

## Chapter 01 - A Night in the Life of the Dead

Was there anything less welcoming than the generic sound of a preloaded alarm jingle on a phone to wake one up. The blisteringly loud but wholly unoriginal and unmemorable tune brought only one thing to mind. It was time to wake up. It was time to do it all over again. It warranted little more than a sigh and a disappointed groan from anyone who heard it. There would be, every morning, so many people that found that same tune grating against their ears and forcing them from what small peace they could find in sleep.

He, of course, was no different. There was nothing about that sound that made him joyful or excited to rise from his torpor. Nothing that drove him to rise quickly, or with anything resembling urgency. Slowly but surely, his world came into being, and he pushed the covers down off of himself just enough to reach a hand towards the side table. He patted his hand idly along the edge of the table, fingers feeling about for the source of the noise. When he found the plastic shell of his phone, he reached just a little further to cup it in his hand before pulling it over, unaware of anything but the noise.

Every intention had been to hit snooze, to go back to bed for just a few more minutes of blissful unconsciousness. That was not to be. The cord had wrapped around one of the displaced forks tucked between a couple of empty diet soda cans, and with the sudden clash of sound, they came crashing to the ground between his bed and his side table warranting a single word response...

“Shit.” He had worded breathlessly, as he snapped up to try to catch them before any errant liquid spilled out onto the less than pristine beige carpet of his apartment. Beige carpet that he would have to pay for when he moved out if he ruined. He was lucky – but the stains of the area around the side table indicated this wasn’t the first time. It wouldn’t be the last. He picked up the items and pulled himself to sit up.

His eyes finally fell on the phone, a finger swiping the screen to have it come online. The room was bathed with dim blue light from the device, flashing along his bare, pale skin as he yawned. The clock lit up to a simple bold 10:15 PM, and it warranted another, louder single word.

“Shit!” He groaned, rolling off the bed, his legs kicking the covers away from him as he jumped up and began to move. He had realized that he had succeeded in hitting the snooze button earlier. Likely a couple of times. He should have been leaving by now. He should have been gone.

He slid to his feet and yanked off the ratty, threadbare boxers he had been wearing to sleep in, stumbling forward as he all but hopped towards the door of his bedroom. He left them lying where they fell and twisted out of the doorway. His arm dragged along the wall a couple feet to the next door, where he pushed open to his bathroom. The room was no bigger than a closet, with only the bare necessities. A standing shower, a toilet, and a sink. The sink was covered with his essentials – toothbrush, toothpaste, a couple different deodorants, a towel, toilet paper, a comb... all arranged with the elegance of any good abandoned building.

He reached over to the shower and twisted the knob. The water hissed out with a rumbling shriek, the pipes tapping against the wall as if there would be a torrent of force. It wasn’t much, though.

Barely a trickle of pressure. He turned away and leaned against the sink, moving closer to the mirror to give himself a good once over for the morning and see what he could get away with. That was growing harder everyday. The old myth that vampire's couldn't see themselves in mirrors wasn't exactly true. At first, they were just like humans, but as time went on, that image became less and less clear – as if there was some dissonance between the universe and the fact that the image it was reflecting had not changed.

He looked rough. His skin was pallid, his eyes dim, but he was livening up swiftly thanks to the need to rush. He blinked a few times to clear his eyes and ran a hand through his hair. It was twisted bedhead at the time, but suitable enough. He could wash it tomorrow, after all. And it wasn't too visibly dirty. And it felt fine. It was fine. He kept telling himself it was, at least. He was a little grungy. He raised his head a bit and opened his mouth, two long canine fangs peeking out. He examined them for a few moments before finally giving himself a nod and turning to jump in the shower.

He let out another loud, "Shit," as the water hit him. Cold didn't begin to describe it. But it woke him up nearly fully in a split second. The shower was quick. It had to be. With no warm water, it was an unpleasant experience. One he worked to end as swiftly as possible, covering the essential parts and hopping out only a minute or so after entering. He dried off and tossed the towel over the edge of the shower, before snatching up one of the deodorants and lapping it across his underarms. As he finished, he put the cap on and tossed it into the sink.

Next, back to his bedroom and to his dresser. He pulled out his work clothes as quick as he could. A pair of boxers, that to the layperson would have been indistinguishable from the ones he slept in, but to him were basically his luxury pair. A pair of wrinkled khakis and a simple gray undershirt were pulled on next, and simple black socks. He hopped on one foot as he finished putting his socks on, moving to his closet. He pulled a button-up, collared shirt down from a hanger. He had never unbuttoned it, and as such just pulled it on over his head. It, like his khakis, was wrinkled. But he brushed his hands across it as if to smooth it out and it was still just as wrinkled, but he felt better about it somehow.

He moved to the kitchenette, the darkened apartment barely a full five hundred square feet, so it took next to no time. He pulled open the door to his refrigerator and pulled out a small, red, plastic bottle. He set it aside on the counter before rifling through some odds and ends and finding a box of take-out, which he took as well. He closed the door behind him and had made it about halfway out of the kitchen before moving back to grab the bottle.

He was at his door a few seconds later, grabbing a simple blue sports jacket from the coat closet next to the door while slipping on simple dark shoes. He checked the coat's pockets, and with a jingle and a slap he had found his keys and wallet. He tucked the bottle under his arm and reached for the door. But something made him pause. Something was missing.

"Phone," He said to himself, before turning and darting back to the bedroom. He slipped it into his pocket, and then rushed back to the door. He was out, locked the door behind him, and then moved down the hallway of his apartment building to the stairs, jogging down the three flights of stairs to another door. He pushed out the door and into a poorly lit parking lot, with a flickering light overhead. His car was old, unimpressive, but started up smoothly. The clock in the car blinked to life as the engine came on. Pale green numbers in the dark evening light gave the time – 10:22.

He shook his head and put the car into reverse. He twisted around to look behind him and quickly pulled out of the lot and onto the roads. It was a short trip to work – yes, but eight minutes was not nearly enough time. He drove fast, and in about fourteen minutes he was pulling into another parking lot.

This was a large, empty parking lot, except for the row of cars near one of the entrances to the center building on the lot. The building rose six stories, each story with dark windows showing little more than dim red light of exit signs. All except for one. The fifth floor had flickering fluorescent lights on still. And that was his destination.

He rushed into the building, pushing open the door and darting down the hall. The building smelled of cleaning supplies and old stone and carpet. The hum of janitor staff cleaning filled the distance. He slowed only for a second, as he passed the security post of the building. There sat the security guard.

“Mr. Holland. Running late again as usual?” His raspy and quiet voice called out. The guard was an older man, in his late sixties or seventies. He was a stick of a thing, but always in uniform and one that was well pressed and meticulously kept. “Bad day for it.”

“It’s always a bad day for it,” Our ratty protagonist replied before he gave a smile and a wave. “See you again at seven, Marcell.”

“If they don’t fire you,” He heard the guard calling after him as he reached the nearby elevator.

As soon as that chime sounded, he slipped through the door and into the elevator, mashing the button for the fifth floor. The doors closed, and he took a deep breath. Almost there. He tapped his foot idly, his fingers tapping on the takeout box in his hand. And after another minute, the doors opened. He stepped out into the hall and took a few quick steps. On the left was a large, double glass door with the word Yorokobi emblazoned in gold centered on the door. Well, it was brass, but the company preferred it to be called gold. Below the company name was his department. The Guest Enrichment Center. A fancy term for Customer Service.

He leaned a shoulder against the door and pushed it open. There was a small antechamber that was unmanned this time of night. A receptionist's desk sat there quietly before the room opened into massive hall of cubicles. During the day, these would all be filled with customer service reps – but for now, there was only a single row, near the windows overlooking the parking lot. He slipped back across the large room, and found his own cubicle, slipping in and falling into the chair.

His cubicle, like his home, was in disarray – though he had much less here to have in disarray, so it appeared busy rather than lazy. He took a deep breath and sat his take out one side of his desk and held the red bottle. He adjusted in the chair. It was just comfortable enough to keep you from complaining but offered no real support or luxury. He sat relaxed until his computer booted, and the usual screens and browsers he used in his job began popping up on the screen and automatically logging him in.

He snapped open his drink with a twist as he watched the computer load. He glanced down to the drink, the thick crimson beverage a welcome sight that morning. He was starving, and it might have just been a quick artificial breakfast for him, but it was better than nothing.

“Mattias, good evening,” A familiar voice called out to him. His boss, Halil. Mattias finished his first sip before turning to see the man. His boss was a jovial fellow, kind-hearted, but a follower through and through. He didn’t have any ambition and couldn’t say no to those people above him. It made him a perfect manager. He was depressingly average beyond that, in almost every way. “We have a guest overseeing the department tonight.”

“Oh, really?” Mattias said quietly, barely pulling his drink away.

“Yes. Ed from Operations will be here early this morning to see how we do things. You know,” He gave a couple of little swift punches, “See how we knock it out of the park on night shift.”

“Uh-huh,” Mattias said with another quiet sip of his drink.

“So just be on your best – and if you see your team do anything exceptional.”

“Grab a transcript. Yup.”

“Always a step ahead of me,” Halil spoke with a beaming smile. “That’s why you’re my favorite team leader. Your team is always ahead of the curve.”

“Thanks, Hal.”

“You deserve it,” Hal pointed at Mattias clicking his tongue with what was probably supposed to be a wink, but then at the last second just became an odd blink. “Anyway. I’ll leave you to it. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Will do. And I look forward to meeting Ed,” That was a bald-faced lie on Mattias’ part. He couldn’t care less about whatever the stooge from Operations had to say about the way they did things. This was an easy gig, and his team was good at it. With the holidays around the corner, it was almost certainly the usual reminder of their values and how important it was to, you know, do the job they did every day. And all the platitudes that came with it.

Almost certainly.

Mattias went to work after that. It was a slow day, though, and he didn’t have too much to do, so he didn’t do it with any expediency. Strangely, though, he didn’t work too long before Hal came back.

“Change of plans, Mattias,” Hal’s voice came suddenly, as he hilted around the corner. “Turns out Ed is already here... Meet in the conference room in five.”

“Sure,” Mattias shrugged.

Hal gave a little clap, a finger gun motion and then walked away. But there was something about it that didn’t seem as genuine as usual. Something that seemed very off. There had been a small pause in Hal’s voice between the bits of information. It didn’t matter. He dawdled for a couple of minutes, shutting down essential programs and what he had been working on before standing up and stretching. He reached to his red bottle, which was empty, and sighed.

He moved over to the conference room and glanced over to his team, who was working away – but all of whom took a glance over to him. They were aware that something was going on. He must have missed something.

When he reached the conference room, he pushed open the door. It was a large room, with a big wooden table in the center. By wooden, of course, they meant wood finished plastic material of some sort or another. There were a lot of chairs around the table, mostly on one end of the table, all facing towards the large television screen where projects and reports would be displayed. Under that television at the moment was a woman, seated quietly and expectantly for him to arrive. She wasn't what he expected when Hal had mentioned an Ed.

She stood up and dusted herself off. She wore a crisp, perfectly tailored black and white business suit. She had a folder on the table, one with his name in all caps on the flap. Or rather, HOLLAND M. It was the Human Resources version of his name. He couldn't let her have the first word in that case.

"Hi," He said quickly, extending a hand towards her and walking down the table, "I'm..."

"Mattias Holland," Her voice cut like a knife. She was unhappy. Her hand dismissively pointed to one of the chairs. "Have a seat." She said looking over him.

"Of course," He desperately needed to break the ice. He thought, at least. He gave a wide smile, practiced over the years. "You must be Ed."

A single brow raised over her eye. Perfectly maintained brows carved with a sharp flair made her look serious most of the time and raised, she looked angry. "Edwynna Chambers." She corrected. "You can refer to me as Mrs. Chambers."

"Oh." Shit. That was the word he left off as pulled a seat. "Noted, Mrs. Chambers. I should have,"

"You should have." She waited for him to find a seat, and then thin fingers smoothed down her jacket. "Let's get started."

"Are we waiting for Hal?"

"No. Mr. Bayrak will not be joining us."

There was that word in his head again. "Oh. Good. It's one of those meetings, then."

"Yes, it is." She said opening the folder with a bit more force than was necessary. "I won't mince words, Mr. Holland. We're shutting down the Night Shift department. After looking through the numbers, our guests do not tend to require assistance during the night."

"Wait, what?"

"As such, we have decided to close the night shift department, and fold it into the day shift."

"Wait. Hold on."

"At Mr. Bayrak's suggestion, Human Resources has looked through your team's numbers over the past few months."

"I can explain those."

“And we’ve decided that team leader is not a position that is suitable for someone... like yourself.” She waved over at him. There was a long pause.

In all this, this sudden realization that his job was gone. He felt one simple emotion that he couldn’t quite explain. Annoyance that Marcell was right. Why did he concentrate on that? Why was the night guardsman’s thoughts on him being late the thing that stuck out?

“So, I’m fired then?”

She started to respond.

“Sorry, being let go.” He interrupted.

She shook her head. “No, Mr. Holland. We want to offer you the position of Guest Enrichment Manager for our new Day Shift Seasonal Guest Enrichment and Retention Team.”

Mattias couldn’t help but blink and just stare at her. With his mouth slightly agape, his head slowly tilted confusedly towards her. “Is there another M. Holland that works here?”

“No...” She said quietly, with a shake of her head. “I know it is a lot to take in, but what do you say?”

“Can we revisit ‘fired’?”