges and general wear, they were still reflective. Faces and profiles of the various denizens of the company riding the elevator. And there he was, a blur of universe defying undead - a lack of reflection of more than the shadows and blur he cast upon other reflections. It was a gruesome reminder of just how different he was from those that walked around beside him in the light. He took a breath and steadied himself, wishing he could see how he looked. He didn't know how rough he appeared still, though Olivia said he looked fine. Tired. But fine.

He should trust her. It was a challenge at the moment though. He couldn't trust his own eyes, his own body, how could he trust someone else.

As the elevator opened on his floor, he followed a few people out. Most went their own way. One woman walked in the same direction as him. She had a box under her arm, and when she opened the door, he instinctively reached out to hold it open. She gave a small smile and a knowing nod back over to him. He smiled back. She didn't look like a courier or delivery woman. She was pretty, with meticulously styled caramel hair. She didn't have that exhausted look of most

"Thanks," She said before stepping into the foyer and over to the receptionist's desk, her reflection in the gold and brass fixtures of the room blurred by his as he followed her.

Ava, meanwhile, had spotted Mattias and had bounded to her feet. She was stopped by the woman, though, who held out the box. "Can I help you?"

"Yes, I have a package for someone here,"

"Do I need to sign for it?" Ava said quickly, with a glance over to the vampire as he tried to slip by before she could end the conversation.

"No. Note on the top for who it goes to."

"Awesome, I'll get it to them. Mattias, wait!" She was all but dancing around the desk, and when she thought the conversation was over, she jumped around the edge and rushed him. He had almost made it to the threshold of the cubicle farm. Almost.

He had been so close. "Ava."

"You're going to pass by without even saying hello? You've been gone for more than a week. Is everything okay?" She was talking too fast, and not giving him a chance to get a word in edgewise. "Is the rumor true? Did you, you know? Did you find someone to..." She was slowly talking quieter and quieter until she was in a whisper.

Luckily, the woman that had dropped off the package had left.

Mattias closed his eyes. "Were you worried, or just want to hear a vampire story?" He was already exhausted by her. Her fandom for his ailment was not endearing, it was taxing. He knew she meant well, and he didn't begrudge her for it. It just made him tired.

She was clearly hurt by the response. Her face went from excited to blank in a split second and she backed away from him. "Mean." Was all she said, still quiet.

He sighed out a small, "Sorry," before shaking his head. "I'm a little raw, right now, and you come on strong, Ava."

She didn't respond for a few minutes, instead just standing quietly before a little smile crossed her lips. "I know." She tilted her head to one side. "Sorry you, you know. And I do want to hear about it." She said quickly and then added a defensive, "I was worried – and I do want to know the vampire stuff. I get that it isn't the same as the fiction and its weird,"

"You have no idea,"

"I know, but I would kind of like too."

He paused for a second and glanced over to her with a shake of his head. "How so?"

"Like... I love the stories and the romantic ideas of vampires and stuff, but," She bounced on her heels just a bit. "But, I get it. I get that it isn't like that at all, and those are just stories," She bobbed her head back and forth slightly, "It's like those people obsessed with anime. I'm like that, but I actually want to know about Japan too, in this metaphor."

"I think it's just an example, not a metaphor,"

"Whatever."

Mattias sighed, "Fine. Maybe we can talk on a break," She didn't let him finish before bouncing once more, a little higher, a little faster, and with a quick little clap. "But give me a couple of days at least to get used to being around people again. This is... well, hard, at the moment."

"Got it. Won't ask a word for a few days." She spoke, making a little cross on her heart.

He just stared at her for a second. She was still looking at him.

"About you. Can I still ask general vampire stuff?" She released that particular thought in a swift wave of verbalization.

He closed his eyes for a second and took his breath. "Fine."

"Is it true that there's an Asian vampire that throws its own head at prey,"

"No, that's a mistranslation. Those are more closely related to Dullahan," He responded, giving a point into the cubicle farm. "I'm going to work now."

She just nodded and smiled, giving a little wave before moving back towards her desk.

He wished he had never seen her out in town. He would have rather not known about that part of her, and it probably would have kept her from acting this way around him. At least she cared. He had a moment or two of silence as he walked. Ed's office was empty and dark, and most people hadn't arrived yet. Those that had, for the most part, watched him from a distance. He made his way to his cubicle and turned into the desks. His team hadn't arrived yet for the most part, but Ashley was here particularly early.

"Welcome back to the land of the living, boss," She spun around in her chair to face him as he walked in.

"Hah. Hilarious," He responded with a sarcastic smirk.

"You love it."

“Did I hear Matt?” Hal’s voice called over from the neighboring cubicle group. He appeared in theirs just a few seconds later, with his arms wide and waiting for a hug. He laughed heartily, “It’s good to see you up and out in the land of the...”

“Already made that joke,” Ashley said with a grin.

“Damn it,” Hal seemed dejected, his arms dropping softly to his sides. The smile on his lips didn’t fade though. It was clearly not something that really bothered him. “Oh well. How are you feeling today?”

“I’m alright. Still a little...” Mattias didn’t have the words. How did one really explain a sense of existential solace and loss of self to other people in a way that didn’t encourage further followup questions and unending check-ins? “Weird,” Was what he settled on.

“I bet,” Hal said quickly, adjusting slightly to make way for another person to pass by, some nameless coworker that wasn’t on their team but worked even deeper in the hold. Jonas or James or something, if Mattias remembered correctly. “Well, you just take it easy. Get your feet wet again and don’t worry about the big stuff. You just let us handle that for you today. You’ll be back at ‘em in no time, better than ever.”

Mattias wanted to say he doubted it. This one felt different. He felt different. Something about this was more penultimate than he could put into words. He didn’t need to say that, though. These people, as much as he was loathed to admit it, were as close to family as he had. “Thanks. It’ll be a while, but here’s hoping.” He knew that particular thing was not going to keep eventual questions, but it might buy him some time this morning.

It seemed he was right, at least for the time being. As he unpacked Lunchbox, he heard another bit of movement from Hal, who stepped aside to let in another person. Before he could turn around he had a pair of arms around him and he was pulled into an awkward hug from a woman very much taller than himself.

“Hi, Lindsay,”

She didn’t say anything. She just went on over to her work station. She understood a bit more than most and had likely heard him talking just before.

It was quiet after that. Maddox came in and said something snarky, but didn’t push on the idea. Helena was a bit nervous because she was a bit late. She said she was glad that he was okay. She was tense though. Before long, they were all back to work, taking calls and awash with customer questions and the occasional complaint. It was an ordinary and unremarkable day for the first couple of hours. Then he sensed something familiar. There was a scent, one he remembered from his time spent out of commission.

“Package for you, Ms. Tran,” Ava’s voice chimed in, twisting around the corner with a stack of mail items. She dropped off the box at the edge of the Cubicle area before bouncing off in another direction.

Ed popped her head in the cubicle for a second, not even a moment later, “Glad to see you back, Mr. Holland,”

She was very clearly wearing the scent he remembered but couldn’t place. He gave a little smirk at the realization, “Good to see you again, Ms. Chambers.”

“When you get a minute, come by my office and we’ll catch up on the numbers,” She said with a dismissive, little, wave of her hand just over the cubicle wall, “Not urgent, so don’t rush.”

“Will do, Boss. Probably after the lunch rush,”

“Sounds good,” And she was gone.

It was strange, for the first time in a long time, he wasn’t sure what to say. He felt a little smile on his lips. It was genuine. It was instinct. He could not help it. It was one of those smiles that were paired with a moment of freedom and realization. It was one that wouldn’t be stopped, that crawled across his lips with a mind and a soul all of its own. It was a true smile. It hurt a bit, stretching the stitches under his skin that had held him together after his transformation, and showed off his fangs just a hint. But the people here on his team did seem to worry about it. You couldn’t worry without caring, and it was nice to realize that they cared.