

Chapter 18 – Letters to Santa

The week before Christmas was such a unique experience in the Customer Service Industry. While it was unique for each different type of worker. Retail workers perhaps had the most demanding job, as hundreds or thousands passed through their gates. Warehouse workers shipped with an unending frenzy of items to process and move on. Food workers dealt with hungry and happy people non-stop, watching dramas of countless lives unfold before them. And every single mistake made in that time, no matter how benign or human in nature, would end up at the desk of a Customer Service Representative – by whatever title they held at their respective company. It was no different for his team. Every slip, every mistake, every team member pushed just beyond breaking, would end up with a call to their department. Everyone would be the worst. They no longer received calls from confused team members or guests. All hands were on deck. So that Monday before Christmas, Hell Week started. Every call was angry, every one a problem to fix or solve, and those scant few that weren't would only last a few seconds before they were over and it was back into the trenches. There was no break, no relenting of the wave of trouble that followed them here. It was eight to ten hours a day of constant trouble that needed to be solved. Every second of this weighed on his team, each building their stress more and more, until they were all exhausted and broken, smashed into the dirt and left there begging for the release of silence at any cost.

Of course, they were professionals. All of them knew the secret to survival. All of them knew how to make it beyond this week and to the next. Each had been prepared.

Helena was the newest, and she struggled the most. Lindsay had a kind heart, and she was right there with the newbie. The others, though. They had the secret down pat. And that secret was.

Let them win.

Let the waves of complaints destroy you. Don't try to survive. Once you were broken, everything became easier. Nothing hurt you. All you wanted was for it to end. You could do your job without the worry of being defeated because you had already lost. This wasn't a pit of despair. The guests had done nothing wrong. There was no reason to hate them or be hurt by them. The reason this week was so hard was the company, the expectations. All that faded away with one simple idea.

"Worst they can do is fire me,"

It was true. Every discount, every refund, every little breach of the company's policies to make the guests happy and find the solution needed to keep things moving was worth it. The guest was happy, you were done with it, and the worst-case scenario was that you were fired. At this point, with this much stress, the idea of being fired was one of many lights at the end of the tunnel. Survive with a job, or survive without. Either way, once you were broken the week was already won.

"That is the stupidest thing I've ever heard," Ed said with a shake of her head, standing with a box of donuts in her hands, already half-empty from the ravenous desire of the various team members who had jumped up. "You all don't believe that drivel right?"

"I mean," Maddox spoke up first with a mouth full of donut. "You pay us shit, and expect us to provide excellent service, go above and beyond, work extra hours."

"And benefits suck," Ashley added before taking a bite of her donut.

"Right, and when we push for better wages you say dumb stuff like... you make well over minimum wage, there are a lot of perks to this job, blah, blah, blah," Maddox continued.

"And you two?" Ed looked over to Lindsay and Helena with a bit of a scowl.

"I'm new here, don't look at me," Helena said with her arms up, and a donut daintily placed on a napkin at her desk.

"I think Maddox is being too polite," Lindsay shrugged.

"Really? I mean, this is a good job," Ed gave a glance to Mattias.

"Sure," The vampire said quietly with a slouch and a sigh, "But it's not what any of us want to do forever."

"Well yeah, but until then," Ed argued.

"Until then it's a drain on our life force, our very souls," Ashley gave a little bit of extra verbosity and staged drama.

"Seriously?"

"Actually, she's not wrong. It's just good enough to keep you here for the money and benefits..." Mattias said, but before he could finish, he was interrupted.

"But exhausting enough that you can't really look for anything better." Maddox spoke up, "I mean, of all of us, only Mattias can pay for his apartment,"

"And he lives in a shithole of a tiny box they can sort of classify as an apartment," Ashley tossed a little barb towards her boss.

"It isn't that bad of an apartment," Mattias had planned on saying that. He didn't, though, it was Ed that said it. Which made the conversation pause for a few seconds before the awkward silence was broken by Maddox.

"Oh, ho. So the boss' boss has seen his apartment too," He teased.

"Shut up, Maddox," Ashley bit back. "I have, Lindsay, has," She waved between the two, "You just leave instantly after every shift and don't want to help out."

"I signed the card,"

"Oh," She laughed, "My bad,"

"Guys, it's fine," Mattias waved a hand down to try to draw them away from that.

"You all think this way, though? That we don't treat you well?"

Mattias sighed, “No company treats its employees like family, they just pretend they do. We don’t make enough, we get decent benefits, but doing this eight hours a day is hard during the slow periods. You take on everyone else’s problems, and by the time you go home, you are exhausted. You forget what you really want to do. But, you make enough to survive. Just not enough to thrive. So you keep going, hoping it will get better, or you’ll stumble beyond your station. That’s what I did. Got comfortable, and kept a job that exhausts me and really kills me... and I’m ranting. Nevermind,” He suddenly stopped talking and glanced away. The others stared at him for a minute.

“What did you really want to do boss?” Ashley asked.

“I didn’t say,” Mattias almost bit back at them.

There was a long silence this time. The soul of the conversation had been touched on. There was something else each person here long term had shared, something they didn’t admit. Each of them had a dream they had set aside because of this job, because of the toll it took on their balance of life. The drain of emotions for the service of others was a real thing. It left so little time to do what one wanted to do. When broke it down workers, they worked eight hours a day, plus the commute. Mattias was closest, and that was another hour or two a day, depending on traffic. Then there was getting ready before the day and once one got home. Another hour would be gone if there wasn’t a haste to that getting ready. Decompression was also necessary from a job like this. Some people did it better than others, of course, but most days it easily ate up another hour – just getting away and over whatever it was that had eaten away at the mind from the worst that day.

At the least, this was eleven hours of the day. Days when a team member worked more, or got caught in traffic, or faced off against an angry guest or employee – it could easily reach thirteen or fourteen. Sleeping eight hours a night was necessary too, or mistakes were made and irritability became a much easier trap. It was a dangerous combination. One that could compound swiftly. Three or four hours to one’s self was not enough. Not enough to have a healthy balance, at least. Things got left behind.

It was dreams that were easiest to drop. They felt distant and less than essential.

Mattias was realizing that might have been a mistake. That dreams might have been all there was separating them from the monsters at their core, whatever those were.

They all realized that is where this conversation had moved. Mattias had been here the longest, but he wasn’t speaking up.

“I wanted to be a gymnast,” Lindsay spoke up softly. “In college, I studied that, and communications. I was too big to make professional or Olympic teams, but I always thought I could work with teaching gymnastics somewhere.”

Helena spoke up, “That’s awesome,” She said with a feigned bit of excitement that was something they all had practiced to such a degree that it became second nature, though she wasn’t great at controlling her switches in and out of that mode yet. “Sorry,” She realized what she had done as the other eyes glanced over to her, “Why don’t you?”

“I probably could have right after starting here... but,” The Fomorian sighed and slunk down in her chair slightly. “Now I just want to go home after work, and I don’t feel like doing anything. I’m shy by

nature..." She admitted, "So this takes a lot out of me. I don't have the energy to deal with more people after work. So, I don't." She played with the edge of her shirt nervously.

Again, there was a short, silent pause.

"I wanted to go back to school. Learn magic, you know, properly," Ashley spoke up next. She let out a harsh sigh, knowing exactly what follow up question that would warrant. "I didn't have enough money to pay to go much. Thought I'd take a few little classes, community college stuff..." She sighed, "Even that made me have to get help from my folks. Then last Christmas it got busy, even on night shift..." She looked away, "Didn't make it. Failed out. It's hard to look at a computer screen once you get home from this, you know."

Maddox gave a smirk, "My turn, right?" He took a deep breath, "I'm always looking for another job. I should've quit when I realized how unhealthy it was making my... what do you call them..." He snapped his fingers, "You know, that thing you do instead of dealing with it?" He gave up and threw his hands to the side, "Well whatever it is called. I stopped doing that well. Tried a few different things to cope. None of them good. Now I'm medicated, which helps. But, still."

"You're medicated?"

"Yep. I mean legally, like psychiatrist approved anxiety-reducing wonder pills," He snapped his fingers a few times. "Make everything more doable. Still, haven't found another gig yet."

"Should I be worried about having taken this job?" Helena asked quietly, trying to lighten the mood slightly. It didn't work for her though. She sighed, "I might have made a lateral move. I wasn't too happy being overlooked and forgotten by most people in my last position."

"Oh, being walked over," Ashley said with a nod, "Yeah, you're not getting away from that here."

"Yeah. I'm the tallest person here, and no one knows my name," Lindsay added.

"Partially the shy thing, Linds," Maddox spoke.

Though no one had said it, they had all noticed that Mattias hadn't said anything. Not yet. He clearly didn't want to talk about it, or he hadn't been convinced yet. Ed had watched him for a moment. He had tried to zone out, to ignore the situation. She had noticed. It was working on him. He wanted to open up, but there had not been quite the push he needed.

"I wanted to open my own business," Ed spoke quietly. "It was stupid. There was this old radio show I listened too when I was... really young," She shrugged. "There was a place the kids in the show always hung out. I never had that growing up... my room was about the best place I could find. But I always wanted to make a place like that. You know? Sell snacks for after school. Somewhere kids wouldn't have to worry, where they could study or hang out..." She laughed, "And here I am, a corporate stooge instead,"

"Aw, you aren't a stooge,"

"More like a high-ranking minion."

"Not helpful, Maddox,"

“Somewhere to teach non-humans how to handle it,” Mattias spoke in a little over a whisper. That silenced the conversation completely. His team watched him as he took a long sip of his blood in a bottle. “I was incredibly lucky to know some non-humans... and it was still stupid hard to learn how to deal with all this bullshit.” He said looking down at the bottle, the crimson liquid swirling back to stillness near the bottom. “Every non-human is a little different. And those of us that changed later in life... it’s a damn minefield. If I had a place where I could have learned, where I would have known there was someone to talk to. I wouldn’t be this far gone.”

His voice trailed off. Then there was stark silence.

“That’s... nice, boss. The idea,” Ashley said with a nod.

“And...” Ed spoke up. “Working here made you hold off on it?”

Mattias nodded, “It gave me an excuse to.”

“Yeah,”

“Remember when Christmas was all about presents?” Maddox said with a nod.

“Maddox, not now...”

“No,” He waved his hands down. “I know I’m kind of an ass, but I’m serious. Remember how we used to write Christmas lists and letters to Santa?”

Everyone but Mattias just stared at him. Mattias stared at his desk, or the floor.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Maddox continued. “My therapist says writing down dreams, goals, all that, is helpful in finding a path and keeping yourself calm. In my case, it helps things keep from getting overwhelming. So, I just had the stupidest thought,” He smirked. “Why not write our dreams that this job killed as letters to Santa? You know... what we’d need to pull it off and stuff. It’ll celebrate the season, and maybe give us a couple of ideas on where to go from here.”

Again, silence for a few moments. Maddox sat with his arms wide, glancing from person to person and expectantly awaiting an answer. From the smile on his face, he expected an affirmative.

“Huh,” Ashley intoned with a little neutral shrug.

Ed glanced to Mattias, and took a small breath, “Mattias, I kind of like the idea. I’ll write a letter if you will,”

The others gave small nods, but it was Lindsay who finally asked outright, “We’re all in. What do you say, boss? Want to write a letter to Santa with us?”