

## Chapter 21 – The End of the Year

Mattias had barely finished with an irate customer seconds before. Christmas had come and gone, and now it was that stretch between the holiday and the new year. It was a strange twist that very few people really understood. People had their gifts now and were trying to figure out how to use them or set them up – and they no longer felt the need to be polite. It would be a couple of weeks before it calmed down, but it was just as busy as it had been for the past week or so. It was tormenting, but the light at the end of the tunnel gave a bit of hope that it wouldn't be forever. Those things would go back to normal soon.

As he leaned back, he worried that normal wasn't what he wanted it to be. There was a dread to keep doing this. Even after the realization that these people were closer to him than he cared to admit. He took a breath and finally turned his head to the person that had drawn his attention. One of the Human Resources goons had shown back up at his cubicle and flagged him down. He saw the man waving at him and waiting for the call to end. He pulled off his headset and tossed it down on the desk.

"HR," The vampire spoke with an unhappy smirk on his lips, "I guess we're here to talk about the whole Eve, thing."

"Something like that," The HR man said with a twist of his forefinger into a come-hither motion before moving off towards Ed's office.

For whatever reason, that really unsettled Mattias. Oh well, he assumed he was getting fired. One couldn't throw down with a werewolf and not get fired. The camera's caught the whole thing, so the police and district attorney had no intention of charging him with anything, sure. It was only fair that the company opted to fire him over it though. After all, he had spent Christmas in jail. Oh well. It was a good run. One he was happy with overall.

He took a breath and pushed himself back and away from his desk. "Alright, I'll be back." He glanced around and realized no one could hear him. He shook his head. He'd at least have to come back and get his stuff. He pointed down at his small and constant companion of a Lunchbox. "Stay." He ordered before stepping up and heading out of the cubicles and into the hall. He kept getting stares from people as he passed by. Between the scarred up face, the shattered glass doors as a reminder, and the rumors, he couldn't have guessed what exactly brought their attention to him.

He never liked meetings with HR. He was pretty sure no one did. And in this case, he expected it to be his last. He didn't think he would have a job after the meeting. The look on the faces of the HR personnel waiting for him in Ed's office. There were three of them, and he hadn't ever seen them before. Each was dressed impeccably but in that meticulously designed way as to pretend to be a little more approachable. And they all watched him with the same level of bland disinterest that marked so many in their profession.

That was fine with him. They needed to be distant. It made their job easier, and frankly, he didn't begrudge them for it. Well, maybe he did a little bit. He glanced into the glass out of instinct, trying to check his reflection. It was just a blur. There was nothing there to point out that he was anything but a smudge as far as he could tell. He could almost see through it now. That was a depressing

realization. He would have liked to know if any part of him was still hanging off or was an obvious give away for him being a member of the undead.

He approached the door and took a moment to look back. He had grown to like this place, or rather the people inside of it. Now, he was kind of sad to see it go. He didn't know what else to do now but go on in. He pushed open and stepped in, watching the three keep their eyes on his every single move. He'd make the first move.

"You wanted to see me?" He asked with a little nod of his head.

"Yes, Mr. Holland. We need to talk about your future with the company," The middle Human Resources goon spoke up.

"Of course. That's what I expected," Mattias admitted.

"Most people," The Left one said with a little nod out of the room, "Would not have come in today. They would have taken a few more days to recover, or may have even sought some sort of benefit from the company."

"But you," The Right person said quickly, "Are not most people, are you?"

"What is that supposed to mean?" Mattias felt a bit of defensiveness slide up his spine.

"Just that. You are not most people. You have scruples, and always seek to get the job done," The Center spoke up again.

"We have to ask if you understand that your actions have consequences," The Left added.

"And if you are prepared to accept those consequences." The Right concluded.

Mattias was already tired of glancing back and forth between them. He didn't like feeling as if he was being treated like a child as if they were buttering him up before tearing him down. He took a deep breath and waved a hand at them. "Yes, I did. Get to the point."

"Company policy is to wait for security or the police."

"And let one of my team get eaten by a lycan? I don't think so."

"There was no sign that she would have been injured. Until you intervened," The Center spoke coldly, placing both hands on the desk and standing up.

"There was. Plenty before and at the time," Mattias spoke, "I acted. I won't apologize for that. Do what you have to do."

The three stood quietly and looked at him for a moment. They each gave a slow nod, and the center one turned towards him again. "And what is it that we should do?"

"Fire me, I assume."

They all gave a quiet nod again before the Center smirked. "That would normally be what we would do. But today is not normal. You fought a Lycan to protect a team member, despite every bit of evidence pointing to the fact that you had no desire to be here. You've been an exceptional employee,

even with your personal challenges. And a position has just opened up that we would like you to consider.”

Mattias didn't trust them for a second, but he had to admit he was intrigued by the fact that he wasn't getting fired. “What position?”

The Left and Right stepped away from the desk, as the Center took a step back, pulling with him the chair he had been sitting in. He waved across it, “This one.”

There was a moment when the vampire took them seriously, but then a smile crossed his lips and he let out a small laugh. “Ms. Chambers is the boss here, not sure how she'd take me sniping her position.”

“Ms. Chambers quit, effective this morning.” Both Left and Right spoke at the same time.

Mattias' smile dissipated. “What, why?”

The three looked between one another, and then looked at him. Center cocked his head to one side, “I'm sorry, Human Resources can't offer an answer to personal questions about employees. But, the position is open. It would come with a large jump in pay, a more flexible schedule, full benefits, and of course, your own private office.”

There was a moment of silence in the room. A pin could have dropped and sounded like a hammer. He had wanted to get away from all this, but now that he had started to feel attached he was having second thoughts. He likely needed stability. He needed to have a little extra cash flow and a more secure set of benefits now that he was progressing as far as he was. He never would have assumed this curse would have brought him to this point. He never thought it would trap him in a job he hated, and a cubicle farm he could have cared less to see again. The thought of security was hard to miss in his place. Every part that fell to pieces needed to be replaced and surgeons were expensive in the best of times. After all, discretion was the better part of valor, and his team needed a watchful eye.

Still, a minute to talk it over even with just himself would be a good plan. “Can I get back to you?”

“Sure, take the day,” Left responded.

“We just need an answer by tomorrow.”

The day finished and Mattias went home to consider the options. Of course, he spoke to Rory and Olivia about it. He didn't want to talk to his team about it, but he did eventually ask Hal about it as well. All of them said the same thing. None of it helped. He had one more person he needed to ask about the job before he decided. One last person to talk to about it.

He was lucky that the weekend came fast, and with the new year stretching it a bit further, he wouldn't need to be back to work for a while. It gave him time to do some research, to find out where Ed had gone. After a day or two of pestering everyone he knew that might have known where she was, he finally found himself standing on a sidewalk on a busy street. The same busy street he had met her on that night with Ava.

He tapped his knuckles against a glass door, the dim-lit building completely abandoned, but recently cleaned. There was a light flickering in the back of the building and after a few moments, Ed appeared from one of the doors. He gave her a little wave, and she waved back. He took a step back as she moved to the door.

She looked different. She wasn't as sharp. She was smiling, spattered with paint and wearing loose-fit clothes. Her hair was a mess, barely staying in the loose ponytail she had pulled up recently if the small streaks of paint on the strands of hair were anything to go by. He kind of liked her better like this, though he didn't quite understand it yet.

She pushed open the door, "What are you doing here, Mattias?"

"I heard you were here, so I had to see for myself," He said with a grin and a nod to her. "So you decided to go your own route,"

She nodded, "Yes. I quit after your... well, fight. Put my entire savings into it. Probably stupid..." She waved in, "But I had to try. Want the tour?"

"Sure."

"What about you?" She asked, "Human Resources told me you were their pick to replace me."

"Yeah, that's what they told me too," He said with a nod. He stepped into the building and glanced around. "So downtown, easy for people to get to, close to a busy street for students and things. You're going through with your plan, right?"

"Might as well try. Right?" She smiled over at him. Her hands waved out and gave a quick image, "I figure I can get this well lit, well painted, offer something like coffee or ice cream or whatever. You know. Give people a safe place to find themselves." She paused for a minute. "I know it's not much yet. I'm still painting, and then I have to get the floors..."

"No, I see what you're saying. It's a good open room, plenty of light fixtures..." He shook his head. "A little work will go a long way. I have faith in you."

"Well, I wouldn't have expected to hear that from you,"

"Really? I thought we bonded pretty well as things went on."

"Good, I'm glad. I thought we did too."

He took a breath. He was going to say something else, but she beat him to a question.

"Like the new gig?" She asked with a sly tilt of her head.

"Wouldn't know."

"Haven't started yet?" She asked.

"No," He said taking a deep breath. "I quit." He said with a little nod, "I've only got one life, turns out. Not going to waste it there."

"What are you going to do instead?"

“Well, I was hoping you might be willing to listen to a proposition. I had this dream I kept putting off, and with a friend starting down the same path... I thought I might tag along.” He said. Her smile widened a bit, and she gave a nod. That was the beginning of his new life, and there was nothing about it that didn’t terrify him. It was better than wasting away though.

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