



A Sip of Sin

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Category: Romance, Paranormal, Vampires

Description: One man is possessed by a demon, the other a centuries-old vampire. Can they find love when they're unknowingly mortal enemies?

Hollen's luck is running out. With a chatty demon named George trapped in his head, he can only hold down a job for a few days before getting fired. When he stumbles upon a strange teahouse that's only open at night, he discovers demons aren't the only perilous things in this world.

Cruising through the monotony of his centuries-long existence, Munro's life is forever changed when Hollen crashes into his teahouse, soaking wet and full of fire. But Munro has no idea that Hollen is haunted by George's thoughts and that the demon will change both their fates.

Secrets are carved into the wooden rooms of the teahouse, but none are so lethal as the ones of Munro's and George's pasts.

Total Pages (Source): 73

Page 1

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:06 am

Chapter One

Munro

They were all leeches, ready to suck the nearest throats before ducking into hiding. Each one held their head high, showing off the thumping vein at the side of their necks as the pointless banter continued, uninterrupted.

Powerless. Useless. Boring. Munro scraped his nails over the throne he sat on, his legs crossed and the hem of his suit inching up his leg. It was a newer-style pant that had come about in the last few decades, the fabric lighter yet infinitely more expensive. It would take a hundred cups of tea to pay for it, the dregs congealing at the bottom of the porcelain and giving him new inspiration on the next color for his wardrobe.

Munro held up his hand and the conversation cut off with a stuttered gasp, every gaze turning to him. There were eyes of every color that made up the collection his family had become, the variety the only reminders of the past and the places he struggled to forget.

“Get to the point,” said Munro, nudging his chin at Tess, who was nearest to him. She was shorter than most of his family, the tips of her dark hair thrumming with violet tones that matched the artificial contacts she had placed into her eyes. The thin film covered the lovely brown that her maker had fallen in love with.

She pursed her lips, sending a glare across the table to Corby. He stared back, his gaze calculating and hard. Corby must not have known the rumors that circulated about her and how she had murdered her maker in cold blood the moment she was

free of her mortality. Her maker had looked similar to Corby, too, with the same short blond hair and square jaw.

Munro smirked to himself, leaning his head against his hand. Hopefully something interesting would happen.

“I am not going to allow women to become baby factories just because our numbers are declining,” said Tess, her voice calm and frigid. “Men are more than capable of upping the population themselves if they had the balls to do it.”

Corby let out a growl, flashing his fangs as he curled his lips. It was far less intimidating than he probably intended. “I’m not splitting my power with some mortal just to keep you out of carrying an extra load around for a few months. We’d be discovered within weeks. Society today has no idea how to keep a secret—”

Corby obviously had the same feelings about splitting his power as Munro did. It was a completely vulnerable sensation to halve your power down the middle and thrust it upon a mortal so they could carry out more years than nature had ever intended. Munro had only done it once himself, and there were days he still regretted it.

But unfortunately, there were only two ways to make a vampire.

Munro tapped his fingernails on the arm of his throne, leaning hard into the uncomfortable wood. He had commissioned the furniture out of pure spite, giving himself a throne while the rest of his family—his murder—was forced to stand around the obsidian table. If they got too close, they would discover the magic embedded within the stone—one of the last real proofs that magic had ever existed.

“We are not starting this endless conversation again,” said Munro, resisting the urge to shift on the chair. Cushions were in order if these meetings stretched any longer than they already were. “If you want to turn someone, go ahead, but face the risks. As

for our ladies—I'm sure they would be happy to remind you of how well defended they are if any attempt on their freedom were to be made.”

There were a few murmurs of assent around the room, even from Kail, which was surprising. As one of the youngest, he often stayed silent, not offering the slightest hint as to what was happening behind those green eyes. It was the exact reason Munro had chosen him after his predecessor had been removed.

“Anything new?” asked Munro, trying to steer the conversation before an actual fight broke out. As amusing as it would have been, he had to work soon. The shop was already starting to bustle beyond the thick oak door, the smell of spices and sugar thickening the air.

Rhys, who was standing at the other head of the table, shifted, drawing all attention. “We’ve had a few tech failures. As fast as our technologies advance, mortals have numbers on their side. Social media is becoming particularly hard to keep our presence from. A video was released last week that was seen by over a thousand users before our bots managed to take it down. We suspended the account and tracked it, but it looks like it was a ghost account.”

Munro nodded, running his tongue over his lower lip. A fresh wave of cinnamon sparked in the air, and his stomach grumbled. “Good.”

Rhys shook his head, his hair nearly dusting his shoulders. “Not good. We got lucky this time that it was stopped before it went viral. Next time we may not be.”

A grin slipped over Munro’s lips. “I don’t believe in luck.” He left his gaze on Rhys until he squirmed, looking away. “We’ve been discovered before. Most of you weren’t born, but let me assure you that we quickly faded into fable, where we belong. Oh, the fearsome creatures we became.”

Corby scoffed. “Not before thousands of us were burned and staked—hunted in our very homes and murdered by people who should have been our prey.”

Munro raised one brow, and the man fell silent. “Trust me when I say that number was grossly exaggerated. There’s only one thing that was truly extinguished on this planet, and we had more of a hand in that than any other group. Magic was fickle and not meant to be.”

A murmur of assent again moved around the table. They agreed, but none of them really knew.

Only glimpses of magic remained, most of it tethered to artifacts like the soul-sucking table that made a fine decoration in the otherwise righteous meeting room. The first time each of them had looked upon it, there had been such fear and utter loathing in their eyes.

Munro glanced at the massive clock that was perched over the door. Through the thick wood he could catch sounds of the kitchen preparations, one crashing dish souring his mood. “Join me for tea—those who can, at least. Tess, I understand you need to leave us. Know that you’ll be missed.”

The dismissal couldn’t have been clearer.

“Covi,” said Tess, lowering her eyes and giving a small nod as she uttered her indication of respect. Munro used to loathe the title, but it had grown on him as the centuries settled. Now it was the way most members of his murder addressed him.

She headed for the door, the others following behind her at a slower pace and filing out until only Rhys remained.

Rhys smiled as the last of them left, relaxing his shoulders. “I think you like teasing

them like that.” He tugged at the buttons on his shirt until it hung wide, showing off the naked plane of his chest. He was the lucky type who seemed almost naturally hairless, leaving an unobstructed view of a millennia of hard work.

“You know me too well.” Munro heaved himself from the throne, brushing off a few invisible specks from his clothing as Rhys drew close. Next to him rested another throne that wasn’t meant for sitting, the sharp points of antlers catching his eye.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:06 am

Rhys lowered his head, brushing his lips close to Munro's ear. "Are you hungry? You can take whatever you need and leave the worries of discovery to me."

Munro glanced at the clock, the seconds ticking by steadily.

Following his gaze, Rhys shifted, blocking his view. His shirt parted farther, showing off the lines of his waist. "You have time. A few sips and you'll feel so much better."

Munro licked his lips, tracing the throbbing vein on Rhys' neck with his gaze. It would be so easy to take his fill or more, the gnawing in his stomach ceasing to memory.

"I don't have enough time for what you want," said Munro, slipping sideways to pass Rhys. He reached the door before Rhys' voice halted him.

"You need to keep your strength to be ready for what's coming." Soft steps padded behind him as Rhys crossed the wooden floor. The worn surface from his pacing creaked in one spot, showing off the tiniest weakness in the structure.

"What do you think is coming?" asked Munro. Hairs prickled on the back of his neck where Rhys' gaze brushed him.

Slipping around him, Rhys leaned against the door frame, partially blocking his path. "We've been playing catch-up for years. Sooner or later our secret is going to get out." He crossed his arms, his lower lip curved into a pout. "We need to be ready to fight for our obscurity."

Enough. Munro snarled, pinning Rhys against the wooden frame with one hand. The timber creaked as he leaned into the brutal touch, feeling bone beneath the thick layer of Rhys' muscle. Rhys' eyes went wide, his mouth gaping as he winced at the sudden assault.

“Do your job, and there will be nothing for you to worry about.” Munro dug his nails in until they slipped through cloth and flesh. “We’ve known each other for centuries, Rhys. Don’t disappoint me now.”

Rhys flinched, blood draining from his face. It left him so pale that he nearly appeared like the vampires of legend who wilted at the mere sight of the sun. “Yes, Covi. I’ll make you proud.”

Munro drew his hand back, sucking the blood from his nails as Rhys stared at him. He licked his lower lip as the scent of copper filled the room. Thick rivers were still leaking from Rhys' shoulder in a slow, intoxicating stream that darkened his shirt with a vermillion tide.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me,” said Munro, “I must go greet our guests.”

Chapter Two

Hollen

Hollen hummed the song under his breath, skipping over the next curb as the beat grew thick. He landed in a puddle of steeped leaves, the muddy liquid splashing up the sides of his shoe and wicking into his sock.

Wrinkling his nose as the cold sank through the layers into his foot covering, he glanced across the street, eyeing up each sign.

Flower shop. Boutique. Dress shop. For a lively town, it was quiet for a weeknight, with rain pounding on the sidewalk and a few brave souls quickly retreating from the storm to their cars. They left him almost alone amongst the buildings, soaked to the bone and shivering. Almost.

“What about that one?” asked Hollen, adjusting his earpiece as water soaked through his hood and beneath. He glanced over his shoulder as a man walked by with his dog, the umbrella above his head doing little to protect the soaked pooch. The dog shook its head as it passed, fresh droplets splattering against Hollen’s leg.

“No.”

Hollen looked back to the building, the open sign neon against the darkness. There was a smaller red-and-white sign next to it that was probably a help-wanted ad, but he couldn’t tell from the distance. For all he knew, they were looking for a dishwasher.

He glanced at his hands, his knuckles raw despite the lotion he’d just applied. His skin was usually tanned and perfectly soft, but one round in hot water and cheap detergent and the ruin seemed almost irreparable.

“Okay, maybe not.” He rocked on his toes, jumping back on the curb to get a few extra inches that he’d never gained naturally. “There’s a pizza place down the road. I bet they’re hiring.”

“I’m not going home smelling like pizza every night.” The answer washed over him, and he nodded. Pizza was fantastic, with the soft crust and gooey sauce that practically oozed spices, but there were other things in the world he’d rather smell like most days.

Hollen grabbed at the earpiece as it made a buzzing sound, a small shock zapping his ear. It probably wasn’t supposed to get damp, and it was completely soaked, the

music cutting out.

After shoving it deep into his pocket, he started down the street, ducking his head. With just the rain, it was harder to focus, the overwhelming pattering sounding all around him. Puddles were filling fast on the flat concrete, his footsteps splattering in each one as he looked right then left.

“It would pay the rent,” said Hollen, shoving his hands into his pockets and seeking any smidge of warmth. “And I bet they have wings. I know you love chicken wings—admit it.”

He felt more than heard the grumble roll over him, a tingle wiggling against the base of his skull and along his chest that he’d become intimately familiar with over the last few months.

“No.”

Hollen let out a huff, tucking himself against the next building and putting his back to the brick. The sidewalk dipped away from the building, which gave him a better view of the potential workplaces. The man and his dog had disappeared, his reflection the only one in the windows for as far as he could see.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:06 am

“Don’t be so picky, George,” said Hollen, playing with the earpiece in this pocket. He could peel the plastic nearly off without it breaking before he let it snap into place again. He wasn’t sure why he kept charging the thing when he rarely used it.

“I liked the bakery,” said George.

Ah.Hollen took in a deep breath of cold dampness with a hint of stale bread that still clung to his clothes. Walking into that place had been like stepping on his own slice of heaven every morning. The downside to being surrounded by all those carbs was that he’d put on ten pounds in two weeks. But he wasn’t destined for a job like that.

“I can’t go back.” Hollen kicked a stone on the sidewalk, watching it roll away. The owner had been nice about letting him go, but it was hard to hold down a job when everyone thought he was bat-shit crazy. “He caught me talking to you—multiple times.”

George huffed, something ghosting over Hollen’s hand. Sometimes George was like that—projecting himself beyond the little voice in Hollen’s head so he could touch with the barest of sensations.

Hollen thought it was comforting, while George always insisted that he was testing the waters to plan his eventual escape from his host. George was funny like that—reassuring Hollen when he screwed up, then a moment later monologuing about his eventual freedom.

“Don’t feel bad,” said Hollen, ducking his head. Touching his hand where it was tingling, his fingers met cool flesh that was exactly the same as anywhere else on his

chilled body. “It’s hard not to talk to me when I’m such great company.”

Hollen waited a moment, but there was no response, George’s presence retreating in his mind to nothing more than a wispy thought. Letting out a sigh of relief, he pushed himself away from the wall.

It was hard enough to find a job in this economy, but doing it while he was possessed by a demon was so much worse. Perhaps it wouldn’t be as bad if George wasn’t so vocal about his opinion regarding everything and everyone around them. He was the ‘negative Nancy’ in Hollen’s sunshine day—the half-empty glass of his free drink from a handsome man at the bar—the single thorn on a beautiful rose.

“Love you too, George,” said Hollen, pressing out into the rain and quirking his lips as he skipped a few steps. George had also saved his life more than a dozen times since Hollen had stopped to pet a cat in an alley and had ended up with a nasty infection and a passenger in his thoughts that he couldn’t get rid of.

A few shops were closing down, flicking their lights off minutes before the posted time on their signs and leaving the sparse lamps to be the brightest things on the block. Even the cars started to disappear as he turned off the main street.

He’d never been down this particular road, but the pavement was worn, the curbs sagging and pitted, leaving pools of water along the path. It seemed almost forgotten, from the drooping lamp to the faded lines on the street that had once marked where someone could park for all of thirty minutes before getting a ticket.

He almost turned back, but the wind pushed him on, pressing through his hoodie and licking at his sides. Behind him was the call of safety, but it was an area he had paced many times before, drifting through one week, then the next.

Hollen glanced over his shoulder before pulling his hood tighter. The wind was

picking up, and there were only a few parked cars on the broken road. It was a spot where potholes had been left to thrive, small tufts of grass and brave weeds beginning to poke through the cracks. Some of the shops were boarded up, a faded Clearance sign posted in one front window.

Maybe I should go back? He clenched his hands in his pockets, fighting the chill.

The only problem was that he'd been up and down the bustling main street more times than he could count. He'd either worked at the place before, they weren't hiring, or George put up a fuss when he caught a sight or smell he didn't care for.

A few leaves scuttled across his path, somehow floating over the sodden surface without becoming stuck. They made it to one of the shops, swirling in the entryway before finally succumbing to the dampness of a puddle. He paused, glancing at the sign overhead that was illuminated against the darkness of the storm.

The window of the shop was trimmed with white lace, a glowing light revealing the display of a towering tray of the smallest sandwiches he'd ever seen. Next to that on a silver platter were two fancy teacups rimmed with gold and etched with purple flowers. It was something he would expect to see in an estate sale or at his best friend Adair's grandmother's house, not on a lonely street that was otherwise deserted.

The sign itself was tinted pink with large swirling letters that had a giggle pushing through his lips. A Sip of Sin. Perhaps it wasn't quite the place for an innocent grandmother with her Old Country Rose Royal Doulton tea set.

A teahouse? He looked up and down the street, trying to pick out a shadow or a sign of anyone else moving his way. One car pulled onto the street, only to take a wide U-turn before heading back to civilization.

He could almost smell the lacy curtains, with the promise of warmth and the scent of

the fresh bread that made up the tiny snacks settled on the tray. The teacups were filled to just below the brim with a clear, amber liquid, a few dregs visible beneath the surface. He could almost feel the steam rising from them, the liquid capable of heating every bit of his body all the way down to his soaking-wet toes.

There was no help wanted sign posted on the door, but experience had shown him that sometimes that just meant a revolving door of staff going through and an overlord boss who watched you over the brim of his computer screen. If anything, the dishes looked fancy enough that they probably drew a nicer crowd that would reach a little deeper when tipping instead of scoping out the best deal on the menu.

No harm in trying. Taking a deep breath, he pushed through the door, the heaviness surprising him. He stepped inside, relishing the wave of warmth as he let the door close behind him with a solid thud.

The inside was the complete opposite of what he'd expected, pinks and promises merging into sultry desire. Rose had been replaced with rouge, a vast room of high tables scattered about the single bustling room. Each of those tables was busy, the room occupied nearly to the brim.

There were towering silver platters, and teapots with multitudes of gold-rimmed cups perched on matching saucers. With soft violins seeping into the room and a few muffled laughs, the place seemed to be plucked from the midst of a five-star hotel.

Hollen glanced down at his soaked hoodie, shifting to cover the wet footprint he'd left on the entrance mat. His pants were darker than they should have been, and his shoes made a squishing noise with every movement.

A waiter dressed all in white slipped between the tables, serving a fresh tray of the tiny sandwiches. No one looked his way.

The patrons themselves were a mixed bunch, from women in dresses or jeans to men in suits or slacks. One man was dressed from head to toe in a green material that appeared to be velvet, an actual top hat on the table next to the kettle, and a cane leaning against his chair.

“May I help you?”

Hollen froze, tilting his head to peer at the man greeting him. He could have sworn he hadn't been there a moment before, but his presence filled the entire small entryway. He was a towering man, his black hair pulled into a long ponytail and blue eyes so cold that they sent a shiver along Hollen's spine. From the many rings on his fingers and the way his suit fit him perfectly, he reeked of money and class.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:06 am

“I’m—um.” Hollen ducked his head. He’d attempted to work at a country club once, but after avoiding the patrons for the majority of his shift because of the sheer intimidation of their wallets, he’d never returned.

But he was desperate—more than that. A few more poor choices or accidental words and they would be on the street. “I’m looking for a job. Are you hiring?”

Silence hung in the air, thick and prodded only by the tinkling of glasses and the gentle noises from beyond the room that must’ve been from the kitchen. When Hollen looked up, he saw the narrowed eyes and the smirk at the edge of the man’s lips, the withering glance giving everything away.

Hollen flushed, his hands deep in his pockets. A drop of water was crawling its way down his neck, slipping between his shoulders along the only place where his shirt wasn’t plastered to him.

The man raised one brow, letting out a huff. “Why should I hire someone who disturbs the peace of my establishment with wet clothes and an absurd idea? That blush won’t fool me.”

Hollen snapped his eyes up, amping his glare to its full strength. Who does he think he is? I’m adorable when I blush. He’d dealt with assholes before, but three seconds in and this guy was already unreal.

“I know how to wait tables and do dishes,” said Hollen, wincing as his rough knuckles snagged on the fabric of his pocket. “I can cook or clean—whatever you need, and I have a lot of experience doing bank deposits or counting the till.”

Hollen balled his hands into fists. As much of an asshole as the guy was, he was blatantly attractive, with broad shoulders and sculpted features. There was no telling how fit he was beneath his clothes, but they suited him, accentuating almost every part. Why are all the hot ones either assholes or straight?

“What are you doing here?” George’s voice in his skull was so loud and sudden that Hollen flinched, squinting one eye as a headache instantly pounded at his temples. “Get out of herenow.”

It was lucky that no one would hear a hint of George’s protests unless Hollen answered himself.

Two against one? Hollen let out a huff. “Let me be completely honest. I’m not going anywhere until you give me a job.” He straightened himself to his full unimpressive height, still having to crane his neck to hold the man’s gaze. There was no way he was going to be the one to look away first.

The man had the audacity to look a bit impressed, curving his eyebrow that much higher.

George grumbled, but Hollen resisted the urge to tell him off, locking his knees so he didn’t tremble under the boss’ direct gaze.

The man flicked his tied hair over his shoulder before crossing his arms. “There is nothing you can say that will convince me to hire you. You aren’t the type I’m looking for.”

Type? Anger prickled over his skin, and Hollen had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep the barrage of insults to himself. “I told you I’m not leaving.”

Hollen didn’t even want to work for this guy, but he’d never been so disrespected in

his life. The country club had been a testosterone-soaked place for rich assholes to flaunt their money, but all this place had was miniature sandwiches and tea.

“You’re going to get yourself killed,” said George, his voice reverberating in Hollen’s skull. It was loud enough that his headache flared and enough to draw all Hollen’s attention. “Just tell him Erie sent you.”

“What?” mumbled Hollen, ducking his head to try to muffle the sound. George wasn’t usually so insistent or forceful, and he’d never heard of anyone named Erie in his life.

“Do it,” said George. “If you want to get out of this alive, just do it.”

The man was still staring at him with that same unimpressed look when he glanced back up. He tapped his fingers against his leg before waving his hand dismissively.

“Erie sent me,” said Hollen, straightening his spine at the lie. As strange as George was most days, he’d never led him astray. “He said you’d have a job for me.”

The man paused halfway through turning away, pinching his eyebrows together. He dragged his gaze along Hollen’s body once more, pausing just below his face. Hollen had the strangest urge to cover his neck as his skin prickled, his heart rate picking up.

A few others had started to notice them, the man in green sending an interested look their way as he sipped at his tea. When his eyes sparkled, Hollen’s flush deepened.

“How do you know my son?” asked the man. With two steps he had Hollen crowded against the door. The knob out of reach and his escape hindered, Hollen pressed his back against the smooth wood, the designs aching against his skin as he avoided being touched. His heart beat faster, panic curling in his gut.

“Tell him you met him in the mountains,” said George, his voice strained within Hollen’s mind. He was probably exhausted from saying so much when he’d already been so chatty earlier. Sometimes a single sentence left George quiet for days.

“I met him in the mountains,” said Hollen, dragging his teeth over his lip at the sour taste the lie left. “We became friends, and he told me about you and this place. He knew I needed a job, and he said you wouldn’t turn me away.”

When did I become such a good liar? On the inside he was trembling, his gut molten but his hands shaking. His cheeks were hot, his lip sore from his incessant biting. Adair would be so proud of him.

“If you know my son so well, then you must know my name, at least,” said the man, reaching into his pocket and sliding something from within. He stared at the black watch that was dangling from a silver chain, the blood red hands seemingly frozen in time. Hollen had never seen anything like it.

“Munro,” said George, his voice barely a whisper now. He was almost gone, his presence retreating until Hollen could barely grasp him. It was similar to having something itchy stuck between his teeth, only he couldn’t scratch at the spot on his brain with a toothpick.

“Munro,” said Hollen, fiddling with a sharp hangnail with his hands still deep in his pockets. “But to be honest, he didn’t talk about you much.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:06 am

The couple at the nearest table looked their way, one of them taking a sip of their tea with their eyes trained on Munro. Their conversation was hushed, but Hollen could grasp the gist of the unhappy tones. It was probably politics or maybe their displeasure about having a soaking stranger lingering in the entrance.

“That sounds like him,” said Munro, a small smile briefly passing over his lips. It lit up his eyes, some of the coldness seeping away. “I’m surprised he mentioned my name at all. We don’t see eye to eye on a great many things.” Munro glanced at the time once more before sliding his watch back into his pocket. “But if he sent you to me, there must be a reason. Come back tomorrow. We open at eight sharp, and I expect you to be on time.”

“Eight in the morning?” Hollen grinned, butterflies bursting in his belly. He didn’t care how much he was going to make or how long orientation would be. He had a job.

“In the evening,” said Munro, beginning to turn away. “Only the best of the sinners come out after sunset.”

Ugh. Nights. Hollen nodded anyway, reaching his hand out. Munro glanced at it before scoffing and turning away.

Hollen only shrugged, a grin on his face as he escaped back into the storm. A job is a job.

Chapter Three

Munro

Munro cast his gaze toward the door, letting it linger longer than he cared to admit. The soggy version of a young man had retreated long ago, the sodden stains of footsteps fading to a slightly darker shade than the carpet. The scent of wind and rain had remained long after the coolness had faded to the warmth of the tea in his hands.

The cold had always been his enemy—more an inconvenience now after centuries in this climate. He would much rather be slowed by a blizzard than have morbid thirst hit him beneath an unforgiving sun.

The man had seemed so weak, from his soaked clothes to the almost sickly dampness of his scent. But then he'd spotted that spark of defiance and the fury in his gaze that was absolutely unsettling. There had been a flash of power—of absolute darkness—that had drawn him in.

This is a terrible idea. He turned away, ignoring the familiar faces seated at his tables. Some were there to enjoy the same things he did, while others were looking to climb their way in the ranks. The latter would only find disappointment when they realized that he never mixed business with pleasure.

He hoped, at least, that they found some appeal to the smell and taste of fresh bread and spices, the tea slipping down their throats in a way that was satisfying, even if it offered little sustenance. He usually admired the food, running the bread and filling over his teeth and tasting the subtle nuances before setting it back on the silver platter.

It was about the senses, not the sustenance, and to hell with the waste. He'd gone from riches to times of famine where there had been little to eat except the few sips of a willing victim. But culinary delights and foreign aromatics were where he'd truly thrived in the last century. Blood, in comparison, was dull, albeit necessary.

The tea. He closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. The walls were soaked with it, herbs

and flowers mixed with water to release the astounding concoction. There was a simplicity to it that always amazed him, but when it hit his lips, it opened every horizon.

A simple black tea was almost as good as the sweetest substance that had ever passed through his lips. It brought him back to the days of starvation when survival meant stretching each meal with crushed herbs and warmed water. He never knew how long he'd be waiting for prey to come while his belly rolled.

“Covi.”

Munro blinked his eyes open, turning to the familiar voice before the memories could take him.

Rhys stared back, his wavy hair falling just above his shoulders. He'd changed his clothes, a robe on instead of the shirt, with a tie at his waist keeping it from falling open. His brown eyes were narrowed, locked on Munro's lips, where he swept a drop of blood clean with his tongue. Munro hadn't realized he'd nicked himself while staring after his newest employee, so caught up that he hadn't even asked his name.

Rhys glanced at the busy room, slipping his gaze over the others and dismissing them as he often did. “You seem unsettled.”

Munro hardened his gaze before glancing at the door. He didn't expect another to walk through it tonight, mortal or not, but if one had found their way in, it could lead to more. He'd protected his establishment on so many levels, but the man had walked through every one, demanding a job. But perhaps that's why Erie sent him to me.

“Not here,” said Munro, thinning his lips. There was a time and a place for discussion, but Rhys had never had the skill to know when or where. Ears and eyes were everywhere, the mindless chatter ready to halt in order to catch the latest gossip.

Corby looked up from his tea, his smile knowing.

“Is it the new tech?” asked Rhys, fiddling with the tie on his robe. One pull and he would be nearly naked, which was a state Rhys was in more often than not.

Munro shook his head, clenching his jaw. When he’d first come to this city shortly after its founding, he’d kept Rhys and himself hidden the best way he’d known. Hypnotism, altering memories, and a little bit of skill had always been enough, and he’d honed the defense into a massive, webbed instrument that had allowed others to reap rewards.

But the world was a fast-paced killer that was quickly surpassing their best. There was only so much he could cover up to protect them all. That would fade out of existence if he invited a mortal inside, offering them a glass right next to a pair of sharp canines.

Rhys shifted, tugging at the tie. It pulled free by a few inches, barely hanging on by the thick knot. “Then something else?”

“Would you like tea...or perhaps something stronger?” asked Munro, touching Rhys’ chin and forcing him to tilt his head. “You look hungry.”

Rhys grinned, his lips stretching over sharp teeth. In the outside world he could use illusions to keep some parts of his appearance hidden in the same way the faeries did. When that failed, he could pluck a memory from someone’s mind without a second thought, taking his fill without them being any the wiser. But Rhys rarely strayed from him to feed.

“Starving,” said Rhys, slipping from Munro’s hold and grasping his hand. “Come with me.”

Munro followed, avoiding the knowing looks from his patrons as he disappeared through the kitchen to the wide hallway beyond. He'd decorated the space with hues of red, accented with a leather couch and deep wooden table that was just large enough for two cups.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:06 am

The couch was occupied with two lovers feeding when they approached, the stiff leather doing nothing to deter them. Munro had designed this spot after he'd grown tired of the constant taint of blood in the dining room. Here, at least, someone could feed in peace, and the leather was far too uncomfortable to do much more than that.

Rhys let out a hiss, drawing their attention. One look and they were mumbling out apologies and wiping the blood from their lips. The younger of the two bowed his head at Munro in a sign of respect that seemed more like an afterthought. The flush on their cheeks was from more than the heat of the room, which Munro always kept high.

The few who weren't his kind that came through the door without somepersuasion, quickly left once they started sweating, the hot tea only encouraging them on the way out. For him, the extra heat added a languid energy to his bones that he was so often lacking.

"What are you thinking of?" asked Rhys, pushing Munro onto the couch. Munro went without a fuss, catching Rhys as he landed in his lap. Rhys was exceptionally light for his size, or maybe it was that Munro was so used to him, his weight unchanged through so much memory.

Turning his head to the side, Munro let out a hum as Rhys pulled at the collar of his shirt, popping the first few buttons to expose the scarred skin there. His heart picked up as soft lips touched his neck, teeth scraping over such a sensitive spot.

"My son, Erie," said Munro, tightening his grip where he'd settled his hand on Rhys' hip. That name had been the last thing he'd expected from the sodden man's lips, and

he still hadn't recovered from the jolt. It had been so long.

"Oh," said Rhys before licking a stripe along Munro's neck, his saliva cooling and tingling almost instantly. "I haven't seen him in years." Rhys was breathing fast, his excitement obviously growing when he opened one last button, exposing more of Munro than was strictly necessary.

With one last lick, he bit down, his fangs piercing through Munro's skin like tissue paper. Blood rushed to the surface, the taint of copper striking the air, even as Rhys sealed his lips over the spot, sucking to make the blood well faster.

"Nor I." Munro resisted the urge to shake his head, locking his limbs as Rhys fed from him. The soft noises and sharp prickling were an absolute routine that had gotten old centuries ago. No matter how much time passed, it never hurt any less than the first time he'd felt teeth in his flesh, but he refused to let Rhys go hungry.

Some seemed to enjoy the sensation, others turning the pain into something more sensual. Munro struggled to see the appeal when he was the one playing victim. If their roles had been reversed, it would have been another situation entirely.

"Ah." Rhys gasped, licking over Munro's skin as he started to heal, catching the last of the blood on his tongue as it rolled down Munro's shoulder. A few drops soaked into his shirt, ruining the fabric. "Covi, you taste so good."

Rhys rolled his hips before resting his flushed face against Munro's neck, the heat of his cheeks burning into him. His breath came in ragged spurts, his hard cock pressing into Munro's belly. As he dipped his fingers beneath Munro's stained shirt, Munro caught him, pulling his hand away.

"Please?" asked Rhys, drunk on blood with his pupils blown wide. He rocked his hips insistently, his movements becoming more desperate. "I want you. It's been so long."

“No,” said Munro, standing from the couch and lifting Rhys along with him. He looked away as he pulled Rhys’ hands from him before depositing him on the couch. He straightened his shirt, smoothing the front and slipping the buttons back into place. The blood at his collar was still damp, the bits that didn’t soak into the fabric stamping on his skin.

A little mess was bound to happen when hungry bellies were combined with sharp teeth. His neck still ached, even as it healed, his own grumbling stomach extending the process.

“Is it me?” asked Rhys, closing his eyes as he leaned against the couch. He shoved his hand into his robe as he laid back, his movements partially hidden by the fabric. He parted his lips, tracing the bright red flush of them with his tongue.

Yes. Munro couldn’t say it aloud and shatter that spark within Rhys that made him thrive. What they had was routine, but so different than opening the shop on time or greeting his guests every evening. In his work there were different flavors and exciting spice combinations that weren’t always as pleasing as he would have hoped.

Routine was what led a vampire to their final resting place, lost beneath layers of dirt because they could no longer stand the surface. If he gave in, Rhys would soon become the shovel and tedium that put him there.

Sure, he was beautiful, but with his ragged breath and desperate eyes, he wasn’t attractive. There was no fire—no excitement, only the promise of a somewhat satisfying endgame.

Munro turned away, reaching into his pocket and plucking out his phone. There were few contacts listed, and he dialed the one near the very top. So few of his family carried the devices, still stuck in the old ways instead of embracing the technology that was all around them.

Rhys had started to gasp from his spot on the couch, picking up the pace of his hand as he jerked himself in the confines of his robe. When he grew louder, Munro took a few steps down the hall, putting space between them. Something deep in his chest kept him from leaving altogether.

“Who is this?” a voice answered on the other end, the angry hiss so familiar that it shocked him. “How did you get this number?” It had been years since Munro had heard that voice, but it hadn’t changed a bit, with the same dark undertones and steady rage.

Erie had always been like that—so cool, calm and collected, but ready to destroy all if he faced a threat. He had threatened to remove Munro from the surface of the planet when Munro had found out about his less-than ideal lover situation. A shifter? It was maddening.

“When was the last time we spoke?” asked Munro, flicking his gaze to the delicate wallpaper of the hall. “I ask you to infiltrate a pack, you defect, then I never hear from you again.”

He’d asked Erie to do it on an absolute whim, his knowledge of shifters limited to the very few encounters he’d had. There was no reason to stray from his family and immerse himself in the drama of another that was equally as secretive.

But his society was getting too behind, shifters and faeries encroaching on their territory while he turned a blind eye and watched the news, looking at the places he had seen before and how severely they had changed.

It had been a first step that he’d regretted ever since—asking Erie to befriend a shifter and dive deep into the pack to earn their trust.

The last he’d heard from the few sources he had in that world, there were defectors

involved—ones who weren't even recognized by their own pack. They could be the most dangerous of all.

“They’re mine,” said Erie, his voice dropping into a growl. “I’ll fight you for them, and I’ll win. You know you can’t beat me on this. Your power diminishes by the day.”

Munro raised one brow. Really? He’d hoped, even with the rumors, that his son would have better taste than that.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

“There’s too much at stake.” Munro glanced toward the couch at the sound of a gasp. Rhys has thrown back his head as he came, his body going tight. It was always the same. His throat would bob once before he let out a low moan, curling his naked toes as his pace stuttered.

“Fuck you.”

Munro looked to the blank surface of the wall as the line clicked and went dead, the phone call effectively over. Such filthy language. There had been a time when they would end an argument by outsmarting the other, twisting words in a battle of wits. But it seemed now they were destined to throw callus insults.

“That’s rich,” said Rhys, laughing as he wiped his hand on his belly. He’d gone soft, going limp on the uncomfortable couch. “You tell him to get rid of his pet while you invite your own new one to work here.”

It’s different. Something curled in Munro’s gut at the memory of those eyes and the taste of something other on the air. He usually dismissed mortals within a few sips and a touch of convincing hypnotism. His teeth ached just thinking about it.

“I’m looking forward to having a new snack,” said Munro, taking a moment to glance at his watch. Hours had passed, and he’d dwelt on the same sweet scent and stretch of flesh. A bite would look after this new obsession, maybe a deep one that would have the bright spark of life draining from a willing victim.

Rhys laughed. “You have no mercy, Covi. I love it.”

Chapter Four

Hollen

His best friend Adair was sitting on the couch when he got home, the television streaming in the background and a bowl of Smarties in his lap. He must've poured two or three packages into the bowl to have so many in there, all the colors jumbled together in a disorganized mess.

"Hey, baby," said Hollen, leaning over the back of the couch and hugging Adair from behind. The sweet scent of laundry detergent and candy met him, along with that familiar warmth that always left him brimming. "Bad day? I have good news."

He couldn't hold it back, even if Adair seemed miserable with his hood pulled up and his body tense.

Adair huffed, setting the bowl next to him before leaning back and looping his arms around Holland's neck. "Did you discover the cure for infidelity?"

His hug was strong, tugging Hollen closer until his back protested the angle of being half-bent over the couch. Not again.

"Oh no. Scott? Really?" Hollen broke free and scrambled over the cushions to hug his friend properly, knocking the Smarties to the ground in the rush. The chocolate treats scattered on impact, shooting across the floor in every direction. Hollen let them fall, throwing a hug around Adair's shoulders. His eyes were bloodshot, his nose red, and a bundle of tissues beside him that Hollen hadn't noticed.

Their cat Ghost emerged from the shadows, chasing one of the fallen treats into the kitchen while batting at it with his paw. A small tuft of fur floated to the ground behind him, catching in the fibers of the carpet. No matter how often they brushed

him, he still managed to change the color of the carpet daily with all the fur he left behind.

“Yep,” said Adair, hugging Hollen close. He wrinkled his nose as he touched Hollen’s wet shirt before drawing back in surprise. Wiping his cheeks, he took a deep breath, the sound wavering.

“The guy didn’t even try to hide it.” Adair shook his head. “Apparently even his side piece knew I was just an accessory.” His lower lip trembled, and he squeezed his eyes shut, probably trying to ward off the next round of tears.

“I’m sorry, baby.” Hollen squeezed harder, until Adair let out a huff and pushed him away. “You know I’m here for whatever—especially if it’s revenge sex. We could break the guy’s legs and fuck in his bed. A messy fuck, like that time we had to wash the sheets three times just to get the sex-smell out.” He let out a sigh of relief as a small chuckle escaped Adair’s lips.

Adair pressed his hands to his eyes, rubbing until they were twice as red as before. That small smile was still there, though, lighting up his delicate face. “Enough about my fabulous day. I know you like it wet, but what the hell? It stopped raining an hour ago, and you’re dripping all over the couch.”

It was almost taboo. With what little cash they had, they’d spent way too much money on the couch in order to get the perfect color and cushions. There was just enough space for the two of them, so they were always in reach if Adair happened to put a horror movie on.

“Yeah, but I went out job searching.” Hollen bounced a little as he said it, the reality of it sneaking up on him. “It’s going to be okay. The best job searches happen in the rain. There are no customers around, and the bosses are all bored and looking for exciting ways to increase business. That’s when I come in and save their day.”

Adair perked up, reaching for a few pieces of chocolate that were still on the couch.. “I still don’t get why the last place fired you. You really liked it there.”

“Yeah, about that.” Hollen rubbed the back of his head. He told his best friend about exactly everything in the world except for the little voice in his head. When George had first shown up, Hollen had thought the persistent pressure in his head and chest was a cold coming on. It wasn’t until he heard the voice that he realized what exactly had happened. “I was kind of talking to myself a lot, so they let me go.”

“What?” Adair looked more upset about that than he did about his cheating boyfriend. Fresh tears gathered in his eyes, the red flush deepening. “You talk to yourself all the time—it’s just ayouthing. It’s not even annoying unless I’m watching my show.”

Shrugging, Hollen pulled his hoodie over his head, tossing it toward the entrance to his bedroom. The apartment was tiny, with only a small living room, kitchen and two bedrooms that were just big enough for double beds and a small dresser. It meant everything was in easy reach, and there was very little to dust each week.

Hollen shivered in the cool air of the apartment. “I guess I wasreallychatty.”

As much as Hollen had loved the last job, George hadhatedit. There was rarely silence in his head between his own thoughts and the constant complaints washing over him, his skin prickling every time he touched a tomato or the dough. Everybody loved pizza—except possessive demons, apparently.

“So, what’s this new place?” asked Adair. He flicked the television off, bending down to grab another handful of chocolate. Hollen dropped to the floor, scooping as many ofthe treats as he could back into the bowl before Ghost took off with any more. He could hear the cat chewing on something somewhere, but hopefully one or two chocolates wouldn’t hurt him.

“I think I met mister tall, dark, and handsome, only he’s an asshole, too.” Hollen grinned, grabbing a few Smarties for himself before laying them out to separate them by color. “It’s some tea place with the little sandwiches. What do you call that again? High tea, I think. It’s just off main drag.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

“Oh,” said Adair. “My grandma took me there once for high tea. I honestly don’t remember much about it at all.” He furrowed his forehead in thought while licking a drop of chocolate from his lower lip. “I was only a few years old, but I remember her dragging me there. I think it was good, but I never really thought about going back.” He shrugged.

That was what Hollen pictured when he thought about high tea—a group of older ladies or rich folks with fascinators in their hair, sipping overpriced tea and eating little treats at two o’clock in the afternoon. “It’s the opposite of what I expected—and the hours are weird. It won’t be my first stint working nights, though.”

The last one...no, he didn’t want to think about that. Even Adair had realized how miserable he was after two half-asleep shifts with only power naps sustaining him.

Adair screwed up his face. “We’re getting pretty desperate, aren’t we.” It wasn’t a question. Their tiny apartment was a testament to exactly how much they had in their shared bank account. They’d set it up as soon as they’d moved in together, pooling their money until they both got their feet under them.

It went quiet as Adair looked to his lap, clutching his hands together. “I could ask my grandma. We can keep looking for a cheaper place or maybe downsize to a one bedroom. We sleep in the same room or on the couch half the time, anyway.” He brushed his hair from his face. “I know you don’t want to hear it, Hollen, but I could quit—”

“Don’t.” Hollen held out his hand, cutting off his friend. He tried to keep his anger at bay. “If you give up dancing, I’ll never forgive you or myself. All these shitty shifts

will be for nothing, and it won't be so bad—you'll see. It was pretty fancy in this tea place, so maybe I'll find us a sugar Daddy. We could share, or take turns, making him fall for us and hand over all his money." He wiggled his eyebrows.

Adair spluttered. "If you're that sugar Daddy, then I'm game. I'm done with men for a while." He leaned in, placing a brief kiss on Hollen's lips. "You're already sweet, so now you just need scads of cash."

Hollen chuckled, snuggling close to Adair carefully so he didn't disturb the small piles of candy he'd created. He slipped all the purple ones into his mouth, chomping down. "I'm a man. Are you done with me?"

Money was one thing he rarely had to worry about, because he never had any to begin with. At least Adair's grandma had helped him out with school, but Hollen didn't want to take advantage of such a nice lady and ask for any more handouts. When they'd moved to the city together, it was so far away from her that he rarely saw her anymore.

"Never." Adair rested his chin on top of Hollen's head, reaching over him and grasping a few Smarties from each pile. "Do you think you'll like this new place?"

My boss is a huge asshole, the hours suck, and the uniform looks absolutely atrocious. Hollen held back a sigh. "It's going to be awesome."

Chapter Five

Hollen

This is terrible.

It had started with a uniform that was at least a size too big. The cuffs of the pure

white jacket hung past his knuckles, catching on everything from plates to silverware. They had already caused a massive spill, sending an entire pot of tea to the floor to splash across the polished wood in a steaming river.

The rose-tinted brown smudge that he'd caught against the chest was never coming out, and Munro hadn't allowed him back out on the floor after the first debacle. It had only been a trial run before any patrons had arrived, but Hollen had struck out with two left feet and a bundle of nerves.

Thank goodness I caught the teacups. He had a feeling that they were worth a lot more than he was. Another blessing was that other than himself, Munro, and the chef, the place was deserted so far.

It didn't help his embarrassment when George started cackling, the deep sound bouncing off the inside of his skull. He'd only heard George laugh a handful of times, but this one was the worst by far. A few comedies on television had had a similar reaction, but at least Hollen had been laughing along with him that time.

"Shut up," Hollen hissed under his breath, pulling his shirt away from his body and trying to get the stained spots off under the running tap of warm water. He was almost soaked, with water dripping from the edges of his jacket and into his similarly stained pants, some landing on the kitchen floor and streaming along the grout lines of the soft, white tile.

"Are you going to insist on making even more of a mess back here than you did at the front of the house?" asked Munro. He was leaning against the wall, his arms crossed and his jaw set. There was a dirty and soaked towel in his hand, presumably from cleaning the mess Hollen had left.

He hadn't taken his eyes off Hollen—not even for a moment. The glare that followed him from one space to the next was unreadable and unwavering, making his hands

shake and his mouth dry.

“No, sir,” said Hollen, shutting the water off and squeezing what he could from the fabric. Diluted brown water dripped into the sink, leaving splotches of color against the stainless steel. When he let go, the shirt hung as a wrinkled mess, still stained but now soaked and probably ruined beyond repair. “I hope this isn’t dry clean only.”

“It was,” said Munro, letting out a sigh. He pinched the bridge of his nose before mumbling something under his breath that Hollen didn’t catch.

Hollen smoothed his shirt the best he could, wincing at the final result. “What was that?”

The chef was busy at work a few feet away with one earbud in his ear. Munro hadn’t introduced them, and the man hadn’t said a word. Hollen had caught a few curious gazes, though, and one snort when Hollen had first rushed into the kitchen sans teapot.

“Can you sous-chef?” Munro gave him another look. “Never mind. If you can’t handle boiled water then I dread to see what you would do with a knife. You’re on dish duty until further notice.”

What am I doing with my life? Hollen’s knuckles gave a pang of protest, the skin flaring from the short dunking in warm water. There was no amount of lotion in the world that would repair what a few weeks had done. “I can work a dishwasher. No problem.”

He hadn’t spotted the usual dish set up with the solid metal box lowered by the bar that would wash a hundred dishes in minutes. But there had to be more to the kitchen. The parts he’d seen were almost tiny, with just enough space for the chef and one more person. Every available counter was filled, and each oven poured out more heat

each time it was opened.

Munro smirked, lifting the corner of his lips. “We only hand wash here.” He grasped a plate from the nearby counter, holding it up. The gold rim still shimmered, the intricate details etched like nothing Hollen had ever seen except for the pot he had shattered. “These are worth more than you could fathom.”

Hollen wilted, trying not to slouch his shoulders. Running a dishwasher was terrible enough, but hand washing was beyond imagination. The night before had been packed with people all drinking from similar fancy dishes. His hands would be fried by the end of one shift.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

“Sure thing,” said Hollen, grasping the dish from Munro’s hand and spinning it so the details caught the light. “I think Adair’s grandma has something like this, but we were never allowed to use them. She always called them her guest dishes and had them in a glass cabinet.”

His finger hit a chipped corner on the dish, and it nearly slipped from his grasp, flickering against the light. He scrambled, catching it at the last moment and bringing it to his chest.

“That’s enough of that,” said Munro, plucking it from his hands before it could hit the floor. He rubbed a hand over his face, letting out a loud sigh. “My son better have a good reason for sending you to me.”

Hollen beamed. “I’m cute.” He smoothed his shirt. “Maybe not right now because I’m a little wet, but trust me. You’re going to absolutely love me. And I’m a hard worker you can count on. I never call in sick, so don’t worry about trying to find coverage for me.”

“Just take this to the laundry,” said Munro, waving his hand to cut off Hollen’s rambling. He passed Hollen the towel that was stained and soggy. “The towels and tablecloths can be washed in cold water, but we send the uniforms away.”

“Yes, sir.” Hollen emphasized the latter, flipping the towel around so it didn’t drip and create yet another mess. “Uh, where is that exactly?”

“At the end of the hall, take a right then the first left. There is a laundry facility there. You’ll find a new uniform for yourself and a spot to set your...soiled one.” With that,

Munro waved him away, approaching the chef and eyeing up the fresh dough he was kneading.

“Already?” asked the chef, sending a raised eyebrow his way as Hollen ducked out of the kitchen.

As soon as he was around the corner and out of the kitchen, Hollen slumped his shoulders, leaning his back against the wall.

“It could be worse,” said George, startling Hollen as he broke his silence. “I could be in a pizza place.”

Haha.Hollen rolled his eyes. “That would be a relief at this point,” said Hollen, taking a deep breath and starting down the hall. If dishwashing really was his fate, then he wouldn’t last long. But the pay Munro had mentioned was too tantalizing to walk away from. Three shifts and he could have their rent squared away. Another week and he could get that jacket he so desperately needed.

Hollen pushed away from the wall as laughter came from the kitchen, the chef’s chuckle lightening the air. “How do you know, Munro? He seems to have some major issues.”

That was such an understatement. Sometimes bosses were just not nice people, putting money and productivity before anything else, but Munro took that to the next level, treating it more like a passion. Hollen wouldn’t be surprised if the place was filled with tiny spy cameras so he would be able to micromanage the place that much more efficiently.

The hall darkened the farther he got from the kitchen, antique wood lining each side, along with a single painting of a sunset. A fluorescent light flickered ominously, sputtering out for a second before it struggled to turn back on. Warmth faded to

something dank that clung to the cold material of his soaked uniform, making it stick to his skin. He let out a shudder, slowing his step.

“Did we miss a turn or something?” Hollen glanced over his shoulder, but he didn’t see any doorways that led off the hall. The turn from the kitchen and the red exit sign looked so far away, flickering in and out of view.

“If you knew what was best for you, you’d drop off your laundry and get out of this place,” said George. His presence slithered over Hollen’s skin, prickling his nerves.

“I’m not giving up this job,” said Hollen, pausing and grasping the wall as a shiver racked his body. It was cold and slippery beneath his touch, the dampness of the wood impossible for oak that looked freshly polished and almost new. Something twisted in his belly, and he looked over his shoulder again. “Are you sure this is the right way?”

George didn’t answer this time, his presence retreating to something Hollen could almost ignore. There was no choice but forward in search of the turn, then another. It didn’t seem possible—the restaurant so warm that he’d been sweating beneath his clothes. Now he was freezing, every alarm in his mind going haywire.

It was almost completely dark by the time he hit the end of the hall, a small red light in the corner the only thing that gave him anything to see by. There could have been two doors or five in front of him, and he wouldn’t have been able to tell.

“George?” Hollen whisper, shivering in the dark. Reaching for the wall, he met only empty air, nearly losing his balance. He was frozen in the dark with no way to know forward or backward, the light that had guided him flickering out completely.

Something shifted—a shadow or a trick of his mind—and he shrank back, tripping over his own feet. He landed on his ass, letting out a hiss at the sting. His heart

pounded, his breath heavy in his own ears.

Something isn't right. A creaking noise had the hairs on the back of his neck standing up as a small slit of light appeared on the wall. He could see the edge of a door appear as it drifted wider, the warmth of light calling to him. There were voices, too—loud ones.

Scrambling to his feet, he raced to the door, blinking in the light as he slipped inside. It was hot, even hotter than the kitchen and somewhat stuffy. As his eyes adjusted, the room came into view, and he nearly stumbled right back out again. This is not the laundry.

The voices lulled, the conversation dulling as they seemed to notice Hollen standing there, clutching the doorknob behind his back. Some of the faces peering his way seemed familiar, as if they had been the ones spotted around the tables the night before. The man in green velvet was there, but this time he had on some kind of purplish satin that clung to his body.

There were about twenty of them, only two women amongst the men, and all of them looking his way within a minute. They were gathered around a large, black table, the surface clear and so dark that it seemed to suck the very light from the room. At the end there was what could only be called a throne, carved of thick wood and polished until it shined.

Beside that was something similarly shaped that could never be used as a seat, the base and arms made of jagged antlers instead of wood. Each tip was dipped in something that shone silver in the light. Hopefully, it was a decoration, because it would be absolute torture to sit in something like that, with the sharpened points pressing into his flesh, piercing him any time he shifted.

“Run,” whispered George, the sound resounding in his skull. Hollen shook him off,

clutching his hands together.

“Hi,” said, Hollen, waving his hand with a tentative smile on his lip. “I think I took a wrong turn. Any idea where the laundry is?”

The man in satin tilted his head, his grip going tight on the strange cane he carried.

There was no answer except for the looks, most of them morphing into glares. “Sorry for disturbing you.”

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

Hollen took a step back, wilting under the gazes that seemed to burn right through his damp clothes. He couldn't find the doorknob behind him, only the carved stretch of wood that promised to be impossible to break through. If it had been his door at home, he could have just broken it down with one foot aimed through the material.

“Did Munro send you down here, little one?” The closest man fully turned to him, closing the distance between them. He was dressed in something that could only be called a bath robe that ended mid-thigh. With all the others, he stood out, a startling intensity to the way he approached with his gaze locked on Hollen.

Hollen's heart picked up, and he pressed his back hard against the wood. What the hell is this place? It didn't make any sense to have a meeting room like this in a teahouse unless there was some kind of front for a mafia or gang. He swallowed.

“Y-yes.” Hollen glanced over his shoulder, but he couldn't spy the knob. He fisted his shirt, making the wrinkles so much worse. “I took a wrong turn.” Rent is due this week. He bit the inside of his cheek. Even if Munro was a mafia boss, he still paid well.

“I recognize you,” said the man. He had chocolate-brown eyes and matching hair that fell in wavy strands to just above his broad shoulders. He would have stood out if Hollen would have passed him on the street between the red bath robe that was loosely tied at his waist and that gaze that got stronger with every step. “You're the little treat that wouldn't leave the other night. Munro hired you.”

“Yes,” said Hollen, his voice barely above a whisper. There was nowhere to go when the man reached out, his hands solid links of chain rooting him in place.

“That makes us friends,” he said, widening his grin until his teeth were on display. They were strange—slightly too big for his mouth, like ill-fitting dentures. They were sharp, too, the tips promising to leave quite the mark if Hollen ever got too close. “Call me Rhys.”

“That’s such a nice name,” said Hollen, doing his best not to stare as he failed to tug himself from Rhys’ grip. “Is it Greek?” He stared at the ground when he realized how sheer the robe was. There was nothing underneath, not even the smallest scrap of underwear to hide that he was certainly carved like a Greek god.

The others were all staring at them, silent as Rhys ran his tongue over his teeth, flashing a smile as he leaned in. They all had that same look in their eye, one that had Hollen on absolute edge with every muscle in his body tensed and ready to flee. The last time he’d felt this way, he’d ended up with a nasty cat scratch infection and a demon in his thoughts.

“Welsh,” said Rhys, scrunching his nose as he inhaled sharply. “If Munro was going to send us a treat, he could have sent us something a little less bland.”

“Um.” Hollen jerked his arm, but Rhys held strong, curling his fingers until they were digging into the bone. It ached, likely bruising him instantly. “I need to go. Let me go, please.”

“Not before introductions,” said Rhys, turning and dragging Hollen toward the group. As they drew closer, he realized that the table they were gathered around wasn’t wood but thick black rock that stood on pillars of dark stone. The grain was etched over the surface that gleamed in the lights above. It had to be worth a fortune.

How the hell someone had managed to carry something like that down a dark hallway with no lights was beyond him.

“This is Corby,” said Rhys, pausing at the first man. He didn’t have Rhys’ height or his build, closer to Hollen’s height, but he still managed to be intimidating in a suit with his hair slicked back. His eyes were so pale that the blue looked nearly white. “But perhaps you’ve met him already. He’s Erie’s...father.”

Hollen shook, furrowing his forehead in confusion. “I thought Munro was his dad.” He could’ve sworn that was what George had said. There was no answer or confirmation in his head, George suspiciously quiet as Hollen’s heart threatened to break out of his chest.

“Munro is like a father to us all,” said Rhys, rubbing at his chin. “Corby, myself, and even Kail here.” He motioned across the table to a young man who seemed like one of the only ones who wasn’t interested in what was going on. His face was completely blank, his green eyes giving nothing away.

Rhys let out a small laugh before he turned back to Corby. “Do you want him?”

Corby let out a huff before turning his head away. There was a sneer on his lips, his nose scrunched with something that could only have been disgust.

“I thought not.” Rhys dragged him on.

Why does it feel like I’m being bid on like cattle? Only I’m the cow with the broken leg that no one wants? There was no use in struggling. Rhys was too strong, his grip unbreakable as he dragged Hollen across the room, carefully avoiding the corner of the massive table.

“Is there a point to this?” One of the few women spoke up, her red hair matching her sour look. “I came here to discuss something of importance, but all I’ve been able to do is look at your naked ass while you play with your food.”

Rhys sent her a scowl, his grip going so tight that Hollen whimpered, his knees going weak. There were tears in his eyes, threatening to fall. Run. Run! There was nothing he could do.

“Kail,” said Rhys, gesturing to the one with green eyes. Kail drew back, the first flicker of startled emotion passing over his features.

“Rhys, are you sure—” Kail started.

“I thought not,” said Rhys, scrunching his nose before he jerked Hollen toward the table. His robe slipped as he crowded Hollen toward the black surface, pushing him back as his legs hit the edge.

“What are you doing?” asked Hollen, trying to avoid looking at Rhys’ exposed chest while grasping at his robe to keep him from falling as he was herded and pushed, seconds away from sprawling across the ominous black expanse.

The table was freezing against the thin material on the back of his thighs, the sensation creeping over his skin and tugging against him. He shivered, every hair standing on end at the pure unnatural feel of it.

“Introductions, of course.” Rhys licked his lips before pushing at Hollen’s chest, the movements irresistible. Hollen tried to struggle, but defeat soaked him the moment his back met the obsidian surface.

Every ounce of warmth was sucked from him in an instant, the burning coolness radiating straight to his bones. It soaked through him—in him—contaminating each muscle and nerve until there was nothing but the cold. He could barely keep his eyes open, his chest heaving as if the air had turned to molasses.

When Rhys grinned, Hollen caught the sight of sharp teeth that had his stomach

falling straight into a pit of despair. Everything makes sense now. The strange and aromatic teas, the late-night hours, the hunger and intensity in more than one person's gaze in the room.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

“You’re a vampire,” said Hollen, relaxing back and giving in to the overpowering cold. He was surprised George hadn’t just come out and told him. He let out a laugh, curling his fingers against the table. “Wow, I can’t believe I missed that. I am such an idiot. George, I get it now. You win.”

George, you bastard. You could have said something. He couldn’t budge, his limbs sealed to the table with a glue that seemed like it would never wear thin.

Rhys took a half-step back with his forehead furrowed, a frown etched on his lips, seemingly like a touch of fear mixed with the hunger.

The first day George had settled into his brain and had spoken to him was also the day that Hollen had asked him what George had deemed to be ‘too many questions.’ But hell, if demons existed, then that meant that other things did too, like vampires, werewolves, and Santa Claus. George had told him all about the former, only scoffing when Hollen had insisted he wanted to know more about Santa Claus.

If George had been seeking fear and silence in Hollen, then he hadn’t found it, having to deal with every ridiculous theory that Hollen sent his way. Are vampires related to bats, or is that just a myth? But what about silver— They really aren’t allergic?

Still, Hollen hadn’t been convinced. Seeing was believing, George had told him before retreating into silence that day. And maybe that was easy to say for a hitchhiker, but Hollen had explored most parts of the city and had come up with nothing more than a few drug deals and one very questionable guy who’d thought bathing was just cleansing his body for Satan.

Hollen laughed, the sudden warmth in his chest breaking the hold on his limbs. He rolled off the table, landing on the floor near Kail with a thud. Kail didn't move, not even as a few whispers broke out.

The one Rhys had called Corby lunged for him, grasping him by the soaked front of his shirt. The laugh died on his lips.

"You are astoundingly human," said Corby, tightening his grip. "Fickle, useless with the fruitless existences of sixty years or so. How did a tiny speck like you come across something you have no business in knowing?"

"Corby." Kail reached out, placing a hand on Corby's shoulder. "He was obviously bluffing."

Corby snarled, shrugging off the touch. "You're too young to understand what's at stake here. The others may pretend to be in the dark, but we all know about your own human lover, Kail. Even if you try to hide him away in your home, how many people has he told?"

Corby turned his dark eyes back to Hollen. "Tell me, or I'll end you. All it would take is a squeeze." He twisted his hand, tightening the collar of Hollen's shirt until it strained against his throat.

"Um." Hollen bit his lip, grasping at his shirt and trying to tug the collar wider. It was no use. The material too thick to tear. "George told me." He choked it out, Corby releasing him a moment later.

A gasp pushed through his lips as he was thrown back onto the table, the cold clutching him instantly. His head bounced against the hard rock, his ears ringing.

"This is what I'm talking about," said Corby, curling his hand into a fist and

slamming it down on the table. Even through the solid rock, Hollen felt the tremble of the blow. It only lasted a moment before Corby snatched his hand back, shaking out his fingers.

“I thought vampires were supposed to be fun,” said Hollen, flinching as Rhys circled the table and reached for him. Everything slowed, the room wavering. “Like sparkly and fast and stuff.”

He’d never watched the movies himself, but he’d heard the reviews and the whispers of his past female coworkers. Apparently, the bloodsucking beasts of the past were pure myth conceived by terrified villagers with no Wi-Fi. George had even told him vampires could go out into the daylight with no problem and snack on garlic if they so chose.

Corby hissed, his sharp teeth on display along with narrowed eyes. He was a true predator that Hollen was poking with a stick.

“Bleed him dry,” said Corby, scratching his nails over the surface of the table, keeping the pads of his fingers away from the stone. “I want him dead.”

Oh dear. Hollen wrapped his arms around his legs, shuddering against the impenetrable cold. He could barely keep his eyes open, his ears ringing as mumbled voices broke out around him.

“I knew this would happen with that bastard as our leader,” said Corby, curling his lips so every tooth was on display. He growled, slapping his hand against his thigh. “Mingling with other groups—fucking humans and encouraging us to turn them.” He glared across the room at a woman who snarled back. “It’s bad enough trying to keep our existence off the internet, but now he’s throwing us out there. He wants us to be known.”

There were murmurs from a few, some nodding along.

Can I go now? Hollen swallowed down the question. No matter how hard he hugged his legs, the cold seeped deeper, leaving his muscles stiff and fragile. His heart, that had been racing, slowed to steady beats, then slower until he could scarcely feel it, leaving his head swimming.

“Corby,” said Rhys, the tie of his robe nearly all the way undone. He shifted, glancing to the door, then back to the assembly, glaring at Hollen, who was just out of reach. No one seemed to want to simply climb on the table to retrieve him.

“Silence,” said Corby, turning on Rhys. “The only reason you are here is because you don’t know when to close your legs.”

Rhys flinched, grasping the edges of his robe and drawing them tighter.

“Once I rip this one’s throat out, you’ll be next...then our precious Covi,” said Corby, swiping at Hollen. Hollen flinched, shrinking into himself as much as he could. They were all around him, his escape dwindling away.

“Is there a problem?”

Munro’s voice cut through the commotion with the force of a meteor, wiping the sneer from Corby’s face. His gaze flickered over the others, then to Hollen, lingering for only a moment. That look was long enough to fill Hollen with a tiny bit of warmth to fight against whatever was gripping him.

“I-I.” Corby started, taking a step back. “This human knows about us. We have to kill him.” He stuttered, retreating until he could slip behind Kail. Kail raised a clearly unimpressed brow.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

That first meeting of Munro when Hollen had tossed intimidation aside with sheer stubbornness had apparently only given him a small peek at how overpowering Munro could be. People parted for him, making a space where there had been no escape before. The murmurs were plucked from the air, all eyes on him.

Hollen couldn't look away as Munro came near, stopping just short of the edge of the table. His lips were set in a line, the ice in his eyes morphed into pure fire. His presence smothered everything but the scent of tea and the brutal cold that seeped deeper into his bones with each heartbeat.

"Hollen, come here," said Munro, offering his hand. A few strands of hair escaped from his hair tie, slipping over his shoulder.

Hollen shivered, his teeth chattering. There was nothing but cold—not even a whisper from George to reassure him. It was worse than sitting on cement in the depth of winter or diving into water filled with ice. The obsidian was wrong to the very lines etched across the surface.

He edged toward Munro, gasping when his warm, outstretched hand touched him. He could lose himself in that touch, goosebumps bursting over his skin as relief flooded him. When he slipped from the edge, his heart stuttered, flickering into its normal rhythm almost instantly.

Munro's grip was loose as he slowly tugged Hollen closer, barely a few inches between them and a spice of heat. Munro's broad shoulders and chest filled his vision, his neck pale beneath his dress shirt. There was a small stain on the collar—something brown that had probably been of the deepest red.

“Now tell me,” said Munro, sliding his fingers over Hollen’s chin and tilting his head. “Who told you a silly tale about vampires? Who told you the fable was not as much of a myth as you thought. Was it my son?”

Hollen tried to look away, but Munro held his gaze. His breath caught, draining from his lungs in a long sigh. There was more than blue in his gaze, the flecks of his iris standing out. If he looked close enough, he could imagine seeing himself, his lips tinted blue but his cheeks flushed pink. One blink and he could fall into a sleep that there would be no reason to wake up from.

I was wrong. Munro wasn’t intimidating in the least, his eyes a warm thought that lingered in his own. He wasn’t sure why he’d ever feared him when there was a heat spreading from where they were touching, his lips tingling as he licked them. It wouldn’t be hard to push his hands into Munro’s hair, freeing it all from the tie to let it roam free. Some would fall across his shoulders with Hollen’s fingers still tangled in the strands. It looks so soft.

Munro narrowed his eyes, the displeasure seeping straight into Hollen’s chest with the thud of a whip. “Answer the question, Hollen.”

“George.” Hollen’s voice was barely above a whisper. “George told me.” It was true, but then why did it feel like a betrayal? Munro probably wanted more from him than a simple name that could have belonged to thousands of people in the country.

“Hmm, I don’t believe I know him.” Munro smoothed his thumb over Hollen’s cheek, and his eyes fluttered shut on their own. He licked his lips again, hoping to feel the scratch of that thumb against his tongue. Bergamot and chamomile soaked into his senses, warming him with a tranquil peace. He could lay back on the stone and just sleep.

“He’s my friend,” said Hollen. It took every ounce of effort to get the words out, his

stomach twisting with guilt at the same time his chest filled with something sweet.

“Eyes open, sweetheart,” said Munro.

Hollen tried to resist opening his eyes to the stark light and audience, but Munro was so persuasive—so pretty. There was so much more to see, like the lashes that brushed against his cheeks that were two shades darker than his hair, and the small scar on his chin that hid so well.

Munro was still smiling when Hollen opened his eyes, a hesitant reluctance in his gaze. He hadn’t stopped moving his thumb, teasing Hollen’s senses.

“Tell me about George,” said Munro, his words dripping with warm syrup that slithered straight into Hollen’s lungs. There was something else beneath the spices, rich and deep with tones that were almost like leather.

George stirred in his mind, snapping his trance. “Don’t tell him anything.”

His voice was so sharp that Hollen flinched away, breaking Munro’s gaze and leaving his skin bare. The warmth disappeared in a wisp of smoke, the sodden cling of his clothes and the cold of the table so near that it ached.

But George’s words were worse than all of it, carving straight through his brain until his vision blinked. It almost sent him to his knees as his vision dimmed, the bright lights of the room lost in shadow.

“Sorry,” said Hollen, covering his eyes with one hand. Fuck, that stings. George was usually so quiet, but in the few times he’d yelled, it had never hurt so bad. It had never made him want to hurl his dinner in front of strangers, shivering while they showed off their fangs.

“I should go,” said Hollen. He peeked through his fingers, spotting the door and stumbling toward it. No one moved to stop him, not even Munro, who still had his hand outstretched. “Sorry. I can’t stay.” He staggered, wiping at his nose when he felt something drip. His hand came away smeared with blood.

This is not good.

The blood seemed to end the stillness and the shock in a single heartbeat. Rhys lunged for him, leaping over the table with his lips curled over his teeth. He hissed when he touched the surface with his hand, but it didn’t stop his momentum.

Corby reacted a moment later, grabbing Rhys and throwing him back, only to rush ahead himself, closing the distance too quickly to be natural. Rhys hit the far wall, so close to the throne that the edge of his robe caught on one of the wicked curved antlers, the delicate fabric tearing to pieces.

Munro was the only barrier left, and he struck like a serpent, grabbing Corby around the neck as he tried to pass. There was a scream as Munro drew him close, whispering something into Corby’s ear that Hollen couldn’t hear.

Hollen turned away, running for the door and slipping through it before Corby had the chance to break free. His footsteps echoed as he ran out into the darkness and under the blinking lights.

His breathing came in harsh pants, his lungs filling with the copper scent as more blood dripped down his face. Each step was an effort as his legs went leaden.

The white of his uniform soaked red as he ran through the kitchen and straight out the door, hardly noticing that every seat in the place was still empty. Someone called out for him with a voice he vaguely recalled as the chef’s, but he didn’t look back.

He didn't stop until he was a block from home, his throat sore and his breathing a ragged mess. Tears and snot had dried on his face, leaving itchy tracks behind. There was no one on the street in the darkness with the sun faded into fog.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

“Holy hell,” he said, ducking into the closest alley and leaning against the wall for support. The lamppost at the end gave him the only light to see by, turning every tiny thing into wicked shadows.

His chest heaved, his stomach churning as the taste of bile rose in his throat. He turned his head to the side, waiting for it to pass. The blood had dried on his face in a sticky film, but he could see the dark shadow on his clothes that was definitely never coming out.

“I told you to run,” said George, his voice soft like he’d hadn’t just tried to break Hollen’s skull in two. Even though he was quieter now, the words still sent an ache through him, the synapses aching as if they’d been burned.

“Yeah, but ask nicely next time,” said Hollen, scrubbing at his face and trying to scratch some of the blood away. Pulling his shirt over his head, he wiped his face down before tossing it to the closest dumpster. “And just for that, I’m applying at that other pizza place next.”

George grumbled, shifting behind Hollen’s eyes. “Just take us home.”

Chapter Six

Munro

Huh. Munro watched Hollen disappear through the door, the scent of blood lingering, even as his presence faded.

Hollen had seemed so bland—so absolutely O-positive that Munro had wondered if he was even worth more than a brief amusement a feeding would resolve. It wasn't that he liked to play with his food, but excitement kept the boredom and monotony at bay. It also helped him keep in touch as the centuries folded behind him.

But his blood...Jesus. He'd never smelled anything like it, saliva bursting in his mouth as his gut longed for a taste. He'd simultaneously wanted to destroy and consume, a few drops soaking the room in crimson smoke. There was power in blood, and Hollen absolutely reeked of it.

The others had felt it, too, their reactions a touch slower than Rhys'. All but Corby had halted the moment Munro had shown his attention. A claim over something that sweet meant more than the bonds of time and loyalty.

It was his business, after all—his city, his world. And even if they didn't understand his intentions, insisting on bickering in the basement like crooked politicians, they were still nothing to him. Rhys was probably the only one in the room who knew the pure extent of that claim, the veins at his temples bulging as he strained to control himself.

Munro licked his lips, tightening his grip on Corby's throat as he writhed and twisted. He wasn't struggling to get away, too drawn to the few drops of blood that had been left on the floor that shone from the latest cleaning. The drops dimmed as they started to dry, losing their vibrance but none of their appeal.

Munro could imagine himself kneeling to the ground, licking that sweetness from the floor like a starving animal. It would fill his mouth with the taste of copper, maybe giving him a hint of how such a small man could wield something so pure and alluring.

Better yet, he could follow the trail back to the source, draining Hollen until he was

an empty rind that could be tossed away. Munro would be filled to the brim, every cell saturated in that pure vibrance.

It wouldn't be an easy task to get away with. Hollen had mentioned friends and had broken his hypnotism with shattering ease, throwing his grip off with a staggering force that was hidden within a small frame and green eyes. He could destroy them all—every acquaintance and person who had ever laid eyes on Hollen, wiping him from existence to get his fix.

But in today's world, that was next to impossible.

"Covi," said Rhys, drawing Munro from his thoughts. He was on his knees, cradling his arm against his chest with his forehead lined with discomfort. Corby had thrown him hard—hard enough to shatter bone and break skin, apparently. Blood dripped from Rhys' forehead in a sluggish race, stark against the paleness of his skin.

It was the same blood that Munro had given him not long before, the essence of it dimmed and absorbed.

"Does anyone have anything to say?" asked Munro, dragging his eyes away from the door. The meeting had gone on without him as he'd followed Hollen around upstairs, correcting every mistake he'd seen. Perhaps he should have attended, though, when words had obviously been so quick to become mutinous.

Kail had the intelligence to look uncomfortable, while Victoria had the flush of rage on her cheeks. She had always been full of fire, so much like her maker Tess. When Tess was out in the world seeking more realistic truths, Victoria guarded her seat better than Munro could ask for himself. But with fire, sometimes came poor choices.

The tension in the room thickened, his followers—his murder—looking anywhere but at him. He'd collected them over the centuries from every continent, spreading his

lineage in a way that diluted it with every year. The newest ones had only a hint of his power—not that they knew that. Perhaps it's time for a reminder?

“What was he?” asked Rhys, staggering and wiping the blood from his face with the edge of his torn robe. He was naked underneath, the curves and hardened flesh drawing Munro in. Perhaps it was the blood in the air, or Rhys', but his hunger was difficult to restrain when all he could think about was plunging his teeth into a willing victim as he showed them what true pleasure was.

“Hmm.” Munro sucked in one last breath through his nose, basking in the taint of the air. No more. He was so close to losing himself to reckless drunkenness, tracking Hollen down wherever he had fled to.

When he finally grasped his control, he strolled toward the antlered throne, dragging Corby with every step. He could throw Corby on the very table Hollen had found himself on, watching his strength and power be sucked from his limbs by the magic that was bound to the stone.

There was more than one method of torture in the room, but the table was one of the worst. The cold could suck the very will to move from a vampire, leaving them paralyzed as their fate was met. For others, their soul could be plucked from their body, imprinting on the table as another white line. There was an uncountable number of them already on the surface, locked away until someone with true magic released them.

Luckily, magic had died out centuries ago.

The table was too good of a death for Corby, his words still ringing in Munro's ears. Disagreements were how progress was made, but Corby had obviously lost his way. Mutiny and disobedience were some of the few things that could put a time limit on a vampire's life.

Munro quickened his pace, his nails breaking skin as Corby clawed at him. Corby's feet skidded over the ground as he kicked out, obviously trying to reach for something or someone to grasp on to, probably thinking that someone would stand up for him and risk their own life to save his.

He stilled as they approached the antlered throne and Munro gently set him upon it, whispering soothingly as he nudged Corby to settle onto the surface. Corby's eyes were wide, utter terror echoed in them, his chest rising and falling in quick pants.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

“I didn’t mean it,” said Corby, wrapping both hands around Munro’s wrists. “I swear.” His grip was still warm...but not for long.

“No one ever does,” said Munro softly. He let out a breath as he changed his gentle hands to brutal ones, pressing Corby hard against the piercing throne.

The frame was innocent enough, made of a carved wood—mahogany if he recalled correctly—still naturally tinted red, even with all it had been through. The arms were sturdy enough that shackles could be added, and even someone with immense strength wouldn’t be able to break free. Munro preferred to use a more straightforward method to keep someone still.

The silver tips of stag antlers had been lovingly arranged on the throne by a true artist, creating a spiderweb of brutality that all pointed to the poor soul who happened to be seated. When he’d first commissioned the piece, he’d thought of sharpening the points, but it really was better this way. The silver was a joke of his own making—one that no one had ever laughed at.

In the long history of his existence, one of his sons had been allergic to the gleaming metal. A few years later, word on the street was that silver repelled vampires. As if. There were a very few things that could stop a vampire.

Corby let out a screech as his back met the tips of the antlers, and Munro kept pushing, his grip steady and unyielding. Arching his back, Corby tried to escape the inevitable, but it was no use.

His shoulders were pierced first, jagged horns appearing through his chest as if by

magic. Blood soaked into his shirt—dark and strong, coating Munro’s senses completely but doing little to sate him after Hollen’s alluring scent.

Corby was limp by the time he was fully seated, his eyes half closed and blood dripping from his lips. It wouldn’t be long before his eyes became sightless and his heart beat for the last time. The antlers had been expertly placed to avoid the vital organs and surrounding arteries, but he had already lost a lot of blood.

“Now,” said Munro, licking his fingers clean as he turned to face the others, “I believe you were discussing a revolution of sorts.” His heart picked up, excitement bursting through his veins. “Please continue.”

Kail shifted, Rhys screwing up his face and let his tattered robe fall wide.

Rhys clenched his jaw before crossing the space. “Covi.” He gave Corby a hesitant gaze, the scent of blood overwhelming. Corby was twitching now, blood pooling on the floor in a spreading lake. “If a single human with no affiliation with ourworld knows about us, then there is no way of knowing how long it will take the rest of the world. We would be captured—”

“And tortured,” said Munro, cutting him off. “I’m very aware of the little science experiments we would become before we would blink out of existence. We have fail-safes in place—computer viruses written into every base code—to stop any images and knowledge of us from spreading online. And people can easily be hypnotized into forgetting. We have nothing to fear.”

Something curled in his gut, twisting and echoing his words back to him. If someone else said those same things to him, would he believe them? He clenched his jaw.

Munro turned away from the scent of blood, strolling toward the door. Beyond were the calming scents of tea and the gentle clinking of glass. With the chaos here, the

place would be empty tonight, but there was no reason he wasn't able to sip alone. It wouldn't satisfy him, but the warmth would keep him strong for another day.

A hand on his arm stopped him.

"You weren't able to," said Rhys, his eyes locked on Corby's body. "You couldn't hypnotize the mortal. I saw you fail. I've never seen that before."

Munro pulled his arm free, raising his voice to address the room. "You are all welcome to enjoy the feast." He motioned to the rapidly cooling blood. "It's not very often we can cherish such an old vintage."

As he slipped from the room, most of them were moving toward the body or already kneeling to suck the blood from the delicious wood. Kail was still at his place next to the table, his arms crossed as he stared at them.

Rhys met Munro's gaze, licking his lips before running a hand down his chest. The appeal that had been there moments ago evaporated into smoke, his focus still on those few drops of blood that Hollen had left behind. Even with his eyes closed, he could sense exactly where they were.

Munro had to force himself to keep walking.

Chapter Seven

Hollen

He slipped through the apartment door, taking a deep breath of warm air. Once inside, he pressed his back against it and leaned his head until it thudded against the hollow plane. His heart was still pounding, goosebumps littering his naked arms. The only thing between him and a chill from outside had been a thin tank top, which

hadn't soaked up a single ounce of tea stain.

For all the three locks on the door, it was probably fragile enough that someone could easily break right through it if they had the desire to. But it still had that barrier—the break from the outside world that muffled the voices of the neighbors and the smell of their various dishes that always combined into a mess.

“We have a few things to talk about, George,” said Hollen softly, looking down at himself. His uniform top was in a random dumpster, the white pants still clinging to his hips. They did little to warm him, the fabric thin and soft. The rainy coolness that had lasted for almost a week now had soaked into his very limbs after a few minutes on that strange, clearly cursed table.

It was late, probably close to eleven at night, but the lights were still on, the kitchen just beyond the door fully lit with the oven whirring away. Somehow, he'd hoped that Adair had already gone to bed, his soft snores greeting him instead of the overly bright lights.

There was a shuffling in the kitchen before Adair appeared at the end of the hall. There were dark circles under his eyes, the white still tainted with pink from tiredness or tears. “How did it go?”

He was wearing oven mitts, the blue stripes faded from so many uses and washes. Something red was smeared on his lips, and he quickly licked it away, his cheeks rosy presumably from the heat of the oven. “I made jam cookies, and there's pizza in the oven for a late-night snack.”

Hollen glanced at the clock. It was later than he had thought and long past when Adair should have gone to bed. Most of his workouts started first thing in the morning, and since they didn't have a car, he relied on buses to get there. It added an hour to his trip and cut away even more at the amount of time he had to sleep.

“You didn’t have to do that, baby,” said Hollen, toeing off his shoes as he took a deep inhale. “But it smells delicious. I was really craving a pizza, too, but don’t you have to dance tomorrow?”

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

“I wanted to know how your day went,” said Adair, turning back to the kitchen as a timer went off. There was a faint burning smell as Hollen followed after him into the tiny space that had barely enough room for two people and a miniature table. “I’m surprised you’re home so early. Is that good or bad?”

“Umm, good?” said Hollen, scratching the back of his head. He couldn’t tell Adair that he’d lost another job so soon. They were one step away from being out on the streets, then Adair would have to drop out of dance school. All that time and passion wasted.

“They let me go home early because it was my first day,” said Hollen, reaching for a cookie. There was red jam pressed into the middle of it, and he swiped it with his tongue before he shoved the rest in his mouth. “It was really—uh—busy, so the big boss said it would be too hard to train me today. I mostly just did paperwork and all the safety quizzes I’ve done a hundred times. You know how it goes.”

When did it get so easy to lie? Hollen smoothed his hand over his shirt as he took a seat. There was still sweat clinging to him, right along with the clamminess he had yet to shake. His bones ached, the cold so pure that he wasn’t sure how long it would linger.

“Are we celebrating?” asked Adair, going to his toes as he reached for the wine glasses in the top cupboard. They clinked together, the cheap glass polished enough that they could almost pass for something expensive when they were really a set that Hollen had discovered in a clearance bin one day.

“Not until my probation is up,” said Hollen, ducking his head to avoid Adair’s gaze.

“I don’t want to jinx it.”

A moment of silence passed, but Hollen refused to look up, plucking at the edge of his shirt and toying with the seam. Gnawing at his lip, he found some sweetness there from the few cookie crumbs that remained. Adair always tried so damn hard, and yet...

“Hollen.”

He looked up, meeting Adair’s gaze. Adair had taken a seat across from him at the tiny two-person table they used for breakfast and lunch. His hands were clasped, the oven mitts next to them. “Why are you lying?”

“He’s smart,” said George unhelpfully. Hollen shook the comment off with a roll of his eyes before letting his shoulders slump.

“I’m sorry,” said Hollen, ducking his head again. The table was beaten up after so much use, a burn in the surface from when Hollen had accidentally almost started it on fire.

“Why did they let you go?” asked Adair. He pushed himself off his chair, looping around the table before crouching at Hollen’s feet. Seemingly without hesitation, he threw his arms around Hollen’s shoulders, pulling him in for a hug. He was a few inches taller than Hollen, his hair smelling of cinnamon and butter.

“I...” Hollen had no idea how to answer that one. Their laundry facility had a serious vampire infestation? I’m pretty sure Rhys, who I assume is the assistant manager, threatened to kill me?

He’d covered up his messes so many times, but Adair was right. He wasn’t sure why he was trying to lie anymore. Every day it grated on him, each lost job just another

failure to add to the tally. It wasn't his fault, even if he took all the blame.

"Remember how you got into a fight with your grandma because she wanted us to go to church on Christmas?" asked Hollen, clasping his hands together. He was so cold, but sweat was pouring down his back, probably soaking into Adair's arm as he tightened his grip.

"Yeah." Adair looked up hesitantly. "That's the only time we've fought in years. I cried for a week straight when she refused to speak to me like I was some sort of evil man. She just didn't see the point. I've told her so many times that I don't believe in God."

Hollen held out his hands before Adair could get worked up. His beliefs were his beliefs. Unfortunately, Hollen didn't have a choice but to believe in angels. "Okay, and that's fair. But what about other stuff?"

Adair blinked, leaning on his heels and staring up at him. "Other what?"

"You know..." Hollen bit his lip, his stomach twisting. "The stuff that you might not be able to see, but some people believe they exist." When he said it like that, he sounded like an absolute lunatic.

"Like ghosts?" Adair looked over his shoulder, his eyes going wide. "Oh shit, is this place haunted? Hell, no." He lunged at Hollen, squeezing him tight as he trembled. "I'm sorry if someone died here. I didn't know—I swear!" He lowered his voice into a whisper. "Did it tell us to get out?"

Hollen squeezed back, his stomach rolling. "I'm not sure if ghosts exist—I'll have to ask." He combed his hand through Adair's hair until he relaxed. "But what I mean is like demons and werewolves...or vampires."

“Oh.” Adair let out a soft sigh. “No, not at all.” There was pure relief etched onto his face when he looked up. “I think some of that stuff did exist, but they were medical conditions or mental health disorders. The women they burned as witches were probably just a little strange and progressive, but I don’t believe in magic. Did you want to binge fantasy movies or something?” Adair grinned, putting a hand on each of Hollen’s shoulders. “I hate to be the one to tell you this, but there is no Santa Claus. I’m the one who fills your Christmas stocking with chocolate.”

“Magic died out a long time ago,” said George, the voice in his head startling Hollen. Sometimes he was so loud that Hollen wondered how other people couldn’t hear him.

“Why did you flinch?” asked Adair, looking Hollen over. “If you got hurt on your first shift, I’m suing the owner.” He narrowed his eyes, his gaze settling on Hollen’s nose. Even after he’d tried to clean himself up in the alley, there was probably still blood there.

Hollen took a deep breath, his limbs quivering. “Umm.” It’s now or never. “I may or may not be slightly possessed by a teeny-tiny little demon that talks to me almost constantly.”

A beat passed, the kitchen still until Adair smiled, a laugh pushing through his lips. His eyes sparkled, and he squeezed Hollen tight, giggling as he held him.

“Funny joke,” said Adair, squeezing Hollen one last time before he released him. With the smoothness and agility of a dancer, he stood, turning to the stove and taking a peek through the door. A wave of heat and a few wisps of smoke escaped before Adair clicked the oven off with a few button pushes, donning oven mitts to retrieve the steaming pizza.

George grumbled his hatred of pizza at the same time Hollen’s stomach protested. All that melted cheese and pure carbs were exactly what he needed to warm him up,

George's hatred for it beside the point.

Hollen took a deep breath, trying to ignore the hunger in his gut. "I'm serious." I'm possessed by a demon named George. I'm not exactly sure how it happened, but a few months ago I started hearing his voice in my head."

Adair gave him a sharp look, letting the pizza fall to the stove top with a clatter. "You shouldn't joke around like that. I was taken away from my mom when I was little because she was schizophrenic. You know that."

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

“I know,” said Hollen. He ran a hand through his hair, the coolness clinging to him. “And I’m so sorry you had to go through that. God, I feel like such an ass.” His gut was churning with guilt, hunger completely forgotten. “I’m telling the truth. I promise, Adair. Just...ask me something only a demon would know. Let me prove it.”

“I’m not mind-reader, if that’s the trick you’re going for,” said George, his voice trickling down Hollen’s spine. He seemed to have perked up in Hollen’s head, his excitement palpable. “But I know a lot of history.”

“Uh-huh,” said Adair, his shoulders stiff as he cut the pizza. “You can stop anytime, Hollen. If you’re trying to distract me from our money problem, you’re doing a crappy job.” He set the cutter to the side, leaning heavily against the stove with his head at the level of his shoulders. “Please stop.”

“Something old,” said Hollen, shuffling ahead until he was right next to Adair, the heat from the cooling oven radiating against his back. “Ask me about pyramids and stuff...or maybedinosaurs. George, have you been to Egypt? I know nothing about it other than that there are pyramids and a sphinx.” Adair, on the other hand, loved that kind of thing. Hollen had seen him look at hieroglyphics before...forfun.

“I was there when they were built,” said George, a chuckle in his words. “I may have had a bit of influence on the placement.” His presence shifted, like syrup dripping inside his mind.

“Oh, cool,” said Hollen, looking to his hand where he could have sworn he felt the soft brush of skin. Speaking to George was like answering that little voice in his

thoughts that always seemed to know right from wrong. There was no lying between them or false truths—only the absolute vulnerability of reality.

It was hard to know where to look, though, when the person he was talking to was swirling in his own thoughts. A mirror just gave him the creeps, a flash of black on his skin or color in his eyes enough to put terror into his soul.

He didn't look up from his hands, waiting for the same sensation when George would speak again. "How long did it take to build something like that? Adair probably has so many questions for you." He looked up, his smile faltering at Adair's expression. "He said he was there when they were built..."

His voice trailed off. The soft features on Adair's face were stained pink, tears welling in his eyes until one spilled over to wind down his cheek. The pure betrayal on his face was enough to gut Hollen to his core, every snippet of excitement burned away to nothing.

"Stop." Adair didn't move to wipe the tears from his cheeks, even as more followed the first. "How could you do this to me?" The pizza wheel slipped from his fingers, clattering onto the floor in a splatter of sauce and cheese. "You know how hard my mom's disease was on her—how scared I was about it." He sniffed, shaking his head. "She almost killed me—twice. How could you—? I can't believe this." His voice wavered. "Get out of the kitchen. Just leave me alone." Adair pressed his hands to his eyes, tears seeping past. "I don't know why I stayed up to make you dinner when I should have just gone to sleep."

"I'm sorry," said Hollen, holding his hands out until they hovered in the air a few inches away from touching Adair. He flinched back as if he'd been burned. "I didn't mean to upset you." His chest ached, twisting harder at the sight of fresh tears.

He couldn't break his promise to Adair—or the one he'd made to Adair's mother in

one of her few lucid moments in the brief times they'd met. "Keep him away from them. Keep him safe, and don't you ever let him get hurt."

George spoke up, his voice soft. "Give it up."

Hollen trembled, dropping his hands. "I can't keep lying anymore. I lost the last three jobs because they thought I was crazy—because they heard me talking to myself all the time. It's not just a little bit, like everyone does. They thought I was having full conversations with myself, even arguments sometimes. I tried to hide it, but George doesn't shut up, and I can't not answer. He's in my head all the time—talking, asking questions, complaining. He's a negative Nancy."

Hollen took a step, settling his hands on Adair's shoulders as he sniffed, a fresh round of tears trailing down his face. He couldn't hold back, hugging him close and dragging in the comforting scent of his hair.

"Please believe me." He brushed his cheek against Adair's shoulder. "I would never hurt you."

"I know you wouldn't," said Adair, leaning into him. His voice was trembling. "You need to see a doctor, Hollen. I can't go through this—not again. I want to help you, and I can't do that by believing this fantasy. You need help."

George curled inside his chest, so sudden that it ached. "No doctors. We don't need anyone fumbling inside your thoughts like you're insane."

"I know. You know I don't like doctors," said Hollen, squeezing Adair tight. He hiccupped, sobbing against Hollen's ear.

"That's exactly what Mom said when she was having a crisis, Hollen. You can't trust yourself or your thoughts right now, but you can trust me. Please go to a doctor. I'll

take you and hold your hand. Anything you want, as long as you'll go."

Darkness blinked over Hollen's vision, a pressure like none-other radiating from the base of his skull as a metallic taste seeped over his tongue. He pushed away from Adair, stumbling back to clutch his head as it throbbed.

George was there, thrumming through him and filling every gap in his being that he hadn't known existed. The sensation surrounded his prickling skin, spreading through his gut and chest as untamed fire that was bent on destruction. He couldn't breathe—couldn't think, his ears ringing and his heart thudding faster and faster. It was more than he could take, each muscle stretched over limbs that no longer felt like his own.

The poison spread, infecting everything in the same way that it would if it were dropped into a clear pond. He went to his knees, the impact aching and stinging all the way to the back of his spine where it curled in a burst of flame. George surged ahead, using every drop of agony to wrestle control, biting and snapping until his synapses ached.

His vision cleared, the kitchen and Adair's terrified face coming into view. Hollen tried to move to brush a drop of sweat from his forehead, but his limbs were locked, his scream deafened within the sound of his own head. He couldn't move, his limbs belonging to an entity that wasn't him.

"George?" he asked. His lips didn't move, the sound dead in his throat before it could be spoken. Instead, it echoed in his skull, plinking across the rounded walls until it was siphoned away in a depth of noise.

My hands. Hollen tried to scream at the sight, but he was wrapped tight, his wrists and ankles bound within himself. He'd always been pale, the creaminess of his skin now anything but. There were black lines etched into his flesh, stained as the darkest ink

that could compete with a starless sky. Each line was beautiful and rough, symbols and designs that he had never seen, writhing to life and stamping their way until there wasn't a square inch of him that was left untouched.

Adair flinched as George cleared his throat, the sound echoing in the room for the first time. "Five thousand years ago I carved this into rock." His voice was deep and thick, a rock grinding against stone as he pointed to a symbol on Hollen's wrist of a bird perched over water. It was crude but beautiful, the meaning as clear as the picture.

A gasp caught in Hollen's throat, refusing to go farther. Hollen could tell that George somehow sensed his gasp from the way he chuckled.

That voice. It was like finally putting a sound to that nagging conscience that berated him at every move, laughing at his blunders and keeping him out of trouble. It was deep and wisping with darkness and smoke as the design on Hollen's arm twisted into the shape of an eye.

"I did the eye next," said George, stretching Hollen's lips into a grin. "No one understood the humor in it then. By the time they did, it was too late." His laugh turned dark.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

Adair stumbled back, clutching the counter as his mouth fell open. One of the plates of cookies fell as he bumped it, shattering all over the floor and throwing clumps of delicious crumbs everywhere.

“I was always the one watching and the one they couldn’t see.” George strolled closer, reaching for Adair. Thick black smoke curled around his hand, dissipating to nothing as soon as it touched the air. “I’d like you to see me.”

The string snapped with a gut-wrenching tug, throwing Hollen back to the forefront of his mind. His ears popped, his legs collapsing as if his strings had been cut. The floor was inches from his cheek before he managed to throw his hands out, catching his fall with aching wrists.

Breath rushed into his lungs, and he let out a groan, rolling onto his side. The sharp scent of pizza and cookies filtered in, replacing the fire that had consumed him. Ash and darkness faded, tingling erupting over his skin as black markings faded into smoke.

He rubbed his hand where the eye was slowly melting away, expecting to see dark smudges against his fingertips. Instead, there was nothing except for an ache and a rush of blood that pounded fiercer through his veins. It retreated to an itch, then a mere glimmer that faded along with everything else.

The pale stretch of skin was as blank as it had been before, no clues left behind of the drawings that had looked so similar to hieroglyphics that they just had to be. Adair had told him the meaning of that one before, bursting out excitedly on those later nights he read on the couch.

“You could have warned me,” said Hollen, licking the bit of drool from his lips. They were cracked and sore, the taste of blood sliding over his tongue. “That was way worse than the last time.” His limbs throbbed, his wrists most of all, and his voice was scratchy from overuse.

“What the fuck was that?” Adair’s voice broke through his haze. Hollen twitched, his muscles protesting the simple action. They were stretched, like they had tried to fit over a frame so much bigger than his, their elasticity pushed to the maximum. His head thudded back against the ground a moment after he tried to lift it.

“Can you carry me to bed, baby?” Hollen asked softly, letting his eyes close. The room spun, his stomach clenching. “Nevermind. I think I’m going to puke.” He turned himself over just in time, heaving onto the floor as Adair let out a distant scream.

Footsteps thudded next to his head, going softer as Adair ran from the room, headed for the bedroom. He slammed the door shut behind him, a click sounding as he turned the lock.

Gee, thanks, George.

Chapter Eight

Munro

The sun peeked through the sliver beneath the restaurant door, tracing across the small, carpeted entrance. Tables had been cleared, dishes washed, and patrons fulfilled hours ago, but Munro hadn’t stopped staring at the door. At any moment it could turn, and Hollen could walk through it, the wood moving aside with a small touch of his hand.

Munro licked his lips. Those few drops of blood—he hadn't been able to banish them from his thoughts or the scent from his memory. After the bloodbath had ended and Corby had ceased to exist, he was ashamed to admit that he'd gone back to the room, breathing deep to try to catch the remnants of Hollen.

He'd gone to his knees, not quite stooping all the way down and licking the small, darkened spot. It was a battle that he'd almost lost, staring and reaching out to touch the few dried flecks that remained.

Sweetness didn't begin to articulate the honey that rolled over his senses with each inhale, imbedded under his fingernails once he'd scratched the floor clean. He'd brought his fingers to his nose, sucking in the warmth with saliva flooding his mouth as hunger had consumed him.

Three hours had passed when he'd searched the halls and the restaurant for a hint of another drop—or any lingering sign of Hollen. There was nothing, not even a saturated hint clinging to the sodden mop.

Sean, the chef who had been with him for years, helped the servers throw most of the food away, only the tea leaves going back into storage. He did it quietly, his head down, probably with the knowledge that the pallets in the building had been sated more than he ever could be.

The servers were mostly unaware, a few of them grumbling about the absolute waste, while Sean was completely aware of exactly who and what he made his nightly pastries for.

The only true waste was the following day, when Munro had waited, his heart sinking further every time the door opened. He's not coming back.

"I can't believe this," said Rhys, breaking the silence as he strode across the room,

knocking into one of the tables on his way. While Munro had remained still, Rhys had paced, his thoughts carving a winding pathway around the restaurant until Munro was grinding his teeth, the sharp points cutting into his lips.

The fresh blood in his veins had obviously strengthened him, and he'd been insufferable all night. Munro was honestly surprised that he was wearing clothes instead of a robe, the sheer shirt leaving little to the imagination, regardless.

"I thought he would come," said Munro, shaking his head. There was something pulling at him—something more than just centuries of experience turned to a sharp instinct that rarely steered him wrong.

There had been a few brief glimpses in his life when he'd developed a certain longing, his past with Rhys one of the more unfortunate of circumstances. But nothing like this.

"It would have made things easier," said Rhys, curling his lips over his teeth as he strode toward the small display that was tucked between curtains in the front window. Munro made sure to refresh it every evening at eight o'clock, but it had long since grown cold, the small pastries losing their freshness until the bread would crumble from the lightest touch.

"Hmm." Munro nodded, looking back to the door. The wood was thick and etched with flowers that had been tainted with a deep stain. He'd commissioned it shortly after the chair, the same hands creating art that had yet to be replicated.

Rhys curled his hand into a fist. "I could have ripped his throat out right here and put an end to it." His nails sliced into his palm, vermillion dripping to the floor. It was bland and nearly as unappetizing as Corby had been. "He would be one of the easiest kills I've ever made."

Munro jerked from his stupor, whirling on Rhys. “No.”

Rhys paused in his pacing, sending him an incredulous look. “You can’t be serious.” He stared at his own palm before licking it clean. “He’s a threat, and he needs to be eliminated.”

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

“Is he?” asked Munro, tilting his head. Hollen was all of five and a half feet, his green eyes the only thing that had looked somewhat unique about him. He wasn’t fast, or strong, and if his first day and ruined uniform were anything to go by, he was clumsy as well. “I don’t feel threatened.”

Hungry. Intrigued. Munro forced his gaze away from the door. Perhaps that was all. It had been too long since he’d fed, and longer still since he’d truly taken his fill in a play of lust and pain. He skimmed over Rhys, turning away. Not now.

“Covi, please,” said Rhys, closing the distance between them and placing a hand on his shoulder. “You won’t be able to hide in this tea shop much longer before reality comes knocking on the door. People like Hollen are dangerous. They know about us, but they don’t understand what’s at stake. Hollen’s friend—this man ‘George’ is a threat to our very way of life.”

Rhys always had a way of being so very short-sighted, which was astonishing for how long he’d been alive. Munro shrugged the hand from his shoulder.

“George is such an inconsequential name for a meaningless person,” said Munro. A lisp chased his words, his teeth too sharp for his own mouth. Whoever George was, Rhys was probably right, but Munro would be more than happy to drain him dry when given the first opportunity. He wouldn’t be hard to find—mortals never were. “I’ll be in my room if you need me.”

Rhys grasped him by the arm, his grip tight. “I’ll take care of him for you. You won’t have to lift a finger. Him, his family, and everyone he knows—I’ll take care of it.”

Something dark within Munro snapped, rearing its ugly head as he whirled, grabbing Rhys by the throat and squeezing. He growled under his breath, shoving Rhys along until his back pressed against an unforgiving wall. He pinned him there by his neck alone, rage curling in his gut.

The memory of Hollen's blood was enough to blind him, stripping his control away, even as Rhys' eyes went wide, his mouth opening in an airless gasp. You won't touch him. No one will. Every drop was his to savor, focusing his thoughts into an obsessive claim.

Rhys' eyes went wide as he reached for Munro's wrists, choking through the pressure.

"He's mine," said Munro, squeezing tighter until blood welled beneath his fingers. It was rich and dark in that way a vampire's always was and filled with power—the lifeblood of every person it had come from. For the most part, those people were left alive, just missing a tiny part of themselves. But he wouldn't put it past Rhys to take as many lives as he left.

Rhys narrowed his eyes, scratching at Munro's hand until he managed to take in a breath. "Then take care of it." He barely squeezed the words past his lips. "Or we're all going to end up dead."

Chapter Nine

Hollen

A club was not the place he imagined himself being after losing his most recent job, music pounding at his ears and his temples throbbing with the beat. People were dancing all around him, their sweat mingling in the air just as much as the spilled drinks and drugs that were no doubt being passed around.

But after three more misses in the job market, Hollen had jumped on the short-term gig. The hours promised to be terrible, his fellow employees had immediately snubbed him, and he'd nearly been trampled while trying to carry drinks when he'd come a little too close to the dance floor.

Not to mention how many times his ass had been grabbed. The first one he had ignored, shoving it off as an unfortunate accident. The last guy he'd slapped in full view of his surprised girlfriend. They were both drunk, probably to the point that they should have been cut off, but the bartender had kept mixing drinks, despite Hollen voicing his concerns.

Hollen skirted along the edge of the crowd, hiding from the tables that dotted one side of the club. One had been trying to flag him down for the last ten minutes, but he'd expertly avoided them. Heading that way meant putting himself in reach of Mr. Grabby Hands again when his palm was still ringing from the slap.

If they were really that thirsty, they'd get up themselves and wade to the bar, probably stumbling the entire time.

There was a small spot along the wall where the rotating lights never seemed to reach, the line to the bathroom to his right, and the music unbearable. Hollen leaned against the wall, letting out a long sigh that was lost to the surrounding sounds. "This sucks."

He winced as someone rushed by him, bypassing the line with a hand over their mouth and their sides heaving. Liquid trailed through their fingers, dripping to the floor and mixing with what had already been spilled.

"I like it," said George, rolling beneath Hollen's skin. He'd been attentive all night, and Hollen had heard every word bounce around inside his head, despite the music. He wasn't even sure if the songs had words at this point—more of a never-ending

buffeting of noise and the beat. “There isn’t a vampire in sight—and no pizza.”

“I guess.” Hollen took another step away from the crowd, glancing through them to try to see the bar. The bartenders seemed to be looking for him, drinks lined up in front of them, but no trays appearing to whisk them away to the tables who had ordered them. Some of the tables had little tablets they could order from, so they never had to speak a word before their colorful drink would appear before them.

“Do you think Munro would—” Hollen started, clutching his hands at his sides. A familiar face flashed in the crowd, disappearing in an instant. Even saying Munro’s name aloud seemed to summon his lackeys into reality. I barely know him. Why do I miss him?

“No.” George was swift to cut him off, his tongue jerking to a stop. “Do you trust me?”

Hollen looked to his feet and the laces, which were nearly as sticky as the bottom of his shoes. “Yes.”

He couldn’t count how many times they’d fought over the last few weeks. Hollen would remind George that the teahouse hadn’t been all that bad. He was still alive, for one, and Munro had deposited more than enough for one day’s worth of pay into his bank account.

But George dashed his small hopes every time they arose. “You almost died.” Was George’s personal favorite, followed by “You’re nothing but a snack to them.” That one did strange things to his stomach. Munro hadn’t looked at him like he was a snack. Those eyes had pinned him with the promise of enjoying a full five-course meal before lingering on dessert.

“I don’t think I can do this one, George.” Other jobs he had gritted his teeth and bared

it. Hell, a few of his jobs he managed to actually enjoy. But he could feel the toxicity of this place from a mile away. There were a few tips tucked into his pocket, but he couldn't cross the floor again, trying to avoid every hand that tried to grab his ass.

His eyes burned, and he pinched the bridge of his nose, his headache throbbing harder. How am I going to pay rent? I promised Adair I'd get groceries tomorrow.

"Let's go," said George, his voice so soft that it was nearly a whisper inside his ear. "Anywhere you want to go—let's do it."

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

Hollen slumped against the wall, relief washing over him. This wouldn't be the first time he was late with rent. Their landlord wasn't a friendly guy, but at least he had someone to back him up. Adair had been avoiding him, his gaze terrified if they ended up in the same room before Adair quickly ducked out with some excuse.

"Is it weird that I want to serve tea?" Hollen laughed, shaking his head. "I liked the fancy dishes, and the place smelled fantastic. Those little pastries were bite-sized, and Munro didn't seem like that bad of a guy, minus the vampire bit." He hadn't got to try the food, which promised to be absolutely delicious. "Whatever happened in that room was some kind of fluke...yeah."

George shifted in his gut, the sensation easing a touch of the guilt. "You're insane, Hollen."

"I know." Hollen pushed off the wall, sticking close to it as he made his way to the back entrance. He'd already taken a breather out there earlier, and the garbage scent had been more refreshing than anything in the club. "That's literally the reason I'm unemployable. Munro tried to protect me, though. He's safe. I swear."

His ears rang as he pushed the door open, stepping into the cooler air. His footsteps echoed as he wandered down the alley, a small animal skittering to the space behind the garbage bins. It reeked of more than just garbage and stray animals.

Some people were afraid of alleys, but not him. Why fear something that gave him his friend George? And getting a pretty cool cat out of the deal was just a bonus.

"Any suggestions for tomorrow?" asked Hollen, peering at the dark sky. The hoards

of rain had finally passed again, a few stars peeking out between the clouds. Far away there was probably another job for him—maybe on another planet where he wouldn't be the only one with a ghost in his head. "Do you think aliens exist?"

George grumbled. "Try worrying about the ground beneath your feet first."

"Huh." A wisp of cloud covered his view of the moon, his surroundings dimming until he had to squint to see his way. "I'm going to take that answer as a maybe. Some day you have to tell me how you know all this stuff."

Shivering, he wrapped his arms around himself. It wasn't that cold, but compared to the heat of the club, it was icy.

"I can picture what they'd look like." He smoothed his palm over his arm as goosebumps broke over his skin. "They'd be looking up at their own stars, wondering the same thing. Alien vampires is a thought." He'd never seen a movie with something like that before. "I wonder if they're happy." A tear rolled over his cheek, followed quickly by another. "They'd have their own problems and dreams...their own lovers." He let out a shaky breath.

When was the last time someone had touched him with more than just friendly intentions or as a way to get off? Adair loved him, and they had slept together more times than he could count, but that had only been for comfort or to blow off steam. There was no worship in their kisses or adoration when Adair thrust home.

He paused at the exit of the alley, his chest tight. "I'm so tired, George. I'm not sure how much longer I can do this." He scrubbed his hand over his face, trying to banish the tears. There was a helplessness buried in the air, clawing at him until his limbs were nearly numb. He had a feeling he could curl up right next to the dumpster and sleep for days.

That spark of life that he'd expected when he moved in with his best friend, the city as their playground, had been nothing but a lie.

"It's my fault," said George, sounding hesitant. His presence was calm, centered in Hollen's chest where it ached the most.

"No." Hollen shook his head. "It's me who can't stop talking to you. I could have kept a few of those jobs if I'd just ignored you." That's not all. "I'm glad you're here."

George was the one steady thing in his life right now—his rock. Adair had always been there for him before, but now he wasn't even sure about where they stood. One day he could come home to an empty apartment and a scribbled note from his best friend, finally ridding himself from their desperate situation. Hollen wouldn't blame him one bit.

Hollen wiped his eyes, forcing a smile onto his face. "You're always here for me, George, even when no one else is. Besides, it's not like you could just leave."

"I could find another host," said George softly. "You'd never hear from me again and your worries would be over."

"No." Hollen shook his head, clutching at the center of his chest where George was focused. "Don't ever say something like that again. You aren't going anywhere." Hollen staggered, exhaustion weighing heavy. "You're stuck with me, George. You better get used to it."

The club door slammed open behind him, footsteps echoing through the darkness, so much louder before the music cut off again. Hair prickled on the back of his neck, even as George slipped away from his touch, his eyelids drooping low. He was too tired—too goddamned tired to even look up.

A familiar voice breathed behind him, slurred and thick as his heart raced and his knees gave out. “Well, isn’t it my lucky day.”

Chapter Ten

Munro

Time did twisted things. There were days that would pass sluggishly, people coming and going in a whirlwind of sound and color. Then he would blink and realize that a decade had gone by with little difference other than the clothing and his memories.

But the last few weeks had been torture. Every night he paced the floor as tea was served, his followers looking to him, sometimes fearfully, as they sipped from their polished glasses. Spices filled the air—cinnamon, cardamom, and ginger, but it made no difference to the desolation of each passing minute.

He’d tried to feed when he realized he couldn’t take the hunger and longing anymore—not tea, but blood, biting into a soft neck on a dark night. He’d almost gagged at the watery taste and the delirious look in the person’s eyes as he sent them on their way after a few unsatisfactory sips.

The blood had rolled in his stomach, threatening to burst from his throat and splatter over the dark alley. It took hours to settle, but he hadn’t been able to rest since, his body protesting the limited nutrition that flowed into him.

Instead of sleeping, he found himself often in the meeting room, staring at where the drops of Hollen’s blood had been. The room had been scrubbed after the bloodbath, Rhys no doubt leading the project to get rid of any evidence. Munro had never hated him quite so much.

The warmth of the room was back, along with the perilous chill of the table that

balanced with immortality. One shout and he could summon Rhys and force him against the surface of obsidian, watching his energy and eventually his soul seep from his body to be sucked into the abyss of magic.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

Munro blinked away the thought as he leaned against the wall in the kitchen, glaring at the server as he slipped by him with the tray of pastries. Tonight, Sean had outdone himself, incorporating strawberries into the menu, along with basil. The tea was rich with caramel undertones, Munro's own cup of it within arm's reach.

Steam curled over the glass, beckoning him to take another sip. He curled his lip, his teeth no-doubt on display to anyone who cared to look. The servers' minds had all been convinced not to notice the strange displays of the patrons, Munro included.

He had to fight not to snap as another server went by, their tray brimming with treats. The place was packed, every one of the patrons as cold-blooded as he was. The servers were the only warmth, so much of his influence in their thoughts that they would not have been able to tell their closest family members where they worked.

As long as their pay landed in their accounts at the end of the week, Munro found they had no desire to resist the webs he had sewn into their thoughts. One tug, and the memories of their employment would unravel, leaving a small wound where months should have been. He never let it go on for too long.

The air pressure changed as the front door opened, but Munro didn't lift his head. He knew exactly how it would play out.

There would be a small rush of adrenaline when he first looked up, hoping against hope that he would see Hollen there. It would only take a few seconds to recognize whoever else dared enter his domain with the scent of stale blood and the breeze from outside. A few had turned and left right there at the power of his glare, his stomach dropping further each time.

“Covi.” Rhys entered the kitchen with a whirlwind of energy, a server stepping to the side with their tray balanced on fingertips. There was a smile on his lips, blood staining the cracks between his teeth with the metallic taint filling the room.

Are you insane? Munro glowered, breathing deep and letting the blood rush over his pallet. The image of a woman filled his mind, along with blonde hair and dark eyes, music and sweat surrounding the moment of the bite. He huffed, his stomach turning.

The chef looked up, scrunching his nose with distaste before he shook his head. “Whatever it is, keep it out of my kitchen.”

Sean came from family—not a vampire himself but surrounded by them since birth and managing to survive three older brothers with fangs.

Munro nodded, pushing away from the wall.

Rhys stopped him with a hand on his chest. “I have news.” His grin stretched wider, his eyes almost wild. His prey had most likely been drugged, the amphetamines rushing through his veins with the same vigor. It seemed to give him that extra strength as he pushed Munro, keeping him pinned to his spot.

“I need you to come with me—just...give me a moment to prepare.” He staggered, leaning into Munro until the blood reeked in the air between them. Munro winced, turning his head to the side.

Sean was staring at them, his lips pressed into a thin line. There was a touch of surprise in his look as he glanced between them. “Rhys, you’re drunk. Get out of my kitchen before you break something important. Munro...”—Sean hesitated for a moment, before looking back to the strawberries he was endlessly cutting—“you should stay.”

Red stained Sean's fingers, small green pieces of stem clinging to him in a few places. There were a few spots on his white jacket where an especially juicy berry had flown through the air, staining everything it touched.

Is that pity? Munro tilted his head, wincing as Rhys chuckled against him, his lips whispering over his exposed neck. He was drunk or high, and probably too far gone to restrain himself. Don't have pity for someone like me.

"I have someone down the hall." Rhys looped his arms around Munro's neck, nuzzling into him. The action caught him off guard. It was something he'd craved for the past few endless weeks, but Rhys was the last one he wanted it from. "Come see. It's gonna be so fun."

Munro stifled his gasp when the sharpness of teeth slipped over his skin—there one moment before it disappeared.

"You're so tense, Covi." Rhys laughed, too high and fast to be sane.

Sean snapped his fingers, finally drawing Rhys' attention. "Hey." To his credit, he stood his ground, even as Rhys turned a withering glare on him. "Out. I was planning on retiring in a moment anyway," said Munro, letting out a deep sigh. He avoided Sean's eyes as he side-stepped Rhys, escaping him and grasping his cup of tea. The steam was gone, but it was still warm when he took his first sip. That much warmth alone was enough to strengthen him, pushing the persistent chill from his limbs.

Constant cold had been his companion from the moment he'd come into his immortal life.

"The tea is perfect, Chef. My compliments." Munro raised his glass in a salute, before setting it on the counter and turning away. Rhys was at his back, his breathing loud and feral.

“Munro, I didn’t—”

Munro waved his hand, cutting Sean off. He’d already humiliated himself enough for one night, weakness pulling at his core.

He left the kitchen before Sean could stop him, Rhys skipping ahead of him after a few steps. Rhys staggered into the wall as they rounded the corner to the hall, sending a grin over his shoulder.

In moments, the lights flickered off, plunging the hall into darkness. It was what every person met on their stroll into hell, the sensors in the walls picking up any signs of movement and triggering the darkness. For a vampire, it was child’s play, their eyes just as good in the dark as the daylight. Any server who accidentally stumbled back here ran with screams on their lips.

There was still the question as to how Hollen had made it past the first few steps. Munro had meant it as a joke of sorts to send him to find the laundry that didn’t exist. What he’d been hoping for was to have Hollen run screaming after the first step, offering a bit of entertainment as he’d fled into the night. There’s nothing like a good chase.

It would have given him the excuse to slip into his mind, twining with the intricacies as he took a small sip. The strangest sense of guilt clawed its way up his throat as he thought of it. He’d played the game a hundred times...Why is this time so different?

Hollen had made it past the layers of trepidation and the slip of darkness to the very chamber where his murder was so fond of arguing amongst themselves, as if their words alone could change the world.

While Munro wasn’t enraptured, he preferred to drop in from time to time, sometimes steering past the throne to the hidden door beyond where his bed lay. He’d had to cart

the thing down the hall himself when the movers had fled—all thick wooden beams along with the mattress.

One thing that this century did well was the beds.

Rhys fumbled in the dark, skipping a step or two before the lights flickered on again. As Munro slipped past him, Rhys reached for his hair, grasping the tie and ripping it free. His hair sprang forth from its bonds with nearly as much enthusiasm as Rhys himself. Drunken fingers combed through it, tugging at the strands until Munro grasped a handful of it, slipping it in front of his shoulder so it dragged down his chest.

“Relax, Covi.” Rhys giggled, saliva shining over his lips. “You are going to reward me. You’ll give me anything I want.”

Munro raised one brow, refusing to back down. “What you’re asking for is a privilege—one you haven’t earned.”

“I noticed you haven’t been yourself,” said Rhys, winking as they reached the end of the hall. It was darkest here, and Munro strained his eyes to keep Rhys locked in his sights.

Rhys paused at the door, his palm over the surface. “So, I got you a gift. I brought it in the back so you wouldn’t see, because I wanted it to be a surprise.” He giggled, the sound tinkling in the gloom.

Dread filled his core, his skin prickling. The last time Rhys had been this drunk, he’d tried to feed from a shifter. The pack had threatened to kill him when they found out, and Munro had barely been able to negotiate a truce. It had left a bitter stain on an already-strained relationship.

Munro nodded, reaching for the door, but Rhys stopped him with a hand on his chest. He seemed to sober, the mirth draining from his eyes as a distant light flickered, casting a glow over them. “I need to show you something first.”

A growl nearly burst from his throat as they were plunged into darkness again, Rhys patting at his pants and retrieving a small black phone. It was one piece of technology that had surprised Munro with the fierceness that it had taken over.

“Just get this over with, Rhys.” Munro huffed, shifting. The walls were too close tonight, the buzzing of the lights going directly to his thoughts. A distant scent caught his nose that had been haunting him for weeks. If he closed his eyes, he could almost taste the phantom drops of Hollen on his tongue, the vermillion curling over his tastebuds and filling him to the brim.

Rhys flashed him a smile as he lit up his phone, tapping against the keys. “Patience. This will be worth the wait.” Rhys turned the phone toward him. “Just watch.”

The sudden sound was jarring in the quiet space, the low quality of it scraping against his ears. It was dark and blurry, the video shaking as it pointed at a familiar sight across a barely lit street. Shouts sounded in the background, a voice echoing over and over. “I can’t believe it. I can’t believe it.”

“How did this get missed?” asked Munro, grabbing the phone and bringing it closer. Even with the poor quality, he could spot a figure in the shadows, clearly drinking from the neck of an obviously unwilling victim. Why aren’t they hypnotized?

The vampire didn’t seem to know they were being watched, drinking until the victim’s struggles ceased and they went limp. After licking their lips, the vampire dropped their meal, the victim slumping against a nearby fence before crumpling to the ground. He couldn’t tell if their chest was still moving.

The video went dark before starting over, the same shouts and scene repeating before his eyes.

Rhys shut the screen off, shoving it back into his pocket. “This is what I’ve been trying to tell you.” He moved in close, breathing deep as he dragged his nose along Munro’s throat. “We can’t stop all of them, even with the best algorithms in the world. This one has a thousand views so far and is growing. It will probably hit two thousand before it’s noticed and taken down. But those thousand will spread the word, sharing and re-sharing this clip faster than we can stop it.”

Not this again. “And so, what if that happens?” Munro hardened his resolve, placing a hand on Rhys’ chest. “I can remember a time when we were gods, Rhys. You were young then, but don’t you remember the worship? Perhaps it’s time for that to happen again.”

Rhys drew back, grasping Munro’s shoulders hard. “You know we aren’t gods.” He looked over his shoulder as if expecting someone to be there, ready to strike him down. Munro could picture any shifter or faerie settling that score with one blow. “Saying something like that could get us all killed.”

If only you knew. Munro dug his nails into Rhys’ chest, nudging him away. “Is that what this is all about? I’m guessing you killed the one who took the video. Vengeance is sweet.”

There were so many better places he could be right now. The last thing he wanted was another body from when Rhys got too excited and lost control. He knew every good place to hide one...and the bads ones.

“I brought you the one who started all this mess,” said Rhys, finally pulling away and reaching for the door. “This video only launched yesterday, but it’s not the only one. Someone is planting them—hoping they’ll spread across the world. Only someone

with inside information could do that.”

Munro’s gut sank as Rhys parted the door, exposing the warmth of the chamber. It was deserted save one man who was sprawled across the table, the iciness of magic tinting his lips blue. His heart stuttered as he pushed past Rhys, the video and all danger forgotten.

Lying on the table, with his face pale and his hair haloed across the surface, was Hollen. His cheeks were stark, his lips taking on a blueish hue as the heat was drawn from his body. The table had never been meant for someone so weak, built to end vampires such as himself. He’d watched men go insane from a simple touch, but this was the second time Hollen had been trapped upon the surface, his eyes closed now as if in sleep.

Am I too late? Munro took a step, a low growl rumbling in his throat. The blood on Rhys’ teeth and the paleness of Hollen’s cheeks had his heart beating fast, his lips parting as he crossed the space in a few leaping strides. It couldn’t be Hollen’s blood. He would have smelled it...right?

“I found him working in a club, and I followed him into an alley. He was too easy to take—barely even a challenge, really.” Rhys stepped toward the table, stroking Hollen’s cheek. Hollen didn’t stir. It was hard to see if his chest was rising beneath his clothes. The T-shirt and black jeans clung to his skin, the taint of alcohol and sweat a lacquered coat.

“Is he...dead?” asked Munro, fighting the strange fluttering in his gut. He barely knew Hollen, but he’d thought about him nearly every moment since they’d met, even the dark times when he should have been resting. But now he looked so lifeless, his blood cooled and that stubborn attitude silent.

There was nothing in the air—no allure—but still Munro wanted him. He needed

those eyes to flutter open and catch his gaze, a warm hand reaching for him. Munro was frozen, unable to reach out with Rhys touching Hollen, stroking his limp wrist before moving to his face.

“Soon,” said Rhys, sweeping a few strands of hair back from Hollen’s forehead. “I thought you would want the honors. You seemed enthralled by him—by his blood.”

Munro pushed Rhys to the side, carefully scooping Hollen off the table and bringing him into his arms. His fingers scraped against the freezing surface, sending a bolt of icy rigidity up his arm from the quick touch. The pain curled around his fingertips, settling deep into his nerves.

Hollen was nearly as bad as the table, so cold that he sucked the warmth from Munro’s skin in an instant, replacing it with such a deep ache that it stole his breath. He didn’t flinch away, instead holding Hollen against his chest tighter, willing the warmth into his limbs.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

Hollen's heartbeat that had always been so even, was slowing, the cold tipping him straight to death. I'm too late. Munro reached beneath Hollen's shirt, pressing a palm to his chest. The thump was barely there, tickling his palm as it danced slower. He pressed hard, Hollen's sternum firm against his fingers.

I can't. Not like this. He drew his hand back. He'd never considered turning someone like this, not since the first time when he'd split his power to make another. That had been so long ago that he barely remembered the feeling of a beating heart in his palm, blood soaking into his skin.

Rhys hovered close, the excitement thick in his glassy eyes. "I want to watch you bite him." He leaned in, licking his lips. "Do it, Covi."

If Rhys had been anyone else, Munro would have killed him in an instant. Maybe he still would, forcing him on the table or impaling him on the stag antlers. His rage seared against the cold, sharpening his senses.

"I never thought I would truly want to end you, Rhys," said Munro, carefully shrugging out of his jacket so there was only one layer between himself and Hollen. He dropped it to the floor, adjusting Hollen so his head rested in the crook of his elbow. Hollen was limp, his arms hanging.

Munro's limbs were already slowing, strength draining from him as it sank into Hollen. The room was hot, but not hot enough, the thermostat cranked as far as it could go. "Get out of my sight before I kill you where you stand."

Rhys furrowed his forehead. "But, Covi"—he took a step back—"you have to."

Munro snarled, twisting his fingers into Hollen's shirt and ripping it free. He gave his own the same treatment, bringing their naked chests together. A deep ache ripped through him, every bit of his warmth flowing straight into Hollen.

"The last person who tried to force my hand, I had locked away for an eternity—a fate that would be a blessing compared to yours if you don't leave now." Munro didn't look up as Rhys fled the room, his attention captured by Hollen as he stirred.

His eyelashes fluttered, revealing a hint of green before he let out a sigh. Somehow—amazingly—he was still in there, the beat of his heart growing faster with each passing moment.

"Hold on." Munro lowered his voice, crossing the chamber to the thick wooden door that marked the entrance to his own room. It was convenient as hell to sleep in the same place he worked, his sheets smelling of the spices that he craved each day.

His room was simple in the best of ways, with a bed, the softest sheets he could find, and vents that roared with more heat than the throne room. Off to the side there were two doors that housed a bathroom and a closet each, leaving just enough room between them for a small seating area.

He had heard the whispers before— Why have his most vulnerable place next to where his followers assembled? There were days when their words were ripe with mutiny, cursing him beneath their breath and promising change.

And yet, Rhys had been the only one to step foot in his rooms, pleasure the only thing on his mind at that time.

The rest still had that innate fear—one they probably didn't fully understand. He was older than them by more than they could possibly fathom. He'd seen the rise and fall of so many empires that defeat and victory had become routine. There was nothing any

one of his murder could do to him that would put him at risk.

Hollen. Munro glanced to him and the blush of blue on his cheeks.

The bed dipped as he sat on the edge, laying Hollen against the soft sheets. His hair was dark against the cream color he had chosen, his skin so pale it was painful to look at.

Tearing his gaze away, Munro slipped into the bed next to him, pulling Hollen back to the spot against his chest where he fit so perfectly. With Hollen sucking away what little body heat he naturally made, sluggishness pulled at his limbs, slowing his own heart and thoughts.

When Hollen stirred, pushing against his chest and letting out a soft groan, Munro held him tighter, pressing him into the bed. There was a very slim chance that Hollen would recover from exposure to so much magic, but only if he got warm now.

“Be still.” Munro moved his hands to Hollen’s arms, pinning them to the bed as Hollen struggled. His lips were parted, a stream of steady whimpers and moans between his lips.

It didn’t take long for Hollen’s heart to pick up, until it was racing wildly, faster still as his strength seemed to return and he squirmed. The scent of his blood was tucked away just beneath his skin, so unremarkable even when Munro nosed at the column of his neck, breathing deep.

There was something enthralling about being so close to someone he desired so fiercely. Beneath the few layers there was a blood unlike anything he’d ever scented, wrapped with bland flesh to keep it safe.

Just a taste. His teeth ached as he grasped Hollen’s hand, bringing his wrist into the

light. Hollen's skin had turned from blue to pink, but he was still pale, his veins standing out in the light. A steady pulse throbbed beneath Munro's grip, each thump drawing him closer. All it would take was one scrape of his teeth and a tiny puncture, and he could have a taste.

He'd done worse in his life—murder, for one. Most of his feedings involved biting someone while he held them hypnotized, zipping the memory from their mind before he disappeared into the night. There was no way that could be called consent, but this...

Bringing Hollen's wrist to his lips, he parted them, touching the cool skin with his tongue. He tasted of sweat and the dull bitterness of dark magic. There was a warmth there, too, and something else Munro couldn't name. It had a murky familiarity of something that was buried deep within his brain.

Just do it. He'll never know. Munro placed a kiss against the thin surface of Hollen's wrist, roughly nuzzling against the spot that was just out of reach. There. The scent hit the air, not as strong as it had been when Hollen's blood had dropped to the floor, but that hidden wonder that was so clearly concealed.

Munro let out a groan, swallowing as his mouth filled with saliva. It smelled like life, freshness, and a power that promised to be more addictive than the worst drug he could imagine.

Come on. Munro opened his mouth wide, settling his teeth against Hollen's skin. The tips of his canines were still sharp, even after the thousands of bites they had withstood. This one would be just the same as all the others. Hollen was the same—just another snack.

I can't. Munro turned his head away, snapping his jaw shut as it ached. Hollen stirred again beneath him, his lashes fluttering against his cheeks.

He was handsome in a way—pretty, even. It was strange that he had never noticed. That was usually the first thing he noticed about a man, the second being how edible they seemed. But now he was caught, tracing each freckle on Hollen's cheeks with his gaze as he slept.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

“I can’t bring myself to bite you,” said Munro, his voice cracking as he tried to stay quiet. “My world could be ending because of you, and I can’t even bite you.”

Chapter Eleven

Hollen

He couldn’t ever remember being this cold before. His limbs were shaking, his teeth chattering in that painful way that made them clack together. Every muscle ached, pulled taut and twitching as his skin prickled and burned. Feeling a swallowed ice cube slide down his throat was a small taste compared to the absolute frigidness that stuck to every limb.

The worst part was the absolute block of heat he was pressed against. It made the shudders worse, assaulting his flesh until his nerves were nearly on fire. It felt similar to letting an ice water settle against his teeth after a long drink of hot coffee—so excruciating that his eyes watered and his toes curled.

He let out a groan, trying to push away from the furnace he was pressed against. His eyelids were too heavy to open, even when his limbs failed him. There were iron bars of warmth wrapped around him, pressing his arms into his sides with supreme strength.

Letting out a whimper, he winced, trying to break free. It had to be some sort of prison or something like a tanning bed gone wrong where he was trapped beneath the burning lights. Only his last memory was of an alley and a familiar voice.

Hollen curled his hands into fists, the joints in his finger protesting the move. His body was useless, his mind buzzing like he'd just rolled through a heap of garbage, most of it sticking to his skin and coating him in absolute filth.

He remembered the club, the staggering exhaustion, and how George had slipped away in the strange way he did when speaking became too much for him. He seemed to grow tired, the same way Hollen did, almost disappearing altogether some nights as he retreated into Hollen's chest or mind. The only evidence that he was still there was the steady throb of his presence—a heartbeat that wasn't his own.

Even now, he could barely feel George's presence.

“Be still.”

Hollen jerked at the familiar voice, renewing his weak struggles. He wasn't sure how Munro had gotten into his apartment, but he couldn't refute the evidence. The vampire was here, in his bed that was much softer than he remembered.

“Get out,” said Hollen, trying to kick the man against him. Did he drug me at the club? He'd been so careful, pouring his own glass of water from the bathroom sink after the bartender had given him a leery look when he'd requested a drink.

His bare feet struck shins that may as well have been stone for how firm they were, his toes instantly aching. “If you bite me, I'll...I'll... I don't know what I'll do, but you won't like it.”

He curled his fingers, dragging his short nails over the skin of Munro's chest. Munro was naked—as shockingly naked as he was. “George!”

“Calm down,” said Munro. Somehow, he became even heavier, pinning Hollen to the soft surface of the bed. His sheets smelled of tea and lavender instead of the usual

cheap laundry detergent. Or maybe that was just Munro's scent from how he was pressed so close to him, his body heat raging against Hollen. I thought vampires were supposed to be cold.

Munro let out a grunt as Hollen scraped him with his nails, capturing his wrist and clamping down tight. "I won't bite you."

"You're thinking about it." Hollen's heart pounded so hard it hurt. Maybe he'd been drugged, and he'd come back here for a job, ending up naked and on his way to bloodless instead of employed. "You and all your friends looked like you wanted to eat me, and now I'm naked in bed? I don't think so, mister."

Munro's lack of an answer was proof enough. Hollen kicked and squirmed until his muscles ached, shivering so hard that his teeth clacked together. The thick film of exhaustion swept over him the same way it had in the alley, stifling his movements. His sides heaved as he gasped for air, his eyes still closed tight against the dim light.

Munro had barely moved, his limbs locked over Hollen's and curved of pure strength. If Hollen hadn't already known he was a vampire, he would have guessed it then. He was squirming as hell, and anyone who could hold onto that had to be unnatural.

His breath stuttered as he squinted his eyes open, freezing at the unfamiliar ceiling. This is so much worse than I thought.

Above him was smooth plaster, thin strips of dark wood trimming the perimeter and etched with designs that he'd never seen in any lumber store. Two lamps lit the room that was slightly larger than his own in the apartment, one flickering slightly as he whimpered.

The bed had dark burnished-bronze sheets, the wooden columns of the four-poster

stretching nearly to the ceiling. It was close, the air tight and only accentuated by the lack of windows. There were no pictures, no paintings—only the etched designs. Even the doors were made of thick material, looking heavier than the outside door of his apartment.

Hollen looked to the side, craning his neck away from Munro. He couldn't look at him, even if it put his neck on wide display. "Did I get drunk?"

He swallowed hard, curling his fingers into his palm when he realized that his hand was still pressed to Munro's naked chest. His fingers ached as he moved them, so cold that the tips tingled.

When he moved his foot, twitching his knee, he realized he was completely naked like he'd thought, the usual elastic of his boxers not digging into his skin and his socks gone from his naked toes. He couldn't tell if Munro was in the same state completely, but everywhere they touched, there was molten heat lancing into him. "Oh, God."

He closed his eyes, taking an inventory of his body, even as he felt Munro's gaze on him. He couldn't meet that ice-blue stare that had only looked at him with interest once.

His ass wasn't sore, which was a good sign, but that wouldn't happen if he'd topped, or if Munro had been really, really gentle.

In fact, nothing but the cold seemed off, unless he wanted to count his own half-hard cock that was taking an interest to how intimately Munro was pinning him with his thigh. He wet his lips, stifling a groan when his whole body twitched.

"Rhys...invited you over," said Munro, his deep voice rumbling against Hollen's ear. It was softer than Hollen remembered, filled with something like wonder. No one had

ever sounded like that when talking to him—not even Adair.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

Munro let out a huff. “I don’t know how willingly you came, but I found you before he could kill you.” He stroked one hand down Hollen’s back, coming to rest just above the curve of his ass.

His hand was like a stamp of absolute possession, branding Hollen in a way that made his toes curl. He’s hot, but this is not appropriate.

“What a relief,” said Hollen, rolling his eyes. “You saved me so you could eat me yourself. My hero.” He spared Munro a glance, flushing as he quickly averted his gaze. Munro was staring at him, his chin resting on his hand and his other hand still wrapped around Hollen’s wrist, pressing it softly to the bed.

Munro chuckled, the sound vibrating through him. It was beautiful and melodic, hanging in the air long after he’d stopped.

Hollen paused at the sound, the fight draining out of him as another bout of shivering took over. At the very least, Munro was warm. I can let myself like it...this time.

“I wonder what my son has told you if you detest vampires this much.” Munro tightened his grip on Hollen’s wrist, pressing their chests together. It pushed Hollen’s groin harder into his thigh, forcing a gasp through his lips. “I sent him into the world to bring us together, not to split us apart.”

What? “Who—? Oh yeah...the one George told me about.” His mind was obviously still frozen if he’d forgotten about his story that got him hired in the first place. “I mean—the one I met on the mountain.” He cleared his throat, ducking his head. Heat flushed over his cheeks as Munro shifted again, sending a spark straight to his gut.

When Munro moved his leg, his thigh pressed hard between Hollen's. Munro had to feel him and the one part of his body that was so much warmer than the rest.

"Which mountain was that?" asked Munro softly, his lips so close to Hollen's cheek that he could feel his breath. "It's been so long since I tasked him that I've forgotten."

Hollen let out a soft groan, his head going fuzzy. Vampire or not, Munro smelled fantastic, with spices imprinted into his very skin. And the way he moved—rocking in the smallest way that couldn't have been completely accidental. It was driving him out of his mind already.

"The big one. Everest." His lip caught against his teeth as he bit back a groan, Munro's hands like fire on his skin. Sweat broke over his brow as he was suddenly too hot, a vicious fire settling over him as every hair seemed to stand on end. He'd always been sensitive, but there was something about Munro that made the touch so different.

"Hmm." Munro nodded, his chin brushing against Hollen's cheek. "Are you feeling better? Warmer?"

"Yeah." Hollen twisted as his wrist was released and Munro leaned back, the warmth of his skin disappearing in an instant. Before he could think, he wrapped his hands around Munro's waist, gripping at his back and digging in his nails until he went still.

"Not yet. I'm still cold." The sweat prickling over his skin begged to differ. He shivered for an entirely different reason, hopefully fooling Munro. The pressure between his legs returned in a moment as if it had never left, Munro easing back into place.

It had been long enough since he'd fooled around with Adair and longer still since he'd taken care of himself. It was hard to get in the mood when George was

constantly giving him pointers, talking about technique and a few of his escapades. He did not want to hear about that when he had a hand wrapped around himself.

“Take as long as you need,” said Munro. “My body is at your disposal.”

Hollen shuddered. He can't mean that. Munro was all hard edges, but that thigh—Fuck. He was soft, thick, and with George silent, it was the most action his dick had seen in months.

He nudged his hips ahead ever so slightly, tilting his head to look at Munro. Munro was staring back, his pupils wide and his lips shiny and dark. There was that hunger in his gaze again, but it was muted beneath something else.

This time, Hollen couldn't look away, even as his breath caught and his mouth went dry. His first thought of Munro had been that he was extremely handsome, the scowl the only thing taking away from that. But he could have never imagined how beautiful he was with his hair mussed and his eyes so intense.

It didn't make any sense. Munro was dangerous. George had warned him of as much. A few minutes ago, he'd been terrified for his life and ready to kick Munro in the balls and run. But now?

He flicked his gaze between his eyes, the blue color so pale against his dark pupils that it seemed to cool the heat of his skin. Munro's hair was only half in its tie, thrown over his shoulder and some falling to tickle Hollen's chest. With his dark lips, it looked as if he'd just finished taking someone to the peak of intimacy.

“I'm good now,” said Hollen, licking his lips as he flushed hotter. He'd never lied so terribly in his life before. He was anything but good, longing and absolute need coursing through him.

Munro didn't move, his gaze flickering to Hollen's lips, then back up. He seemed hungry, but Hollen wasn't exactly sure what for. "I'm—."

Munro snapped his mouth shut, staring at Hollen. He dashed his tongue out, licking over the lower one and leaving a trail of wetness behind. Behind those lips were sharp teeth and a promise of pain.

But Hollen had always been a risk taker.

Arching his back, Hollen rocked his hips. It was way too easy to wrap his arms around Munro's neck, tentatively touching some of the hair that had slipped free. The strands were smooth and soft—thinner and more delicate than he'd expected. For some reason he'd assumed the strands would be created from pure titanium, like the rest of Munro seemed to be.

Munro closed his eyes into slits as he took a deep breath. His jaw twitched, the muscle in his cheek jumping.

"Why do you want to bite me?" asked Hollen, keeping his voice low. He could touch the column of his own throat and feel the thudding pulse there, but it had no appeal. His skin was thin and sensitive, his flush making the sensation sharper.

"I don't. Not right now." Munro took in another heaving breath, leaning into Hollen's touch. "That's not what I want anymore." He opened his eyes, his gaze narrowed on Hollen's lips.

Liquid heat dripped through him, squirming in his chest and soaking his extremities. He fidgeted, bringing his hips forward to press himself more insistently to Munro. There was nothing half-hard anymore between them, every bit of Hollen's focus on that rigid piece of flesh.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

Munro parted his lips in a pant. “I can feel you.” He reached down, pulling Hollen’s ass hard and forcing him into his thigh. He seemed to lose himself, that wonder taking hold of him. “And I want to watch you unravel, your body out of your control as you succumb to the pleasure. I could show you things that you’ve never heard of—things that you wouldn’t think to ask for—things that haven’t been done in centuries.”

Words like that were probably supposed to turn him on and make his cock harder. But jealousy streaked through his gut instead, his arousal wilting.

“I’m not looking to be another notch on your bedpost,” said Hollen. In reality, that post was made of solid wood that was completely unblemished, but guys kept track in strange ways sometimes. Hollen had once dated a guy who kept a few strands of hair from every lay. That was serial killer material.

Munro furrowed his forehead, his face suddenly serious. “You won’t be.” He cupped Hollen’s chin, tilting until their gazes met. He seemed to hesitate for a moment. “I’ve never kissed anyone before I’ve bitten them.”

Munro leaned in, closing the few inches of space and bringing their lips together. The touch was soft, butterflies breaking out from the point of contact. Hollen let out a gasp, his heart pounding as Munro took the invitation.

His back was pressed into the bed as Munro settled over him more firmly, shifting until their lips were level. He was heavier than he looked, holding Hollen so decisively and insistently as he slipped his tongue into Hollen’s mouth.

Strawberries, tea, and spices rolled over his senses, soaking into him and pulling a groan from his throat. It was good—better than he imagined, stripping any sense of self-preservation from his mind. He could lose himself in a kiss like this, aching for more but longing for those lips on his at the same time.

He gripped Munro's hair, tugging him until he had no choice but to settle all his weight on top. As he shifted, it brought his thigh harder against Hollen, pushing a whimper through his lips as the pressure overwhelmed him.

Munro was so hard—all muscle and strength wherever Hollen put his hands, but his lips were the exact opposite. Even as he deepened the kiss, Munro's was still soft, his tongue stroking but not taking more than Hollen was willing to give.

“Jesus.” Hollen further deepened the kiss, sliding his tongue along Munro's. Delving farther, he traced inside Munro's mouth, pausing at the sharp bite of his teeth. Munro stilled, all his focus seemingly on that touch.

When he'd first thought about kissing Munro, he wasn't sure what he'd expected. The way he moved and moaned was so normal and natural that he was honestly startled when the tip of his tongue first glanced against the sharp points in his mouth.

In comparison to his own, they were massive, long and so sharp that the edge threatened to break skin, even with the slight glance of his tongue.

But he couldn't help himself, reaching for one side, then the other, to tease each point with his tongue. They must've been sensitive from the way Munro's breathing picked up, his heart pounding where Hollen had a hand on his chest.

It made him bold—bold enough to press just a little too hard, a sharp sting zipping against the side of his tongue. He drew back with a gasp, searching for any hint of copper in the mingled taste of them.

Munro's cheeks were flushed, his eyes still closed with his lashes heavy on his cheeks when Hollen drew back. He seemed so innocent like that, the weight of the world hidden behind the thin sheets of his eyelids. He certainly wasn't the dangerous beast that George had warned him about repeatedly.

There was nothing about Munro that he'd expected, not even after the gruff demeanor of his first day. This was the man who had stopped a room of vampires from eating him and who had apparently rescued him from Rhys, who was a bad guy if Hollen had ever met one.

"How do you drink?" asked Hollen, brushing his thumb along Munro's lower lip. He fluttered his eyelashes at the touch, only opening for a second before those icy eyes were hidden again. "Are your teeth hollow like straws or do you use them to gouge a hole, then just sip?"

Munro's lips curled into a smile, a chuckle shaking his body. Suddenly those eyes were open, ice blue filled with dark arousal pinning him as he grinned at Hollen.

With his flushed cheeks and eyes that were now sparkling, he looked like perfect normal boyfriend material. There was a kindness there that he could take home to Adair and not get a rant about how they weren't compatible or how Hollen could find someone better who could treat him right.

"Sip?" asked Munro, lifting the corner of his lip to show off the largest of his teeth. The long canine tooth was bigger than any Hollen could remember seeing, appearing even stranger next to the rest of Munro's teeth that appeared almost normal. "Tea is for sipping. Blood is an indulgence."

He licked over that fang, a dark red drop springing from his tongue. It was so unlike an animal's or a predator's that had the clear purpose of grasping prey and holding on.

Hollen was mesmerized as that drop rolled over Munro's tongue, so dark that it was nearly black. There seemed to be a thickness to it almost like syrup, promising a sugary sweetness that didn't make sense.

"What does it taste like?" Hollen leaned in, his eyes nearly crossed as he stared at the drop that was slowly melting against Munro's tongue. It spread like a web, seeping between his tastebuds until Munro finally closed his mouth and swallowed it down.

It couldn't just taste like copper with that hint of death that always made his stomach curl when he cut himself on accident. Usually, the sight of blood would have sent him to the floor. The only change now was the pounding of his own blood through his veins, so much of it gathering south.

He closed the distance, curling his tongue around Munro's and swiping right over the spot that had been tinged with vermillion. There must have been more than one drop because it tasted so strong, the metallic notes slapping over his tastebuds. But there was something else there—something that made the same spots tingle and ache.

He tried to draw back as he scrunched his nose, not sure if he loved or hated it. It could only be one of those things with no option of a gray zone in between. As he swallowed, it sank deeper, the sensation traveling all the way down his throat. His head went fuzzy as he swallowed again, his throat aching at the fierceness of the sensation. I don't know if I can—

Munro grabbed the back of his neck, holding him tight as he slid his tongue over his own teeth again, teasing along the length of Hollen's.

Blood filled Hollen's mouth in an instant, flowing straight down his throat when he failed to turn his head to the side. He couldn't breathe, copper choking every one of his senses until he was strangled with it. I'm going to drown like this—in a few drops of vampire blood.

Something in him made him swallow, even as every practical part of his mind told him that he could simply turn his head to the side and spit it out on the bed. A few drops turned into more, saturating every part of him.

He swallowed again, fire sinking down his throat and straight into his gut where it radiated out to his limbs. The taste sharpened, then morphed into something else, the bitterness and acidity fading until there was only sweetness. It wasn't the sweetness of candy, instead much more satisfying, spreading and sating every bit of his body. Even his toes tingled, and he curled them into the sheets, trying to hold on as he nearly lost himself.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

Munro finally released him, and Hollen turned his head away, his vision swimming as he gasped in huge lungfuls of air. “I—”

His breath was swept away, rendering him silent as he licked his lips, trying to find any trace of blood left behind. His gut ached for it, needing to be filled until he was brimming with the dark liquid. Deep pools of exhaustion were swept away as his muscles tingled with energy, his entire body throbbing with it.

Munro breathed against Hollen’s cheek, sending a shiver along his skin. His hands were so still, one resting against Hollen’s neck and his other still at his hip, holding him firm to the mattress.

“How does it taste?” asked Munro, licking the bit of darkness from the red of his lips. Hollen longed to drag him closer and lick it up for himself, the power of that desire bringing him back to life.

“I don’t know.” Hollen gasped, reaching for his belly. It was so hot that he wasn’t sure if he’d be able to drink again or ever fit a morsel past his lips. He could fit more blood, but nothing else. Shaking his head, he tried to break through the thrall it had on him. “Not terrible.”

He swallowed again, wincing as the aftertaste hit him. There was the taste he’d expected, like old pennies had been sitting in his mouth all day. It stuck there, even as he tried to swallow it down. “Not really good, though.”

“What are you doing?” George’s voice in his head shattered the fuzziness of his mind, drawing back the comfortable curtain and plunging him straight into ice again.

“I—” Hollen blinked, shaking his head as Munro chuckled, apparently completely unaware of George’s presence.

George shifted in Hollen’s chest, smothering the rosy ache of the blood and drawing every bit of Hollen’s attention.

“I try to have a rest,” said George, “the first real rest I’ve taken all week.” His voice pitched low as he grumbled. “I wake up to find you naked and in bed with the enemy and drinking his blood. What the hell did I miss?”

Hollen trembled, a headache cracking his skull at the seams. “I’m—uh—getting my job back.” Hollen kept his voice low, but he could tell Munro still heard him from the way he paused, his smile faltering. “Sorry,” said Hollen, much louder so Munro could easily hear him. He pulled away, slowly standing from the bed on wobbly feet. His gut rolled as George seemed to settle there, the blood cold and curdling in his gut. “I’m feeling a lot better now. Any chance you could take me home?”

Munro narrowed his eyes, unashamedly staring at Hollen’s naked body. “Did I do something to upset you?”

Hollen clasped his hands in front of him, glancing around for his clothes. “I think I overstayed my welcome.” He put a hand to his head as it throbbed. “Thank you for helping me. I don’t want to intrude any longer.”

On the far side of the room, he spotted his clothes crumpled in the corner, his shirt from the club still sparkling with bits of glitter that would probably never come off. The warmth of the air had sweat trickling down his back, the long black pants looking way too heavy to pull on.

Hollen averted his eyes as Munro stood, his boxers leaving nothing to the imagination. There was a deep pang of disappointment when he realized that Munro

hadn't been naked at all the entire time.

"Of course." Munro closed the distance, brushing his fingers over Hollen's cheek. "But will you promise to come back to me tomorrow?" Munro bit his lip, one vicious tooth on display.

When George grumbled in his head, Hollen did his best to ignore him. "I'll be here. I promise."

Chapter Twelve

Munro

Munro stared at the closed apartment door, his palm still tingling from where Hollen had clasped his only a minute before. He probably seemed strange lurking in the hallway, gazing at the chipped paint on cheap wood for longer than was healthy.

There was a lot of trust to showing someone where you lived. Now he knew where Hollen slept, where he ate, and presumably where he spent most of his day when sunlight ruled the city. Behind the flimsy barrier, Hollen was free to be.

But I suppose I showed him my room first. He'd done everything backward. He was supposed to be the one who called the shots—the one in control. But Hollen had stripped him of that in moments.

He looked to his hands. They had paled over the centuries as he found less reasons to stroll beneath the sunlight, drinking cool sips of water just to keep hydrated. People and ages came and went the same way they always had, and it did so little to tempt him. But Hollen...

First the kiss, then the blood. It had been such a spur of the moment thing that Munro

hadn't thought of it for more than a split second before he'd sliced his own tongue to give Hollen a taste. He was fed from all the time—days before Rhys had been carving his teeth into his neck while bringing himself release. This shouldn't have been any different.

But it was.

He let out a soft sigh before turning away from the door. The apartment was shockingly close to the teahouse, and it had only taken him about twenty minutes to escort Hollen home after he'd found one of his own shirts for Hollen to wear. The fabric had dwarfed him, but a strange possessive anxiety had churned in Munro's gut.

It had been a long time since he'd had something truly for himself that didn't wilt and die the moment he made himself truly known. There was a yearning within him focused with such precise obsession that it was almost calming.

A woman passed him by as he exited onto the street, not sparing him a single glance. Most didn't notice him—they weren't meant to. It wasn't magic, but more of an illusion that he could wrap around himself to avoid looks and slip from someone's memory as easily as a passing thought.

Why did I give him my blood? He licked his lips, chasing the sweet taste that Hollen had left behind. There was still the metallic taint of his own blood, along with that darkness that seemed to linger on everything Hollen touched. It was so intoxicating that apparently he had lost his mind to it, giving Hollen something that meant so much.

Blood was life. Rhys took it regularly, sipping away at Munro's soul like a warm drink. But to give it to someone so entirely...mortal was something he'd never considered. There was nothing in it for Hollen except for the taste, which he probably hadn't acquired. Why did I do it?

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

He gritted his teeth, disappearing into the nearest alley. Darkness wrapped around his skin, protecting him with shadow as he reached out with his senses. There was no one close by except the gentle snuffling of a rat in the dumpster one block over. If he reached hard enough, he could sense Hollen, his heart beating so steady and soft. It was mesmerizing.

“Enough.” Munro shook his head. I need to get these thoughts out of my head.

There were wings hidden beneath his skin with feathers ready to burst forth as soon as he closed his eyes. He urged them out with a sound like shredded paper, his clothes dropping to the ground in a heap.

A prickling itch tickled over his skin as paleness gave way to lustrous black, his arms bending and snapping into shape. His fingers stretched, long-flight feathers arching into wings that he flapped, trying to balance as five toes became four, tipped with brutal talons.

To anyone watching, he would appear as a raven standing on a heap of clothes that someone had discarded. If they approached, curious about the biggest one of his kind that they’d ever seen, he would simply nudge their mind until they turned away.

He wasn’t sure how birds could stand it, his feathers like pins that tugged against his skin every time he moved. They were jet black, consuming the light from any stars and extinguishing them. His eyes were the only brightness, their usual blue and just as icy as they always were. He had seen himself so many times in this form that he knew where every feather lay, even the one on his tail that was shorter than all the rest.

Poking at his clothes with his beak and urging them into a small pile, he folded them over themselves, hopping from one side of the pile to the other. As soon as everything was as neat as it was going to get, he gathered what he could, taking off with a flap of wings.

A few feathers immediately floated free, drifting to the alley floor to get lost in the nearest muddy puddle. They were so similar to his hairs, a few falling out every time he brushed it. The form was one of a few he could take, but different from the legends of vampires who morphed into bats.

Even with his overly large wings, it was a struggle to get into the air with the extra burden, his muscles burning from the effort. He flapped until he caught a small breeze above the stillness of the alley, letting it take him.

A few raindrops flicked against his back as the wind picked up, the moisture rolling off him as quick as it landed. He angled his wings toward the moon, slipping closer to the teahouse with each flap.

There were only a few people on the street, their cars flickering below the lamps, and one lonely man walking his dog through the beginnings of a puddle. He turned his head away, focusing on the pitted street where his home lay as the clothes slowly soaked heavier.

He had no desire for the few he saw, not even to fill his rumbling stomach that ached.

Three short minutes passed before he landed in the darkness against the side of his teahouse, letting his feathers fall from his skin and into dust. Hunger gnawed at his belly from shifting when he had already pushed himself too far, his hands shaking at the force of it as he quickly dressed.

The clothes were damp from the rain as it picked up, the material clinging to his skin

uncomfortably as he walked to the front door. His front display was showing its age, the tea dipping in the cup as it evaporated and leaving a stained ring behind. The small sandwiches looked hard, a bit of the sauce at the edge going dry as it soaked into the crust.

Rhys had always insisted that they should get a fake display that they wouldn't have to change every night, scoffing at the tiny morsels that always went to waste. To Munro, nothing made life more real than the daily reminder of the expiration date of everything around him.

He slipped through the door, closing it behind him when he was met with silence. The followers in his murder always had a way of sensing his mood, steering clear when he was not at the house and only emerging during the all-clear. The dark dining room matched his thoughts, shadows clinging to the corners.

“Where have you been?”

Munro paused at the sound of Rhys' voice, turning to where he was sitting at one of the shadowed tables. There was a slit of light from the exit sign that caught his eyes, making them glimmer with darkness.

Rage licked at the tips of his fingers, and Munro clenched his hand into a fist. “I didn't realize I was under watch.”

He said it so savagely that Rhys flinched.

Rhys stood, his chair squeaking against the floor as he pushed it back. He had his phone in his hand again, the screen flickering as a video played. There was no sound this time—no screams.

“I'm worried about you, Covi—about all of us. I've been searching for more videos,

and I've found so many." Rhys brought the phone up, his face illuminated by the shifting light.

Munro's gut clenched, fear and guilt settling over the rage. He's only looking out for you and everyone else. Exposure had always been a risk as his followers made their way in the world, but things had been going so well.

The last time vampires had been exposed centuries before, they'd been hunted to the brink of extinction. He'd survived in hiding, living off scraps of whatever he could drink from while he planned his revenge.

The revenge had never taken place, his idea sputtering out when he realized that this wasn't something he could do alone. Vampires weren't the feared beings with a strength that legends feared. They were vulnerable in their own way, their immortality striking terror into their own souls.

But he never wanted to drink from a sparrow again or have the anxiety that every cracked branch was a hoard approaching. He had lost most of his strength then by simply staying alive. And it was within that dark chapter that he had met Rhys.

Rhys had been his only light for a long time. He was the first one to make him laugh after so much darkness, the longing between them undeniable at the time. Munro had grown out of it, but for Rhys, it was all he had known for so long.

"Let me see them," said Munro, taking a breath to calm himself. What he had with Hollen was so new and fresh, but loyalty was forever. He knew Rhys would die for him a thousand times over.

Reaching for the phone, Munro skimmed over the paused video, hitting the symbol in the middle to start it. It was similar to the last one he'd seen, with a vampire feeding from a struggling prey, completely unaware of their surroundings. The next one Rhys

had lined up for him was the same...and the next.

The faces were unfamiliar, along with the usernames, but the messages were all clear. Vampires exist.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

“They’re from different places around the world.” Rhys leaned in, pointing to the background of the latest video. “That’s Spain there, and this one is somewhere in South America.” He flicked the screen, a new clip starting. “They’re getting smarter—trying to track us,” said Rhys. His eyes were wide, his breath coming in short pants. “Our computer viruses aren’t fast enough to combat the entire population. Things like this are coming out faster than we can find and neutralize them. Everything is at risk.”

“I’m not worried.” Munro passed the phone back to Rhys, regarding the rage that crept over his features. “I don’t think this is the same world we used to live in. People are accepting, and we have allies.”

He turned away, heading for the bleak light in the kitchen. The surfaces were scrubbed and spotless, every dish put away in its spot. Even the shelves above eye level were meticulously cleaned and dusted.

His gut twisted as he touched one cool metal surface. Sean must’ve cut the dinner service off early, ushering people out when Munro didn’t return as he always did to see his guests off. His followers wouldn’t have lingered, heading back to their homes to conduct whatever business they needed to.

He’d never missed it before. Hollen was changing everything so quickly.

“I can’t believe this.” Rhys stomped after him, a fire in his eyes. He slammed his hand on a gleaming metal countertop, dishes tinkling in their bins. “You’re so infatuated that you can’t see the danger right in front of your eyes.”

With his lips thinned in a determined line, Rhys drew close, bracketing him against the wall. It was the same thing he had done earlier, with his system fried with drugs from his victim. Only now he was fully present, every ounce of rage directed at Munro. “I can’t let you destroy us all over a piddly human who is not going to be around in fifty years.”

Munro had always been tall, especially for his time, but Rhys had a few inches on him and thickness in his frame that Munro didn’t possess. In a fair fight, Rhys could have overpowered him every time, ripping his throat out and draining him dry.

For the first time in years, a trickle of true fear seeped down his spine.

“What are you thinking, Rhys?” asked Munro softly, bracing himself as Rhys pressed their chests together. There was a time when he would have desired the position, but now it only brought him regret.

It was a regret that he had never been able to love Rhys the way he deserved. At first, it had been lust and a defined fascination that kept him going back for more. That lasted just long enough to have Rhys completely hooked and devoted to him. It was too late by then to simply part ways.

“Perhaps Corby was right,” said Rhys, his voice a low hiss. “And you only killed him to protect your reputation. You’re failing us, Munro.” He lowered his mouth to Munro’s neck, dragging his teeth over the sensitive column.

Munro fought the urge to tense—to run, refusing to show anything that could be considered weakness. Rhys had bitten him so many times, but this was the first time it had been a threat. Munro’s skin prickled at it, his fury reigniting.

“I believe our time together is over,” said Munro, his voice steadier than the quivering in his chest. “Thank you for your companionship, Rhys, but it is no longer

required.”

Rhys drew back as if he'd been slapped, his face drained pale in an instant. He opened and closed his mouth as his eyes shimmered. “I didn’t— Munro...Covi.”

Munro shook his head, cutting off any further protests. His chest ached, centuries of their time together coming to an abrupt close. It wouldn’t work to simply let Rhys down gently like he deserved. He would just come crawling back—seeking the only unchanged thing in his life.

“I am no longer your leader, Rhys.” Munro straightened himself, a hand to Rhys’ chest, holding him away. “Find another murder that will welcome you in. You are no longer welcome here.” He dropped his voice, letting a growl seep into his tone. “And if you touch anything that belongs to me...? Well, I don’t believe I need to explain what will happen to you.”

Chapter Thirteen

Hollen

He still couldn’t believe he was going back, even if George seemed absolutely livid about the whole circumstance.

“Just chill, okay?” Hollen swept his hair back, debating whether gel or spray would be best to tame it. He settled on neither, wetting his hands in the sink and running his fingers through the strands. The bits that had been sticking up with stubborn humidity finally lay flat.

George scoffed and Hollen could have sworn his eyes flashed yellow in the mirror for just a moment. “I will not. Somebody has to make sure you’re taking care of yourself, and you’re doing a terrible job of it. One would think you’re trying to get eaten.”

Hollen leaned closer to the mirror, pressing a fingertip to the bruised-looking bags beneath his eyes. After a touch of coverup, he looked well-rested again. “I’m not gonna get eaten.” Hollen rolled his eyes. “This isn’t Jurassic Park.”

“Munro is old enough to be a dinosaur,” said George. There was that flash again, the green draining from his eyes as George spoke. He couldn’t remember that happening before—or maybe he just hadn’t noticed.

Hollen laughed, dabbing a bit of color on his pale cheeks before turning away from the mirror. “Now I know you’re just being pissy. He can’t be more than a few hundred years old. He doesn’t wear velvet suits or ruffles like those other guys. And he’s stylish.”

He flushed, ducking his head as warmth rose to his cheeks.

George laughed. “I can’t believe this. You’re completely besotted with him. I yanked him out of your mind once, but he’s still there, curdling your thoughts.”

“Ew.” Hollen wrinkled his nose. “There’s no ‘curdling’ going on, thank you very much. He’s just very handsome...and possibly a little bit rich.”

“Unbelievable.” George rolled in his chest, his presence stretching until it tingled beneath his skin. “And now you’re dolling yourself up for him. Put some lamb’s blood on your neck. That’ll be sure to lure him in.”

Hollen rolled his eyes before grabbing his keys and heading to the door. “If you were paying attention, you’d realize that we’re going to Adair’s dance competition. Even if he’s not talking to me yet, we aren’t going to miss it.”

“Adair?”

Hollen nodded, locking the door behind him and sliding his keys into his pocket. Luckily, George quieted, seeming to retreat to that part of his chest that he always did when he was pouting. Months together and Hollen was finally starting to figure him out. He would come around...eventually.

“What would happen if I decided to be with Munro?” Hollen squinted at the sun as he shuffled through the main door, the light cutting straight across the sidewalk and into his eyes. The warmth of it was soothing after so much time indoors either sleeping or working.

George pulled out of the depths, itching under Hollen’s skin. “I don’t think we should have this conversation.”

Hollen lowered his head when he spotted his landlord leaned against the front of the apartment building. He was smoking cigarettes and scrolling through his phone, his saggy eyestrained on the device. He was balding, with a potbelly that snuck out from under his shirt. His fingers were tainted yellow, and holes were spotted along the front of his shirt where ashes had fallen.

Hollen shuddered, turning away. There had been a time when he was almost desperate enough to offer the guy a blow job in exchange for rent. Luckily, George had stopped him with a stern talk about STDs.

“Now who’s avoiding the topic?” asked Hollen, ducking around a corner before he could be noticed. The dance studio was across town somewhere, and he was already

tired from the short walk downstairs, sweat prickling over his skin. I must be coming down with something.

“I don’t want to scare you,” said George.

Hollen snorted. The bus was at the stop, a few people in line and slowly starting to get on. “That didn’t stop you when you explained the pros and cons of medieval torture methods.” He scanned his pass when it was his turn, finding a spot at the very back.

Over the rumble of the engine, he could barely hear his own voice, so he didn’t have to worry about anyone overhearing his little chat. If they did, it didn’t matter. There was a guy halfway up the bus staring at the pole and muttering under his breath, while one lady held an actual chicken in her lap. Its head stuck out of the bag slung over her shoulder, its comb wobbling as it looked around, clucking.

“That was different,” said George. “If you really want to know, I’ll tell you, but I have to warn you first. Munro is not who he seems to be.”

Hollen nodded at the person who decided to sit next to him, turning his face to the window and shuffling to the side. “So, he’s not a vampire?”

“He is.” George’s voice dropped, thickening as his presence strengthened.

“Then he doesn’t own a tea shop?”

“He does—but.”

Hollen cut him off, thudding his own head against the solid glass. He wasn’t sure if it bothered George or not, but he fell blessedly silent in response. “Then he’s what he seems. I don’t know much about him other than that. If there’s anything else, then

he's probably just waiting for me to find out."

"He's not a good man."

Hollen let his eyes fall shut, the roads passing so slowly. "Are any of us?" The man beside him shifted away before standing and heading for another seat. He couldn't bring himself to care—not this time. "I broke my best friend's heart, and I haven't made it up to him in weeks. I'll crash this competition by being there, and that probably just makes me selfish. Just...don't interfere." Hollen took a deep breath to steady himself. "Any other time I wouldn't care, but Munro—? I like him. It's okay if you don't understand, because this is a decision I've made on my own. Let me have that."

George didn't answer. He didn't even respond as Hollen signaled for his stop and made his way to the front. He was the only one getting off, barely hitting the sidewalk before the driver closed the bus doors and headed down the street.

"You should know something—"

"George, don't." Hollen cut him off again, nearly stumbling on the street. There were a few people dotted around, but no one spared him a glance.

George didn't grumble or put up any of his usual fuss. "If you're sure."

Hollen nodded. "I am. I'm so, so sure"—he glanced up at the studio—"about everything except for where we are. Is this the right place?"

Adair had described it so many times before as looming and black—an old office building that had been turned into an upscale school and studio. Hollen still hadn't expected...this.

It was three stories of solid black brick that seemed to ooze the color. If Hollen was a betting man, he would have waged a hundred bucks that it wasn't painted at all but made of some sort of lava brick. The windows of the main floor were shuttered and dark, while the floors above were thrown wide open to let the sun and air of the city in. Music filtered out with a steady beat.

Huge block numbers at the entrance were nearly taller than Hollen, guarding the entry where a group of young women were slipping inside. They were pulling bags behind them that were only a slightly smaller version of hockey bags, chattering away as they disappeared through the door.

"I like it," said George, seeming to perk up. "It's so rare to see such a nice design in buildings nowadays. Why haven't we been here before?"

"It's out of our price range." Hollen stuck his hands on his hips. "Adair can really only afford to go here because of all those scholarships. He's the best dancer I've ever seen. He's invited me a few times to open houses, but I'm always working."

George scoffed. "We need to get you out in the world. Your little friend has nothing on the way the ancient Egyptians used to dance. Their gods themselves couldn't have done better."

"You just keep thinking that." Hollen lowered his voice as he stepped inside. It seemed even bigger in here, his voice carrying further than he intended against the stark walls. "You've never seen Adair dance."

“I don’t need to,” said George.

Hollen looked to each side for any hint of a sign or indication of which way he was supposed to go. The girls had already disappeared, leaving an empty entrance and four hallways. “You’re going to regret it. There’s a reason I work my ass off so Adair doesn’t have to. He’s going to go places one day.”

The sound of laughter echoed along one hall. Hollen ducked that way, slowly creeping along. He let out a sigh of relief when he found two doors pinned wide, an array of voices coming from within.

The last thing he’d expected appeared before him. It must’ve been a warehouse of sorts in its last life, but it had been converted into a massive gymnasium and stage. There was a graduated seating area along with a floor that was illuminated with flood lights from above.

The lights were hardly needed with the sunlight streaming through the upper windows along one side, the sounds of the street completely obliterated. Voices and laughter reached him, along with that same wicked beat, one rhythm fading out for another.

Seats everywhere were packed, some people holding signs and others homemade banners that had been scrawled with permanent marker. There were even a few with Adair’s name, one particular woman in her forties holding a sign gleaming with sparkly red hearts. The poor girl probably didn’t realize that Adair was even gayer than he was.

Hollen made his way up the stairs, looking for any unoccupied seat. As soon as he would spot one, others like him would zoom for it, filling the empty spot before he could claim it.

George huffed. “Would you like me to ask them to get out of our way? I’m sure they would listen tome.”

Hollen glanced at his hand as his fingertips tingled, covering it with his shirt when dark markings suddenly scrawled across his knuckles, his nails lengthening with dark tips.

“George,” Hollen spoke through his teeth, his eyes wide. “Not here, okay? There’s like two-hundred people.” His hand tingled with numbness as George pulled back, leaving a hollow emptiness behind.

Shaking his hand out, Hollen took one last look around, almost resigned to turning back for the bus and heading homeward. There, at the very top of the seats was a single unoccupied seat. Above it was both a speaker and a light, a beam set right against the back. As he approached, he wrinkled his nose.

There was a full six inches of leg room less than any other seat around it, the beam forcing the builders to shrink it in place. Even with his shortness, it was still a squeeze to fit into the spot.

The view, though... It was breathtaking. He could see the stage perfectly as the black curtain shifted and a row of men and women stepped out. They were all in matching costumes, the women in dazzling pink and the men in a muted blue.

As a new song began, they started to move, weaving intricately as the music picked up. Each movement was solid, only one lady slipping until her partner caught her, and they twirled into the next movement.

“Is this what you were boasting about?” George’s voice thudded against the inside of his ears. “I could do that...Hell, you could—”

“Shhh.” Hollen poked himself in the middle of his own chest where George beat the strongest. “Just wait.”

As the group wrapped up, yells of encouragement hit the air, the crowd roaring with excitement. The round of applause faded, the curtain shifting again before a single man stepped out and the others disappeared. There was an instant of shining recognition when a sudden nervousness curled in Hollen’s belly.

Adair was so fluid as he moved, perfect and elegant before the music even began. His eyes were sharp, casting over the crowd with a frown on his lips. Hollen could have sworn he hesitated on him for just a moment before he looked away.

The music began, and Adair started to dance. A hush fell over the crowd, words leaving Hollen’s lips and sputtering to nothing. If music was movement alone, then Adair had captured it all, each muscle responding to the notes and undulations of the song.

“Your friend—is he—”

“I said shush.” Hollen winced when his voice came out much louder than he intended. No one seemed to notice, too enthralled with the show.

As the beat amped up, Adair followed suit, moving as if it took no effort at all. After a particularly difficult series of intricacies passed, a cheer broke out at the front, followed by more. Hollen had to hold his hands to his mouth so his shout would carry further, pure joy spiking through him as the dance ended on an abrupt note.

The signs with Adair’s name on them rattled with how fiercely they were shaken.

The first sign of a smile touched Adair's face, a flush moving over his cheeks as he regarded the crowd. His gaze shot straight to where Hollen was sitting, his smile going even wider as his eyes sparkled.

George let out a sigh as Hollen waved, standing on the chair when Adair waved back, his laugh disappearing into the crowd. "I think I'm in love."

Hollen spluttered, moving from his seat and back to the main doors. Another single person had started to dance, their style so different from Adair's that it was almost jarring.

"We'll have to rush to get to work on time." Hollen glanced at his phone, biting his lip at the time. "Hopefully, Munro has a new uniform for me because I kind of destroyed the last one."

"Munro?" George scoffed.

"Yep." Hollen ducked out the door, lowering his voice as they hit the echo of the hallway. "And I don't want to hear another word. I'm working there, and that's final."

"Hollen!"

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

Hollen paused, turning toward the sound of Adair's shout. His friend was standing at the far end of the hall, his face flushed red and his chest rising and falling fast. "You came."

Hollen glanced at the floor, his own heartrate picking up. "Of course. You're my best friend..." He trailed off. "I'm sorry—"

Adair threw his arms around him, the smell of sweet cologne and sweat enveloping him. "Thank you so much."

He felt so good, the warmth of his skin enough to soothe the terror that had been haunting him for weeks. Hollen hugged him tight, pressing his face into Adair's shoulder. George hummed beneath Hollen's skin, sinking into the embrace as tears rolled over Hollen's cheeks.

Chapter Fourteen

Hollen

"This is weird." Hollen kept his voice low as he slipped into the kitchen, his new white shirt still surprisingly stainless after many round trips to the dining room. "How do I pretend that I don't know what they are?"

The other servers didn't seem to mind, their expressions almost empty as they moved back and forth like clockwork. Even an occasional correction from the chef didn't seem to affect them, their lips seemingly sealed as they worked.

It was like working with a bunch of ghosts.

Still beat the customers, though.

He dropped the silver pan he'd been carrying into a nearby sink that was brimming with soapy water. There was another fresh tray already waiting for him on the counter, piled with delicate pastries adorned with peaches.

"I avoid looking at their mouths as much as possible," said the chef, grinning as Hollen looked at him with wide eyes. "Sorry... Couldn't help but overhear." He held out his flour-covered hand, clasping Hollen's and shaking it firmly. "Sean. Nice to officially meet you."

"Hollen." He stared at the powder left behind from the handshake, dipping his hand into the blistering water to wash it clean. He'd seen Sean that first night, but he'd never introduced himself, too busy with acting the fool.

"Cute. Sounds Christmassy." Sean dove his fingers back into the dough he was kneading. There was flour on almost every part of him except his sleeves, including a smudge on his cheek. Sweat was beading on his forehead, his biceps bulging with each turn. It was mighty distracting, if Hollen were being honest.

"It kind of is," said Hollen, leaning against the closest wall and letting the coolness soak into him. It was hot in the restaurant, almost warmer than he remembered Munro's room being.

Hollen smiled. "I was born on boxing day, so I just missed it." His feet were aching, along with his hands from carrying so many heavy trays back and forth.

The quiet lady in the kitchen who seemed only to plate and pour continued to work, her hair completely in place without a hint of tiredness about her. As soon as one

filled tray disappeared, she began to work meticulously on the next, never seeming to miss any details in her silence.

It had to be getting close to midnight, and sleep was pulling at him in the worst way. Apparently, vampires had no issue with going out in the sun, so he had no clue why they wanted to be out so late, or why they wanted to eat pastries at all. From what he'd seen, there was no blood in any of the recipes.

"Is this your first time working with vampires?" asked Sean, patting the dough until it was in a rounded ball, before tossing it onto a large metal tray with a few others. "Most of my family are blood suckers, so I had an in." He chuckled, shaking his head. "Ten years ago, I would have done anything to open my own bakery, but it wasn't in the cards."

"Yeah." Hollen curled his toes in his tight black shoes. They were a size too small, but it was all he'd been able to find that would match his ensemble. "I've had some pretty weird jobs, but nothing like this."

"Munro's pretty cool, and he's not like some of this group. He'll back off if you ask him to, unlike Rhys. That guy's just an ass." Sean nudged his shoulder, pointing to a scar on his neck that was barely noticeable. "Happened my second day. You stay away from Rhys if you don't want to match."

Hollen felt the blood drain from his face, and he had to lean heavily on the counter wall. He'd been so very close to matching that his head ached.

"Don't worry about that, though," said Sean. "You must be used to it from your own family. They vamps? Or something else?" He grabbed some plastic wrap, covering the tray before sliding it along the back counter where there were three trays like it already resting.

“Not really,” said Hollen, scratching the back of his head. “A few months ago, I didn’t even know vampires existed.” He touched his neck in the same place Munro had kissed so gently the day before. The skin was sensitive, sending goosebumps all down his arms and to his toes.

He dropped his hand. If he wasn’t careful, he was going to get hard just thinking about it. He doubted that would fly.

“Shit.” Sean paused, looking him up and down. “Are you a shifter then? Some of the old packs are pretty out there on traditions. You don’t give off many weird vibes, though.”

“Um, nope.” Hollen looked over his shoulder. The lady wasn’t ready with the next tray yet, and the coast was clear otherwise. He wasn’t sure if she could even hear him. “I’m kind of possessed by a demon.”

Sean’s eyes went wide.

“He’s a really nice guy.” Hollen held out his hand. “He’s saved my butt a few times. But yeah, he talks a lot. He told me about vampires and all that.” But I’ll have to ask him about shifters sometime.

“Huh.” Sean grabbed another hunk of dough out of the large mixing bowl, throwing it on the floured work surface. “I didn’t know that was a thing. Growing up with vamps, I never believed in God much, so I guess I didn’t think demons were around.”

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

Hollen let out a breath. He'd thought he would be faced with the same reaction as Adair's. Things had improved on that front, but there was still a tenseness to the air every time they were in the same room.

"Does he have a name, or does that give you power over him?" asked Sean, making air quotes with his filthy hands. He chuckled as he pushed hard against the dough, the ball stretching smoothly before he folded it over itself again.

"His real name is hard for me to remember, so I just call him George. He's cool with it." Hollen smiled, shifting closer to Sean. His hands were huge, practically pulverizing the dough as he stretched and turned it with practiced ease.

"You best get the next one out there, kid," said Sean, nodding to the piled tray that the lady had set out just a few minutes before. "For as long as they live, I've never met a patient vamp."

"Thanks, Sean."

"No problem, kid." Sean tossed the rounded ball on a fresh metal tray, reaching for another chunk. "Stick around. It's nice to talk to another mostly regular guy who isn't hypnotized to the teeth."

Hollen frowned, his gaze locked on the lady as she started on another tray. Her movements were smooth and meticulous, but Sean was right. She didn't speak—not a word, her eyes glazed and distant. When she stared at him, there was nothing behind the emptiness as she looked through him.

What the hell? He took a step back with one tray in his hands, quickly retreating from the kitchen.

Entering the dining room, he had to blink to see through the shadows of the low lights, the warmth enhanced by the spiciness of tea. He approached the next table, desserts held high so he could easily slip the tower onto the middle of it. There were two seated vampires that were speaking another language, and they gave him about the same amount of attention as every other table had.

It wasn't as if there were any questions between them. Every group got the same glass and food for a menu that Sean had mentioned changed every time he desired. There were no substitutions—no extras, only tea and treats before they would leave.

It was one of the strangest restaurants he'd ever been a part of. There were others when his notebook would be full at the end of the night with lists of substitutions and all of the questions he'd had to ask the kitchen. This was almost monotonous in its simplicity.

One of the vampires snatched a treat from the tray, taking a small nibble before offering it to the other. He grasped it from his fingers with his mouth, dragging his tongue to wipe the traces of fresh cream away. The first one grinned, a fond look on his face as he brushed some stray cream from his partner's bottom lip.

It was sweet—not the biting and slashing that Hollen had expected and had seen before. They were all new faces, too, except the one woman who watched him from a far table. Someone else had served her, and she had mostly ignored the tray, her gaze locked on Hollen every time he came and went.

When Hollen turned away, an empty tray clutched in his hands, he spotted Munro standing at the entrance to the kitchen, a soft look on his face. He regarded the room with a regal type of relaxation that Hollen hadn't seen before. There was no edge—no

hunger—just contentment.

Hollen looked away, heat rising to his cheeks. He'd managed to avoid Munro for hours, only for him to appear right now. He'd seen him in passing once or twice, always managing to slip out of view. He just wasn't exactly sure what was expected.

"You're doing well," said Munro as he approached, opening the swinging door to the kitchen for him. "Not a single spill."

I guess we're not talking about it. But it was impossible for Hollen to forget the feeling of Munro's lips against his—or the taste of him that flooded his senses.

"Well." He glanced down at his shirt. A peach had been left on one of the trays, and it had been slippery enough to slide straight off the surface and onto his chest. He'd scrubbed at it right away, but there was still a tiny spot left behind that he only noticed when he squinted.

"You look good." Munro followed him into the kitchen, not looking at Sean, even as the chef inclined his head. "I was worried you wouldn't come after what happened."

Hollen's cheeks burned, and he ducked his head, pointedly not looking at Sean. "It's a good thing I did. I remember more servers when I came here. Did you fire everyone but the four of us?" It was busy enough that he could have used another two sets of hands to keep up.

"Something like that," said Munro. Sean snorted as he wiped his work surface clean. He'd made close to forty balls of dough, each almost exactly the same size, despite how Hollen hadn't seen a scale once.

"Oh, God." Hollen covered his mouth with his free hand, his stomach protesting. "Did you eat them?"

Now Sean really did laugh, shaking his head before he turned to the loaves that had been proofing for an hour. Removing the plastic, he slapped them into oiled tins with expert precision.

“Remember what I said, kid? Munro’s one of the good ones.” Sean chuckled as he looked over his shoulder. “Right, boss?”

Munro pressed his lips into a thin line, shooting Sean a mild glare. “They weren’t to my tastes.” He found Hollen with his gaze, softening right away. “I have to hypnotize my employees to keep them from seeing who and what passes through the doors. I can only make it last so long before I return them home, their memories somewhat blank and their bank account adequately compensated.”

“Oh.” That’s not as bad as I thought. Hollen chewed on his lip. But why not me?

“He’s lying,” said George, his voice startling Hollen so badly that he jerked, the tray falling from his hands. Luckily it was empty this time, metal clattering against the hard tile of the kitchen.

“I don’t think so,” said Hollen, lowering his voice as he bent to retrieve it. There was a small dent in the corner, pressed into the immaculately designed surface.

“George?” asked Sean as Hollen stood, grinning as he grabbed a dozen more loaf pans to fill. “You have to tell that guy to give you a break.”

Hollen chuckled awkwardly, rubbing the back of his neck. “He certainly has his opinions, and he doesn’t like Munro very much. Sorry, Munro.”

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

Munro was staring at him, his gaze narrowed.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to dent the tray. I was doing so good, too.” Hollen gently set it into the suds. They were still warm, but not hot, the dishes piling high within. The person who had been working on the dishes earlier in the evening had disappeared about an hour before, and they were starting to stockpile.

“I think my first full day is going okay.” Hollen forced a smile onto his face.

Sean nodded. “From what I’ve seen, we’re happy to have you.”

He cracked a yawn, swaying where he stood. With all the excitement and whatever was going on with Munro, he hadn’t slept much. Most nights he barely did, anyway. George had a way of keeping him awake with ramblings about the past.

The tray tilted in the suds as he stumbled, blinking hazily as he tried to get his focus back. “I used to be able to stay up for two days in a row.” He yawned again, his jaw creaking from the angle. Lately, he’d barely made it through the day without the need to pass out somewhere.

Munro shifted, a frown tugging at his lips. “You’re tired. If you aren’t able to continue—”

“Give the kid a break, boss,” said Sean, cutting Munro off. “It’s his first full shift, and it’s midnight. His bedtime is probably nine o’clock.” Lining up the bread pans, he finished the last of them, covering the whole array with a massive towel.

“Sorry.” Hollen rubbed the back of his head, suppressing the next yawn. “I’m not used to being up so late. Give me a couple days, and it won’t be a problem. I promise.”

Sean nodded. “I had a hard time, too. I’m usually here mid-afternoon to start prepping, and sometimes I’m still here mid-morning. It takes some getting used to.” He jerked his chin at Munro. “Not like these guys, who only need a couple hours sleep. They’d work us all to the bone if we didn’t remind them we’re mortal.”

“I was going to offer that you could have a rest in my chambers.” Munro crossed his arms, his gaze steady. “I can help the others finish tonight, and I’ll come wake you when everyone is gone. It’s not out of my way to walk you home again.”

The kitchen was so silent that Hollen could almost hear the yeast rising in the bread pans. He could feel Sean staring at him, his gaze almost heavier than Munro’s. A flush rose to Hollen’s cheeks as Sean raised one brow.

“That sounds really nice, actually.” Hollen flushed hotter, unable to ignore the low whistle Sean let out. “Let me just take out this last tray, then I’m ready.”

He was in and out of the dining room in seconds, doing his best not to look at Sean before following Munro down the hall with the flickering lights. The humidity of the kitchen gave way to pure heat as Hollen shuffled after Munro, sweat breaking out over his skin.

He couldn’t imagine working as hard as Sean in this heat, already overwhelmed when he’d just been walking around with trays all night.

He glanced at Munro. He seemed completely unaffected by the temperature, his movements smooth and even as they made their way down the hall. There was no dread this time as he passed the flickering lights, only a twisting in his gut of pure

anticipation as they went into the darkness.

Is he going to kiss me again? It was almost all he'd been able to think about since Munro had escorted him home like a pure gentleman, wishing him goodnight with no pressure for a repeat kiss, even with as much as Hollen had longed for it.

"Don't interrupt this time," said Hollen, whispering softly so hopefully George would know the words were just for him.

The demon in his head grumbled. "Someday you'll listen to me. Remind me to tell you I told you so when that happens." The heavy sigh echoed in his thoughts. "Just don't do anything stupid."

With that, George faded to the very depths inside that Hollen could barely sense. Hollen rubbed at his chest where George seemed to nestle right next to his heart, the pounding beat of him reduced to a tremor. "Better."

He wasn't sure how a demon with such a presence could shrivel up to almost nothing at will.

Walking through the throne room again was surreal. That freezing cold table was still right in the center of it all, black stone seeming to suck the heat from the room with a strange pull that tugged directly at his chest. George grumbled, shifting lower and settling into Hollen's gut, where he was so much easier to ignore.

With the dining room filled to the maximum upstairs, the room below was left empty, the only sounds their footsteps and the heating vents that seemed to blast down here more than anywhere else in the building. Hollen wiped his forehead as sweat beaded there. How does everyone stand it?

George's soft whisper answered his thoughts. "They're almost cold-blooded. If they

get too cold, they'll slow down until they eventually stop, frozen in position for eternity."

Hollen bit his lip, pressing a soft "shut up" into his palm.

Munro looked over his shoulder, raising one brow at Hollen. "Is something bothering you?" He paused, a few steps shy of the door that led to his bedroom. It was beyond the chair that seemed lethal, lined with antlers with tips sharpened and dipped in silver. "Or have I made you uncomfortable?"

"No...I—"

"Perhaps I could escort you home instead." Munro nodded. "Forgive me, I shouldn't have presumed."

"Stop." Hollen reached for him, grasping Munro's wrist. Instead of the cool skin he expected, Munro was warm, only the tips of his fingers slightly cooler. "Please. I want to stay."

Munro curled his lips into a smile, the light of it reaching his eyes. When he wasn't scowling or frowning, his eyes almost seemed to glow, the ice giving way to exotic beauty. He reached for the door, turning the knob and pushing it to reveal his bedroom.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

“Do you remember where everything is?”

Hollen nodded. There wasn't much to the room except a bathroom, a closet, and the bed. It was the bed he was focused on, anyway. The sheets were the same ones he'd woken up in, the color burned into his memory. They still smelled like tea, too, the scent that was getting closer to desire for his senses.

“You're welcome to get changed into something more comfortable,” said Munro, motioning to a closed door that Hollen knew led to the closet as soon as they entered. “Or undress, if you prefer.”

Munro's gaze was steady and piercing, his focus completely on Hollen's hands as he fiddled with the top button of his shirt. It was almost as if he could see through the thin cloth and straight to the vulnerability underneath.

“Okay.” Hollen's hands trembled as he untucked the waist of his shirt, showing off a quick glimpse of skin before he tugged the hem low. Munro had seen him naked, stripped of everything, including his boxers, but this was different. The last time, Munro had been trying to save him—warming him up the best he could. Now Hollen was practically stripping for him, his heart beating fast.

There wasn't a drop of fear in his body. That was long gone and buried right next to his desire to listen to George. Just this one time on his own—that was all he was asking for. Any other time, he could put George first.

Hollen paused, his fingers resting on the white button at the collar of his shirt. It was nearly stifling with his desire to get naked. “Wait. What's your policy on sleeping

with coworkers?”

He'd been fired for less before, and this really was too good of a job to pass up. If Munro let him go for breaking the rules, he would be back where he started or worse.

He swallowed, his throat sticking. Or maybe he was reading this all wrong. Last time was simply to help him, and the kiss had been completely accidental.

“Is that what we're going to do?” asked Munro, suddenly right in front of him. His hand replaced Hollen's, parting the top two buttons with a gentle tug. “I thought you came down here to rest.”

His voice was so low it sent a shiver straight to his toes, crushing his worries into nothingness. He was sure Munro could talk to people over the phone and give them instant orgasms if he used that tone. And although he was gentle, there was an absolute order threaded through it. If he asked Hollen to strip and bend over the bed, he would have done it in a heartbeat.

“I'm not really tired anymore.” Hollen grinned, touching Munro's wrists as his heart raced. It was an utter lie. The edge of adrenaline was the only thing keeping his eyes open. He couldn't recall the last time he was so exhausted, including when he'd come down with a wicked case of the flu.

“Hmm.” Munro touched the bare patch of skin between the parted layers of his shirt. “What will we do about that?” He trailed his finger upward, glancing over Hollen's pulse before settling on his chin. The brief pause was almost imperceptible.

He still seemed to be hesitant—probably waiting for some cue from Hollen.

“I always sleep better after physical activity,” said Hollen, sucking in a breath as Munro stroked his thumb along his chin. “I could try a walk, or run up some stairs as

fast as I—”

Munro cut him off, pressing their lips together. Hollen instantly sagged into the kiss, letting out a gasp of pure exhilaration.

Yes. Hollen let out a sigh. When he parted his lips, Munro took the lead, delving inside his mouth and spreading his taste. The man must’ve lived off tea, because it was in every stroke of his tongue, the sweet spiciness pushing a groan through Hollen’s lips.

The sluggish, tired thoughts drained from his limbs, his nerves tingling into absolute awareness. Months without kisses were a memory, because now there was a beautiful man focused solely on him. He didn’t care if that same man probably wanted nothing more than to bite him. If Munro really wanted to hurt him, he’d had plenty of opportunities.

Throwing his arms around Munro’s neck, he deepened the kiss, pouring his longing into the touch. He pressed his chest to Munro’s, getting as close as he could—but it still felt too far. The urge to throw himself into something dangerous was undeniable, the need burning through his veins as his lungs longed for air.

“Are you tired?” asked Munro, slipping his hands beneath Hollen’s shirt as he broke their connection. His hands were cool compared to the warmth of the air and Hollen’s skin, grounding him in the moment.

“No.” Hollen forced the word through his lips before dragging Munro close again. Something had to be wrong with his brain to want someone so much, especially someone who was probably older than he could have imagined and had some strange ideas about human rights.

“Are you?” Hollen asked, drawing back for a breath. Munro’s face was bright, his

eyes laser-focused without an ounce of sleepiness. “If you aren’t up to this—.”

Munro cut him off, closing the distance with a sharpness this time that made his lips ache. His touch was fierce as he crowded Hollen closer to the bed, the scent and taste of tea nearly overwhelming.

The back of Hollen’s knees hit the soft mattress, and he collapsed back, dragging Munro with him with a hold on his neck. He landed with anoofas Munro followed behind, bracing his weight so he didn’t crush Hollen. Hollen parted his legs and Munro eased between them, the sudden pressure against his cock curling his toes.

“Are you excited?” asked Munro, dragging his lips over his ear and nipping at the soft skin. “I can feel you pulsing—throbbing. You can’t wait for me to touch you.” His hands were at Hollen’s waist, squeezing and caressing. “Tell me how much you want this.”

Yes, yes, yes, hell yes. Hollen struggled to hold back the low moan that rose in his throat. It was rare to find a man who knew how to talk to him. Most seemed to think that he liked being tossed around or to be called ‘Daddy’s little slut’, when all he wanted was to be a little desperate.

“I—I want it.” Hollen groaned, bucking his hips as he tensed his thighs. His crisp white uniform pants weren’t made for something like this, straining at the seams until he was sure they would tear. Munro was broad enough that he was spread wide and throbbing directly against that seam.

“Cute.” Munro ducked lower, kissing Hollen once on his neck before shuddering and moving lower. “You taste so sweet.” His voice was much deeper now, thick and threaded with lust. It made Hollen want to twist and whimper, but Munro was everywhere, moving his hands and lips to uncharted areas.

“Of course.” Hollen reached for the hem of his shirt, flushing as Munro tracked him with his gaze. Instead of undoing each button, he tugged at the bottom, pulling it over his head and tossing it to the side.

Munro leaned back, seeming to take his fill from looking alone. His gaze wandered, pausing at each dusky nipple before moving on. It was insane to imagine what those lips would feel like on him, following his eyes with nipping teeth at his skin.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

When Munro settled his weight back, the sensation against his bare flesh was breathtaking. Hollen bit his lip, fluttering his eyes just to feel. “You feel good.”

He didn’t just mean the sweet pressure against his cock. Munro’s weight on him was that perfect slice of heaven. He was pinned and helpless, cool hands and a wet mouth everywhere except where he really needed it. His control was slipping in away that only happened when he was so close to the edge that all meaning ceased to exist except heat and pleasure.

Hollen opened his eyes, catching Munro’s gaze with absolute purpose. “Will you fuck me if I ask you to?”

He needed it more than a job and a friend. As Munro deepened his touch, dragging his hands over Hollen’s chest as certainty hardened into pure fascination. They barely knew each other, but Munro played him so well, knowing exactly where to touch and how hard.

Munro growled, dipping to Hollen’s chest and dragging a flat tongue over one nub. “That depends on how nicely you ask.” He drew back just long enough to watch Hollen’s reaction before he dove in again.

Hollen arched, digging his nails into Munro’s shoulder where he was holding tight. If he let go, there was a chance that he would slip away or even fall asleep, ruining his chances for good.

Another lick and he curled his toes, leaning into the touch. It was all tongue and pressure without the bite of teeth he’d expected. There was more to be had, even if

Munro thought he needed to hold back. As far as Hollen knew, this would be the only time, and there was no way he was ignoring the yearning.

“You— You canniblee a bit if you want.” Hollen stuttered as Munro caught his gaze with a dark look. “I mean, I wouldn’t mind if you bite me a bit. Just try not to break skin.”

Bite me a bit? Hollen struggled not to facepalm. Obviously, the blood had drained from his head, leaving nothing but lust behind. If George heard him, he would have a fit. Don’t think about George. Not right now.

Munro shook his head in disbelief, his eyes blown black. “My teeth are too sharp.” He curled the corner of his lip. The canines were massive, stretching past the crowns of his bottom teeth into wicked points. It was a wonder he didn’t cut his lips constantly. Or maybe he did, and he had the healing powers the movies and books talked about.

The saliva he’d left on Hollen’s skin seemed to tingle, the fine hairs standing at attention until they were wetted again. “One slip, and…” Munro trailed off.

Hollen sagged, trying to fight against the thick disappointment. “Oh.”

Munro dipped his head, giving his other nipple the same treatment, even going so far as to suck until the drag pulled a grunt from between Hollen’s lips. It was so damn good, but Hollen could see the lines at the corners of Munro’s eyes and the set of his jaw when he had to pull away.

The realization crashed over him in a surge that went straight to his gut. “You’re afraid to bite me.” He bucked his hips as Munro stroked his side, burning for relief.

“No.” Munro shook his head, placing a kiss on his nipple before surging up to meet

Hollen's lips. Once Hollen was aching for air, Munro moved to his ear, whispering over his skin. "I'm going to bite you, but I'm waiting for you to beg me for it."

Hollen bit his lip as prickling broke over his skin. He couldn't imagine someone begging for those sharp points to dig into their skin until they broke through. It had to hurt—even if the edge of pain was almost pleasant when he was this hard.

He shook his head. "I won't."

Hollen gasped as Munro dipped and sucked his nipple into his mouth, bypassing his neck completely. They ached, pounding from the repeated assault. He grabbed at Munro's hair, digging his nails between the strands. There was the tiniest scrape of something sharper, a yelp pushing through his lips.

Munro moved to his other nipple with one last lick. "I love your confidence." He was fluid as he grasped it roughly between his lips, the sensation nearly torture.

"Ah." Hollen parted his lip. There it was—that bit of ache that always went best with the peak of pleasure right before he came. He was already getting close, still retrained by thin fabric that gave everything away. There was an obvious wet spot that Munro was ignoring, focused on his chest alone.

"Touch me." Hollen threw his head back. "I want you to...please."

Munro

He could almost taste the blood beneath Hollen's skin, trapped below a thin layer with its sweetness beckoning. Every pulse—every thump had him spiraling closer to the edge of his restraint, until he was sucking each of Hollen's nipples into his mouth

while wishing they were something else.

They hardened beneath his tongue, flushing bright as he lapped hard enough to have the blood blooming beneath the very surface in a tempting spider web that he wished would catch him. Still, he went harder, leaving so little room for pleasure when his torture was nearing completion.

Hollen moaned and bucked, seemingly unaware of the struggle Munro was facing. He had been completely truthful. He'd never kissed someone before he bit them. Sure, a few of the people he'd fed from in the past had gotten close to him, sneaking their way into his bed before they inevitably moved on in one way or another.

But it had always been about the succulent sustenance pumping through their veins, not their hair or eyes or their quick wit. Lust was a natural side effect with feeding sometimes, even if it faded after every exposure. Nothing was ever quite like the first hit that was warmth and ecstasy entwined.

But now he was holding himself back and doing everything in his power not to bite into Hollen's neck and end him as a river across his bed sheets. A few drops would sustain him, but would he be able to stop? Even now he could barely restrain himself without the copper liquid flowing down his throat.

"Touch me." Hollen grabbed at him as he pleaded for a second time, guiding Munro's hand until he was skimming the top of his uniform pants. His fingertips touched warm skin that was flushed and overwhelmed.

Usually, he took such pride in the white uniforms as the only things that were spotless and neat in his world of chaos and revolution. But it was keeping secrets from him now that he had only caught glimpses of before.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

The fabric ripped under his hands easier than tissue paper, the extra layer of Hollen's boxers offering only a slight resistance before it gave way with an elastic snap.

Hollen squeaked beneath him, opening his eyes wide. That flush on his cheeks darkened before he covered himself with his hands, his cock poking out between his clasped fingers.

Things had changed over centuries, but there was still nothing better than a nice cock that was hard, wet, and wanting, as its owner squirmed. Hollen was perfectly curved and flushed, the tip nearly purple where it poked through. His balls hung loose and soft between his parted legs, nearly as flushed as his cock.

"Let me see." Munro was surprised at how gentle his own voice came out—a dark request when he was burning for more. Hollen dipped his head before slowly peeling his hands back, seeming to look anywhere except at Munro.

Staring for days wasn't an option, especially when Munro couldn't keep his lips to himself for long. He took a risk, kissing Hollen's neck and letting out a shudder that was stronger than the last.

Saliva flooded his mouth, his stomach growling as if hadn't eaten for weeks. He could imagine how it would flow over his tongue—hot, tangy, and filled with the saltiness of lust. It would be all the better when the pleasure hit Hollen, and he came with Munro's teeth digging deep into him—penetrating him more intimately than he had ever experienced.

"I want it." Hollen grasped the back of Munro's head, gently tugging his hair. "I

know you won't hurt me. Please. I want it."

How can I resist that? Munro trembled, fighting against instinct and longing. He'd destroyed empires before and had felt the same power surging under his skin with single-minded focus.

He tossed it all to the side, kissing Hollen's neck softly before dipping back to renew the assault on his nipples. Hollen gripped the bed with one hand and Munro's hair with the other as he let out a broken moan.

"You said you would if I begged." He cried out, jerking Munro's hair at a particularly hard suck. "I'm begging you. Please bite me. I want to know how I taste."

Munro took in a deep breath, filling his lungs and pressing his forehead against Hollen's chest. I'm not that strong. Any other vampire would have given in three times by now.

"You aren't desperate enough," said Munro, his voice thick as a string of saliva rushed from his mouth. Licking his lips, he focused on another goal before he could let himself be distracted again. Sometimes sex could be just as fulfilling as a meal. I'll just keep telling myself that.

Grabbing Hollen's leg, he jerked him closer before spreading his thighs. Hollen squirmed as Munro settled in between, trailing his hands closer and closer to the center before pausing just short of the prize. Hollen's cock twitched as Munro breathed over the tip, mesmerized by white against pink.

Hollen let out a loud curse as Munro lowered his head, licking the slit of his cock for the first time. Thick saltiness bloomed over his tastebuds, his jaw aching as he reacted to it. It was strange how similar cum tasted to blood, only missing that metallic edge to it that gave Munro life.

He sucked in a breath, turning his head to the side before he was overwhelmed. He was treading the thin line of control, but Hollen was winning.

“I...” Munro shook his head, closing his eyes. Hollen was all he could taste, touch, and smell, every sense saturated with him. He was starving.

His control snapped, and he surged ahead, taking Hollen’s cock to the base. It took a conscious effort not to drag his teeth over the delicate skin, instead swallowing over and over to try to wring Hollen dry. Cum would have to do, Hollen’s blood staying locked away.

“Oh, Jesus. Oh fuck.” Hollen writhed, bucking his hips as if trying to convince Munro to take him deeper. It wasn’t possible, Munro’s nose pressed to Hollen’s belly as he dragged in his scent.

A smile touched his lips as Hollen throbbed against his tongue. Munro had had a lot of practice sucking cock over the years, and his gag reflex hadn’t bothered him in centuries.

He amped up the suction, his mouth aching as fresh saltiness pooled on his tongue. It spread, soaking into him as his teeth ached. He swallowed it down with the rest, goosebumps breaking over his skin.

Hollen tugged his hair after a particularly strong suck. “Fuck me. Fuck me. I want to come with you inside me.” The chant left Hollen’s lips over and over, his voice pitching higher when Munro didn’t pause his assault. He couldn’t.

With a loud cry, Hollen spilled over, his muscles snapping tight as he lost control. Munro drank him down, pulling back only enough to let the taste spill over his tongue and linger there. He couldn’t stop his growl as Hollen eventually wound down, letting out loud cries of overstimulation when Munro didn’t stop.

Calm down.

“Ah. Ah. Too much.” There were tears in Hollen’s eyes, dripping past his lashes to the bed. The wetness of them soaked the air, and Munro finally relaxed, letting Hollen’s swollen cock slip from his mouth. A moment later he surged up, licking the fresh tears from his skin. They were delicious but did nothing to sate the yearning of his belly, a painful twist jabbing him in the center.

His skin prickled, power surging through him as Hollen whimpered, pulling at Munro’s clothes with his hands shaped into desperate claws.

“Please bite me,” said Hollen. He must’ve been high on lust, his body sated once but far from done. His swollen cock had softened, but it hadn’t shrunk at all, hopefully ready for another round before long.

“No.” Munro shook his head. He was just as drunk, so close to biting his own lip just for the taste. “But I will fuck you.”

He spat on his fingers, reaching between Hollen’s cheeks to touch his hole for the first time. Slick and lubricant had evolved over the centuries, but he’d always preferred the perfection of his saliva. It had a few compounds within it, some of his lovers telling him how it made their skin tingle and prickle, enhancing every touch.

Hollen was so soft and smooth, his tiny entrance stretching even to swallow one of Munro’s fingers. The pressure and heat were intense as Hollen arched his back, crying out as Munro slid to the first knuckle. He paused there, panting open-mouthed as his cock gave a distant pang. It had been so easy to ignore up until that moment that he’d barely noticed just how hard he was.

“Are you a virgin?” asked Munro, curling his finger and pressing hard against Hollen’s prostate. Hollen’s voice cracked as he moaned loud, nearly ripping Munro’s

shirt with the force that he held on.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

Hollen shook his head, biting his lip and probably attempting to keep his cries to himself. Now that won't do.

With a second finger, Munro pushed hard into his spot, until Hollen couldn't help but yelp. He'd never been gentle, especially when he was so close to losing control.

"It's been a while," said Hollen, breathless. "I can't with George around."

Munro narrowed his eyes as he fucked his fingers in and out. There was that name again. George. Whoever he was, Munro was going to rip him limb from limb for intruding in his world and daring to corrupt Hollen.

But now was not the time to think about murder.

With three fingers now inside, Munro used his free hand to release his cock from his pants that had grown uncomfortably tight. He sprang free as soon as his zipper was out of the way, flushed and just as ready as Hollen was.

"Lube." Hollen looked down, his eyes going wide at the sight of Munro.

Granted, he was a bit bigger than most men he'd encountered, but he didn't exactly have lube floating around. The closest thing was probably cooking oil, which wasn't anywhere in reach. Rhys had been his most recent partner, and he always preferred things a little more raw.

"I don't have any." As he said it, Munro leaned back on his heels, withdrawing his hand before grabbing Hollen by the hips and tugging him. He urged him higher and

higher until his mouth had perfect access to his sweet hole.

Hollen yelled as Munro licked his entrance for the first time, letting his pooling saliva soak against his rim. It flowed straight into him, with the position of Hollen's shoulders against the bed and his hips in the air supported by Munro alone.

Hollen was hard again, his cock flushed and twitching as Munro licked his way inside, sucking at his rim and swirling his tongue. He couldn't quite reach his prostate, but he did his best, getting as deep as possible as Hollen squirmed.

The sounds Hollen made were an orchestra, the uncontrolled yells and moans that were deeper than his small body should have been able to produce. When he whimpered, it was high in a begging plead. Absolute music.

"I'm good. Please, please." Hollen covered his face with his hands, but Munro could still see the burning red through the cracks. It was gorgeous and so much better than what he had pictured from Hollen when he'd first strolled through the door with his hackles up. If he had known, Munro wouldn't have waited nearly this long.

In one swift move, Munro lowered Hollen's hips until his own cock lined up with that slick entrance that was just begging to welcome him inside. He only had to nudge his hips and bring Hollen a tad closer, before the blunt head of his cock pushed through the last of the resistance and slipped inside.

Hollen let out a loud gasp, freezing as Munro squeezed the first few inches in. He was incredibly tight, the warmth of his body greater than his own, with sweat dripping to the sheets. And with the slickness of his own saliva, it was absolutely perfect.

Munro waited until Hollen nodded before he eased another inch or two inside, each cue pushing him deeper to the core. The pressure was nearly overwhelming, an ache to it that nearly hurt. When he was buried all the way in at last, with Hollen's arms

wrapped around his neck, the urge to bite slammed into him at full force.

He had no control over his own limbs as he grasped Hollen's hand, bringing his wrist to his mouth. Hollen's pulse was pounding, the beat throbbing against Munro's lips as he curled them back over his teeth, exposing the sharpness to delicate skin.

"Do it." Hollen breathed out, his gaze heavy. It was an order more than a request, an anxious warning threaded into it. Do it, or I'll make you.

He couldn't hold back.

Munro bit down, piercing through the thin skin of Hollen's wrist to the small veins beneath. His teeth popped through the vessels, blood rushing into his mouth with the full force of a heartbeat.

At the first hint of carnal sweetness, he was lost.

His thoughts clouded over, his own blood rushing through his ears as his focus narrowed to the two jagged holes in Hollen's skin. When he swallowed, the warmth that rushed down his throat with sticky sweetness was more intense than Hollen clamping down on him, throwing his head back in what could only have been ecstasy.

Munro's hips moved on their own as he buried himself deeper, caging Hollen against the mattress and pinning him on his cock. There was nowhere for Hollen to escape to as Munro's mouth filled, slower than the first time but filling all the same, stretching the emptiness of his stomach as it settled there.

Almost without thought, he drove into Hollen, fucking him into the mattress with abandon. He barely had the presence of mind to aim for his prostate, knowing he found it when Hollen came again with a loud cry. At the smell of his cum, Munro growled, sucking down another mouthful of blood.

It prickled his throat, swelling with warmth as it spread from his gut to his limbs. It was too much, energy sparking over his skin as he swallowed again, his body buzzing with the sheer force of it. His heart raced, his cock absolutely throbbing as he tried to gasp in a breath, drowning in sweetness and power.

Something was so, so wrong. It wasn't normal—wasn't human to be this good and powerless at the same time.

Munro pulled back as Hollen went limp, his voice failing him at the moment his body went still. His wrist was bleeding, four oozing holes from Munro's bite quickly healing as Munro's saliva knitted the flesh together. He would have four spots left that would look a lot like bug bites until they fully healed, but it was better than what a young vampire would leave behind.

Hollen's eyes were closed, his face relaxed and his lips parted as he breathed slow and deep. The flush to his skin had disappeared, leaving only a slight paleness to his cheeks that were beaded with sweat.

"Hollen?" Munro had lost himself, but he'd only taken a few mouthfuls—barely more than a nurse would take for testing. It must've hit Hollen hard enough to knock him into sleep, as if Munro had nearly drained him.

Munro looked down as his cock ached with a fresh wave of sensitivity. He'd come at some point that he couldn't remember, but he was still inside, with Hollen's grip on him quickly becoming too much. He hissed as he withdrew, smoothing the furrow on Hollen's forehead with his lips as it formed.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

He kissed Hollen's cheek next, lips against clammy skin. "Are you okay?"

Hollen didn't answer, his eyelids only fluttering a bit as Munro wiped him gently with the corner of the bedsheet. It was ruined, one corner actually torn from their coupling. With a soft smile, he wiped Hollen clean with it, careful to get every trace before it could dry.

His skin was paler than it had been, but perhaps it was because he needed sleep so badly. Munro had watched him fade as the shift wore on, until he was stumbling over his own feet and threatening every set of expensive dishware.

With his eyes closed, he looked like an angel—and not one of the ones who were always bent on destruction. He was peaceful and soft in a way Munro had never seen. "There's so much about you I don't know."

He touched Hollen's lips with his thumb. "I know what you taste like, but what do you like? What are your interests and passions?" Hollen parted his lips in sleep, and Munro slipped his thumb inside before he could stop himself. "What do you want most in the world?"

The temptation to pull the soiled sheets over them both and close his eyes was monumental. It took every bit of his effort to slip from the bed, righting his clothes before moving out the door. He looked over his shoulder, cleaning the last of the blood from his lips with his tongue. "Goodnight."

Hollen

Hollen stretched, his limbs aching like the time he'd decided to go horseback riding on the beach without a saddle or proper pants. Even the bed beneath him seemed to be filled with rocks, the jagged edges scraping straight to his bones. The sheets slipped over his naked skin uncomfortably, his bladder aching.

"Hell." He ran a hand over his face, blinking his eyes open and taking in the room that was getting more familiar by the day. There was dim light around him from the lamps, solid wood trim above his head and on every side.

Munro was asleep next to him, his face peaceful in rest and his naked shoulders peeking above the blankets. With his eyes closed, he looked just like any other man, his teeth tucked behind his closed lips. It was impossible to think he could probably kill with a single bite. But he didn't kill me.

"Oh." He winced as he tried to sit up, his ass aching nearly as much as the rest of him. He slapped a hand over his mouth to smother the noise as he shifted, trying to find a comfortable position. That was some of the best sex he'd had in his life. It was amazing he could even move. Munro, as proper and restrained as he seemed, fucked like an absolute beast.

Rolling on his side with a groan, he grinned at Munro, taking in his features in the low light. Well, I guess that answers the question as to if vampires sleep. Munro seemed so innocent like this—so vulnerable. It just made Hollen want to smother him in kisses.

"I can't believe you."

Hollen jerked at George's voice, his head throbbing at the force of it. George's presence leaked under his skin like a cool bath, nowhere one moment, then suddenly

everywhere.

Hollen let out a soft sigh, looking anywhere but at himself. “This is fantastic.” There were probably bruises all over him from the kisses Munro had left, marked on his skin to linger for days.

“You slept with him?” asked George, scoffing at Hollen’s enthusiastic reply. “I told you he was dangerous. You should be staying away from him, not rolling around in his bed.”

That put a load of ice straight into the warmth in his belly. George was as close to being his best friend as Adair was, but what he had with Munro was new and fragile. It was also exciting as hell.

“Is it all vampires you have a problem with? Or just Munro?” Hollen lowered his voice as he carefully moved out of the bed. His head swam as he got to his feet, and he had to catch the edge of the bed for support.

“That bastard is more evil than you could imagine,” said George. His presence flickering before falling back into its normal ebb and flow.

“I don’t want to fight, George.” Hollen clutched at the column of the four-poster bed as dizziness washed over him, his legs shaking. He could have sworn that Munro had only taken a few blissful sips from his wrist before he’d stopped, but he was dizzy and exhausted like he’d been battling the flu all week.

“Listen to me,” said George.

Hollen dropped his gaze to the four red marks on his wrist. They were scabbed over and barely noticeable compared to what he’d expected to find. As he glanced his fingers over the spot, he almost dropped to his knees.

Hell. He leaned heavily against the bed column, circling the spots with his fingertips. The sensation curled through his gut until his cock was throbbing, the picture of Munro biting him crystal clear in his thoughts. The bite had morphed into something that had his mouth dry and his cock ready to bust from the touch alone.

“You let him bite you?” George’s voice dropped into a growl, vibrating in Hollen’s chest. The last time he’d heard him this angry was when Hollen had almost been hit by a car. “Are you trying to get yourself killed?”

Hollen huffed out a laugh, tracing the bites over and over. There was something addictive to it—the impossible surge of pleasure and the hint of itchy ache underneath. It couldn’t be normal or real. Imagine if he bit me somewhere else? His thoughts dropped lower, until he had to grab himself at the base to keep from coming.

“Hollen, please listen to me.” George’s voice turned to begging, his fierce grip on his chest going tight. “You can’t let him bite you again. Do you feel how tired and sore you are right now? The next time he bites you, it could kill you.”

Hollen blinked back the lust and the lingering fog. That couldn’t be right.

George had to be lying. But George had never lied to him before. “How? It’s just a bit of blood. People probably get bitten all the time, and they’re fine. It’s the same as getting a paper cut.”

“Anyone else would be fine, but you won’t be. You’re different.” George relaxed his hold until Hollen could almost breathe normally again. “It’s not just blood they’re taking. The next time Munro bites you, it will drain the rest of your life force from your body while your heart still beats. Please listen to me.”

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

Hollen rubbed the bites, his skin prickling as he was nearly overwhelmed. At least I got it that once. He wasn't sure how he would ever be able to not crave it. When Munro had bitten down, he'd only felt a burn at first, until his fangs popped through his skin and something flowed into him. It had licked a fire right through his veins, hotter than he'd ever felt.

"I'm going to sleep with him again." Hollen looked at the bed where Munro was resting, his chest rising and falling with every soft breath. "He's sweet to me, and he makes me feel safe. He makes me feel like I'm just a regular guy and that I'm no worse off for having a demon stuck in my head."

Hollen let out a sigh, dropping a hand from his wrist. The sensation instantly faded, leaving just the ache behind. His cock wilted as exhaustion hit him again with full force, dragging his eyelids almost closed. "Sorry, George. I didn't mean it that way."

"It's okay." George softened, flowing beneath Hollen's skin like the warmth of a blanket. It soothed some of the ache, unwinding the taut fibers of his muscles. "We should go home before he wakes up. Adair's probably worried."

Hollen nodded. He could imagine his friend calling the cops if he didn't get home in good time, especially with him so on edge since the big reveal. "I'm leaving a note, though."

He grabbed some clothes from the closet after finding the tattered remains of his uniform, before scribbling out a quick note on a piece of paper he'd found in there.

Munro was still resting, his face so soft that he looked like an angel and not some

kind of devil like George proclaimed. It would be so easy to slip between the sheets again, snuggling up to his chest and getting lost in his dreams. His shoulders sagged as he fought the urge.

“Adair is waiting for you,” said George, just loud enough to break Hollen’s thoughts.

“Jeeze.” Hollen moved for the door, quickly skirting through the throne room before he started along the hall. “Adair, this...Adair, that. You’d think you have a crush on my best friend.”

Hollen paused in the darkness when George’s presence flared. Whoa. “Oh my God. You do.” He chuckled, wiping the sleep from his eyes as he dragged himself onward. He was out of breath before he hit the well-lit area, his heart beating fast.

“You worry about getting us home,” said George, his voice soft. The warmth of him had faded to a gentle coziness, doing more to lull Hollen to sleep than anything.

“I’m not sure if he’s ready to talk much, so don’t just jump him when we get in the door,” said Hollen, wheezing between each breath. “I’m too tired for that, and I’m not really sure how it would work.” He looked to his hands. George had changed them once before to prove his existence to Adair, but how much more could he do?

The restaurant was bathed in shadows, but the front door was still open when he let himself out. The amount of sunlight outside was startling.

“How long was I asleep?” The street wasn’t exactly busy, but there were a few cars going by and more noise toward main street. “Crap. Adair is going to be so worried.”

Hopefully, he was worried. He’d seemed truly happy to see Hollen after his dance, sweat still clinging to his limbs. But he could have been high on cheers and adrenaline. Maybe he’d forgotten about Hollen’s other friend altogether.

“Hurry.” George stirred, a touch of energy flowing through Hollen’s limbs. It was enough to get him home at a decent pace, even though his lungs were burning by the time he turned his key in the door and pushed his way inside their apartment. When he stepped inside, he had to slump against the door just to catch his breath. The couch was too far, his bed even farther.

He caught the sound of footsteps thumping from the direction of Adair’s room, getting louder as his friend obviously ran toward the front hall. There was a flash of bloodshot eyes and tears before Adair was throwing his arms around him, pulling him into a tight embrace that smelled of cookies.

“I thought you’d died.” Adair let out a sob as Hollen’s back struck the closed door, his legs too shaky to hold up the added weight. “You didn’t come home after your shift, so I went by the teahouse. Everything was dark and they were already closed. Are you okay? What happened?”

Adair leaned back, holding Hollen by the shoulders as he looked him up and down. “Honey, you look exhausted. Have you been up all night? Was it the...” He lowered his voice into a whisper, “Vampires?”

With his friend so worried, he probably shouldn’t have been smiling, a grin stretching over his lips that he couldn’t contain. He threw his arms around Adair’s neck, sagging against him as absolute joy lit in his gut. “You don’t hate me anymore.”

Adair stiffened, sniffing as he patted Hollen’s back. “I never hated you, baby. I was struggling with a few things, and I wasn’t sure what to believe.” He softened, kissing the top of Hollen’s head. “I’m just glad you’re safe. Another hour and I was going to call the cops.”

That would have been a bad idea. There wasn’t exactly anything illegal going on at the teahouse, but the room with that table was nefarious as hell. It didn’t seem possible to

have something like that hidden in the city while the rest of the shops around were normal.

“I’m safe. I’m good.” Hollen winced as he leaned harder against the door, the ache at the base of his spine flaring. Munro had been so gentle at first, but that had changed quickly when Hollen had started to beg. A warmth rose in his chest, a matching flush on his cheeks.

Adair’s jaw dropped as he looked him up and down, grasping the fabric of Hollen’s long-sleeve shirt that draped to mid-thigh.

“Did you get laid?” Adair screeched, his voice probably echoing through the entire floor. Hollen winced, rubbing his eyes as his headache throbbed.

“Yeah.” He flushed, bringing Adair’s hand to his mouth and kissing his knuckles. “I should have texted you, but I wasn’t sure if you were ready to hear from me yet...and I passed out. I really didn’t mean to worry you.”

“I was worried.” Adair’s smile faltered. “About a lot of things. And you’re right. I wasn’t sure about it either until I saw you at the competition yesterday. You sat at the very back in that stupid chair that’s always empty, and I saw you cheering away and talking to yourself the whole time.”

Hollen winced, closing his eyes as another wave of exhaustion hit him. He wasn’t sure if he could do this right now when sleep was almost the only thing on his mind.

“I realized that you weren’t talking to yourself.” Adair’s eyes were shiny when Hollen looked at him. “You were talking to...to him?” He shook his head.

“Baby.” Hollen reached for him, but Adair shook his head harder.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

“Let me finish.” Adair sniffed, wiping the beginnings of tears from his cheeks. “I know what people become when they go down that path. They don’t just talk to themselves—they scream. When they aren’t scratching at their skin and pulling their hair, they’re lashing out, hurting everyone around them with the cruelest words you could ever imagine.”

“Your mom?” Hollen asked softly. He sucked in a breath at Adair’s nod. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you, I swear—”

Adair let out a soft huff, pulling Hollen in for one last squeeze. “I’d rather not talk about it. One hell of a therapist later and I still can’t get over it.” He squeezed Hollen before letting go. “Tell me about this guy you had last night. Looks like it was quite the ride.” Adair grinned, the tears on his cheeks drying. “This is so exciting. It’s been months for you, Hollen. Months. Do you know how happy this makes me? Tell me about him. I have to know if there’s a potential threesome in my future.”

George choked, the sound echoing in his head.

“He’s a vampire,” said Hollen, bracing himself for Adair’s reaction. He did seem to deflate a bit, some of the glow fading in his excitement. “And he’s also my boss.” Probably two types that I shouldn’t be fucking. Oops.

“Ask him about the threesome,” said George, his presence strengthening.

“You don’t even want me to get with Munro again and now you want him to have a threesome with Adair and me?” Hollen lowered his voice, but Adair could apparently hear him, loud and clear.

Adair took a slow step back, his excitement fizzling out. No matter what he had said before, there were deep lines of concern etched in his face that were accentuated by the tiredness.

“Just you, Adair and me,” said George. Hollen snorted, shaking his head as another yawn took him. He was too tired for this.

“Is he—talking to you?” asked Adair, taking another step back. “What did he say?”

“He likes the threesome idea,” said Hollen, taking a moment to make sure the door was locked before kicking off his shoes. “But I think he’s more interested in seeing you naked.”

Adair swallowed, smoothing his hands down the front of his shirt. “Was hetherethe last time we were together?” He stared at his hands, chewing his lip.

“No way,” said Hollen, shaking his head. “He’s only been around for a few months, and he is the sole reason for my dry spell.” He let out a soft sigh. “It’s impossible to stay hard when he’s telling me all about the bigger ones he’s seen.”

Adair scoffed, lowering his hands. “You are above average, baby. Don’t sweat it.” A smile flickered at the corner of his lips, but the concern hadn’t left. “It could be worse?”

“I know.” Hollen waved him off. “But it really kills the mood.” He headed for the couch, Adair following close behind him. He was yawning again as he collapsed onto the surface, squishing his face into the soft cushion. Exhaustion pulled at every part of him, sleep beckoning.

“It was good sex, though.” Hollen turned his head so Adair could hear him. Adair lowered himself cross-legged in front of the couch, leaning against the cushion.

“Like really good. You remember Alec?”

Adair nodded, his eyes going wide. “How could I forget that man? He was responsible for one of the best nights of our lives. I don’t think I’ve come that many times so quick before. I mean, my dick actually hurt at one point.”

That makes two of us. “Munro was better.” He grinned, reaching for a strand of Adair’s hair and twisting it through his fingers. Adair had started to wear his hair longer since they’d moved into this apartment, the tips curling out over his ears. “Sorry I didn’t call you. I’ll do better.”

Adair reached for him, threading their fingers together. “I haven’t been a good friend these past few weeks. I wouldn’t have called me either.” A smile touched his lips. “But, now that we’ve made up, I need to know every detail.”

Hollen leaned into the cushion. Sleep is a long way off.

Chapter Sixteen

Munro

Munro licked his lips as he reached for the empty space on the bed next to him. Hollen’s scent still lingered, along with a few dark hairs, but there was more than that. An imagined wound in his own chest had twisted deep as soon as he’d realized he was alone, heat fading to a syrupy thickness.

The messy scrawled note did little to stem the wound, the half-drained pen failing to capture the essence of its wielder. It wasn’t often he found himself alone when he pleased his lover into unconsciousness. It was even rarer that he followed suit.

Despite his absence, Hollen lingered in every bit of his senses. It was in the way his

tongue tingled every time he swallowed and the warmth of his belly still brimming as he rested with his eyes closed, listening to the sounds around him and hoping for the sounds of soft breaths to return.

His mind was calm and better rested than he'd been in a century, hunger nothing but a confusing memory. His blood—hell.

I have to taste him again. He'd only taken a few sips—a quarter cup at the most, each drop a pleasure on his palate to overwhelming degrees. The depth of it was fuller than any wine, a bouquet of the best flowers dim compared to the pure and untainted scent of it. He knew without asking that there was nothing else like it in the world.

There was so much left he could indulge in, savoring one drop at a time like sucking from a tiny paper cut. He could bite into Hollen a thousand more times, torturing him with desire until he whimpered and came on his cock, his head thrown back in sweet ecstasy.

The possibilities were endless...unless they weren't.

The note he left said he'd had a wonderful time and that he'd be back for work that night. But there was still the empty bed, the most telling of any signal he'd ever received.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

The teahouse was the last stop of his thoughts. He would close it down for the night if Hollen promised to join him again, arching his neck back so Munro would have the best angle. His whole body throbbed at the thought of it.

Munro threw the covers back, heading for the closet as he rubbed the last of the sleep from his eyes. Sex still lingered in the air, with a bit of dried cum clinging to the hairs on his chest and belly. He'd made sure to clean Hollen fully, but at the time, he'd thought of little for himself except sating his pure hunger.

He smoothed a hand over the patchy skin, flaking the biggest bits away. Anyone would know—vampire or other—exactly what he'd done in the confines of his room. If they knew what was best for themselves, they would realize that Hollen was off the market, permanently.

He let out a groan as he pulled a dress shirt on before tugging up a fresh pair of slacks and buckling them. Dragging his fingers through his hair a few times, he shook off the last bit of clinging sleepiness. He rarely needed to sleep anymore, but when he did, it was a bone-deep rest that he sometimes worried he would never wake up from. There were a few times he hadn't, years passing before he roused. The days following were always some of the worst of his life.

Scrambling to catch up in a society that no longer existed while starving and half-mad with hunger never made it easy to fit back in. Rhys had helped him along before, taking his hand and guiding him through the fresh nightlife that seemed to flood the streets more with time. The fear of the dark was quickly waning, every crack between the hours filled with liveliness.

Munro shook his head, heading to the throne room. He paused for only a moment, running his fingers over one of the sharpest stag antlers. It was an intimidating piece, but perhaps a tad outdated. Maybe it was the fear he'd seen in Hollen's eyes the first time he'd spotted it that now colored it in an off light.

The teahouse was bright as he exited the hall, moving toward the kitchen. Sean was already there, the smell of fresh baked bread strong as he sliced the loaves he'd prepared the evening before. The smell was almost permanent, the yeast and sugars clinging to the ambiance of the place perfectly. Munro wouldn't have had it any other way.

The dishes had all been cleaned and put away, mostly by the other staff, who hadn't said a word when Hollen had disappeared. He didn't pay them to speak or for their ideas—only their presence. It would have been such a loss if he'd treated Hollen the same way, but Munro hadn't seen the use in it when Hollen was only supposed to last a single night. So much has changed.

Sean let out a cat-call whistle as Munro walked into the kitchen, dropping his knife and grinning. He was handsome, even with the smudge of flour on his cheek and the pile of crumbs at his feet. Strong arms were what Munro had been drawn to at first, along with a winning recommendation. There had been a time when he'd thought about pursuing Sean, but that had wilted quickly.

Crossing his arms, Sean looked Munro up and down, his grin stretching wider. "Now there's a man who has had the lay of his life." Sean nodded. "Never thought I'd say this, but I like the guy. I think you should keep him around."

Me too. He wouldn't say it aloud. Sean was the type of man who couldn't keep any information to himself unless it truly mattered, and he was of the special breed of people who were immune to any mind tricks. If he hadn't come from a vampire home himself, Munro never would have trusted him.

“Tell me the menu,” said Munro, glancing from the bread to the display that Sean was building. Where the previous night had all been about strawberries, tonight seemed to be bread. There were four different-colored pieces on the tray so far, from deep chocolate to a light tan, all toasted and topped with different spreads.

“Straight to business as usual.” Sean dusted the crumbs from his hands before grabbing a small plate next to the display. When it was finished, it would go in the front window, offering passers-by a small glimpse of the unique menu for the night.

Sometimes a person would stroll by on a wrong turn home, stepping inside when it caught their eye. They would have a quick bite, but they would never linger, and Munro always made sure they had no desire to return.

It was ironic really that most of his clientele were vampires, there to wet their appetites and stir up war. They received nothing but pleasure from Sean’s hard work and connections and influence from being in an establishment as desirable as Munro’s.

Munro reached for the first small square. The bread base was dark—almost black—with a red spread on top that was so close to the color of blood that Munro was surprised to smell tomatoes and not the coppery tang when he brought it to his nose. He took a bite, flavors and textures bursting over his tongue. He let it linger until the toast finally started to dissolve before he finally swallowed it down.

“It’s delicious.” Munro nodded, reaching for the next and repeating the process. Sean nodded along, looking more relieved with each bite Munro tried.

“I went out on a limb tonight with the theme,” said Sean, tossing Munro’s empty plate into the sink before he returned to cutting his bread into thin slices.

“It’s good that you do. It keeps you interesting.” Munro looked away. The

food was good, but it had washed some of Hollen's taste from his mouth. A steady drip of Hollen flowing straight into his mouth was probably the only thing that would settle his obsessive craving.

"Let me know when Hollen arrives," said Munro, heading to the dining room. The first staff would be two hours at least before they arrived to set the plates and put fresh linens on the tables. By then, Sean would be going along at full steam, finished dishes piling high and ready for fresh palates.

The air shifted as the front door swung open, the small bell above letting out a chime that was barely audible. It was just scarcely dark and too early for any of his patrons to arrive, despite their immunity to the sun. They wouldn't burst into flames, but it was easy to get dehydrated when your liquid diet was a few sips per week.

Munro straightened as Hollen stepped through the door, a fresh uniform on beneath his open jacket. The jacket had to be a size too big for the way it hung from him, falling to mid-thigh. It was completely unexpected in the late spring heat.

Excitement burst in his belly, zinging as fireflies that had warmth instantly spreading through his limbs. A grin touched Munro's lips before he paused.

Hollen had seemed tired the night before, but now he looked exhausted. The dark lines under his eyes had deepened, his eyes bloodshot and lids drooping. Even the way he walked was a slow shuffle, compared to the perky step of their first encounter.

It was the pallor of his skin that really struck Munro. He was so pale that he nearly matched the white of his uniform, the majority of his color coming from his smattering of freckles. Corpses had better outlooks than Hollen as he blinked slowly, seeming to notice Munro standing there for the first time. I swear, it was only a few sips.

“Hollen.” Munro rushed to his side, grasping his shoulder as Hollen swayed. “Are you okay? Who did this to you? Was it...” He trailed off. It was very possible that Rhys had tracked Hollen to his home and had drained him close to death. Their connection had been complete for so many years, and Rhys had forever been the jealous type.

But it was hard to think so ill of Rhys. He was still a reasonable man who was completely devoted to him.

“Hi.” A tiny flush appeared on Hollen’s cheeks before he looked around the dining room. “What are you talking about? I’m fine. A little sore, maybe.” Sean cursed from the direction of the kitchen, and Hollen let out a soft laugh, rising to his toes and placing a swift kiss on Munro’s cheek. “I missed you. Is that weird?”

The spot on his cheek tingled, the dampness of Hollen’s kiss seeping its claws in. I ached for you every moment you were gone. “No.” Munro lowered his voice, tucking a strand of Hollen’s hair behind his ear. “But you don’t have to work if you’re still tired. I know I put you through the wringer when I promised you rest.”

Hollen winced as he smoothed a hand over his own ass. “Don’t I know it. I’m fine, though. Just a bit tired.”

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

If ‘just a bit tired’ was equivalent to ‘about to keel over’ then Munro could’ve believed him. Munro frowned, slipping his arm around Hollen’s waist and supporting him as he swayed. His heartbeat was still strong, pulsing sweetly on that vein that stood out. Everything else about him was limp, from his hair to his eyelids.

“Let me take you downstairs. You can rest for a bit longer.” Munro bit back everything else he wanted to say. If you’d just stayed, you’d be fine right now.

“Nuh-uh.” Hollen shook his head, pressing his hand to Munro’s chest. “I know you’re trying to be nice, but I don’t want any handouts, even if they are from you. I can work, and I’m pulling a full shift this time.”

Sliding free, Hollen headed to the kitchen, greeting Sean as he entered. When Munro followed a few steps behind, Sean gave him a harsh glare.

“What the hell is this?” Sean’s humor from earlier had drained to nothing. “Did you almost drain the poor guy dry?” asked Sean, abandoning his bread to go to Hollen’s side. “You look terrible. Can I get you a drink, something to eat? An iron supplement?”

Hollen chuckled, shaking his head. He weaved a bit when he did, grasping the nearest counter and leaning into it. “I’m fine, really.” He smiled as he looked at Munro, a flush spreading over his cheeks. “I guess Munro filled you in.”

“Un-huh.” Sean didn’t seem to be listening, instead grasping Hollen by the shoulders and leading him to the stool on the side of the kitchen.

Hollen let out a harsh sigh as he took a seat, his eyes fluttering closed for a moment. “The boss was a genuine gentleman and only took a little sip. I just had a bit of a reaction to it.”

A reaction? Munro kneeled next to the chair, grasping Hollen’s wrist. The bites were still there and looked completely normal for being so fresh, the small pink dots shiny with healing skin. There was no swelling or redness that would spell anything worse.

“A bit?” Sean grabbed a glass from above the cupboards—one of the few that had never seen tea. He filled it, handing it to Hollen while giving Munro another dark look. “Does Benadryl help with something like that?”

Munro’s gut sank, guilt seeping into every pore that had been filled with elation. He had caused this. Maybe it was the reason Hollen had snuck away—too drained to say anything but too afraid to stay.

“George said I’ll be fine,” said Hollen before taking a long swig out of the glass. The water trembled within as he shook, a quivering breath passing through his lips.

Pure rage flared under Munro’s skin, and he had to drop Hollen’s wrist before he squeezed too tight. Hollen could ask him anything—anything in the world—but he still had no idea who George was or why he had such a closeness with Hollen. He could be waiting in the reeds to snatch him away the moment Munro’s heart opened. There was a chance he could already be working toward it.

If he heard that name one more time, he was going to snap. Was it Hollen’s lover? A family member? Or perhaps someone who he’d met online. Whatever claim he had on Hollen, Munro was going to strip him of it.

“Oh.” Sean nodded, gaze flickering over Munro, his scowl softening. “I guess you can trust him?”

Hollen nodded before setting the glass on the counter. He heaved himself up, offering Munro a hand. There was a touch of color to his cheeks now, but the darkness still remained. “With my life.”

That’s it. “I want to meet him.” Munro struggled to keep the growl from his voice as he cupped Hollen’s wrist, stroking the vulnerable underside. So I can kill him.

“Oh.” Hollen looked from Sean and back to him. “I think you already did? Kind of. He’s not like someone I can call on command. He does his own thing for the most part. Sometimes he just tags along.”

Sean chuckled, turning back to his bread that he was quickly assembling into the night’s dish. “You make him sound like a dog.”

“Oh, don’t tell him that,” said Hollen, his eyes going wide. “He would kill me.”

All the more reason to kill him first. Munro licked his lips. George’s blood would be sweet, but not nearly as sweet as Hollen’s. The satisfaction of draining him would be next to none.

“I should get to work.” Hollen grabbed for a few kettles and filling them with water. “What tea are we doing tonight, Chef?”

“For you—blue tea. Everyone else is getting the green tea blend.”

“Kay.” Hollen started bustling about, as if he’d been in the kitchen for months. “Is the lady coming tonight?” He glanced to the vacant spot where one of Munro’s workers had stood the night before. She’d done her job well, barely resisting any of his influence.

Seconds on the clock ticked by, getting close enough to opening that she should have

started her trek here.

Munro closed his eyes, reaching for her. She should have been on her first bus by now. He'd written it into her very brain when he'd gazed into her eyes during the interview. A few months here and she would be able to finally move out of the city and start a new life with her young son in a small villa she'd found in the country. The only thing she'd be missing by that time was the memory of tea. She would have gained a few scars on her wrists and neck in exchange for the extra Munro made sure to tip.

The place where she'd occupied in the small uninteresting portion of his mind was utterly blank. She wasn't lost or missing—just gone. He stretched further, putting a hand over his eyes to block the light from the kitchen. He found her apartment with ease, the walls blank and the linens missing.

"She won't be coming in," said Munro, opening his eyes. "I'll see if we can get any extra help for this evening." It would probably only take a few trips down back alleys to find a candidate who needed a decent paycheck, and he kept extra uniforms for a reason.

"We can handle it," said Hollen, his hand trembling as he stacked the first few teacups onto the expensive trays. "As long as you greet everyone, then I'll focus on the tea and getting the trays ready. As long as we have wait staff, we should be good."

Munro nodded, his gaze lingering on Hollen, even as he reached for the others. One was pushing through the door now, their uniform already crisp as they washed their hands and started straightening the place settings Munro had set out. The others weren't far behind, filling the teahouse with their silence.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

Munro looked up, his gaze locked at the entrance beyond the dining room as the first few of his kind stepped through the door. They moved to a table without word or direction. When they saw him hovering at the door, they gave a bow, one dipping much lower than the other.

He gave them a curt nod, freezing as the door swung wide again. His stomach flipped, but not in the same way it had for Hollen.

Leaving the kitchen behind, he stormed to the door, his hands shaking by the time he reached Rhys. Hollen's soft voice as he spoke with Sean pushed him on faster, until he blocked Rhys from taking another step.

Rhys had lost his usual attire of half-naked, standing in a T-shirt and track pants that had a small rip in the knee. His eyes were bright as he peered around the room, barely sparing Munro a second glance with his fangs and claws on display.

It was the most aggressive Munro had seen him in a long time.

"I told you not to return," said Munro, keeping his voice level and shifting so he was between Rhys and Hollen. There was still the murmur of his voice from the kitchen. Hopefully, Hollen wouldn't find any excuse to pop his head out here.

The two vampires who had just sat down looked their way, leaning closer to their table as their green tea arrived. Fresh spices filled the air, but they didn't reach for their cups. A bit of gossip went a long way in their world of monotony.

Rhys held up his hands, his gaze now locked on Munro. "I only came to apologize,

Covi.” There was blood on his breath—a cloying scent that was all too familiar. Munro knew that scent and exactly who it belonged to.

He glanced toward the kitchen where Hollen was working on the other side of the wall, taking over her role so seamlessly that her empty apartment had not alarmed Munro in the slightest until now.

“I don’t think you did,” said Munro, taking a step back. The back of his shirt clung to him as the hairs on his arms raised on end. “Leave.”

The room shifted, and Munro clenched his hands into fists, stiffening as Rhys looked over his shoulder. A smile stretched over his lips as Hollen’s scent grew thicker, mixed with the deepness of tea as he carried some to another table, which would soon be occupied.

“I see I wasn’t the only one who was having fun.” Rhys let out a low laugh, licking at his exposed fangs. “It looks like you only left him enough to stay alive. He must’ve been delicious.” He stepped closer to Munro, heat radiating from him. Munro could see his excitement through his loose clothes, power radiating from him.

“I will end you.” Munro raised his voice, his fury boiling over.

The dining room went silent, Hollen freezing with teacups in his hands.

Rhys only laughed. “After centuries together, you’re going to choose a pathetic blood bag over me? I’ve been a friend to you—a lover. I saved your life more times than I can count—”

“And yet, every moment means nothing.” Munro’s chest ached as he said it, his eyes burning. It was so painfully true, smacking the air with a crack of pure voltage. “I never should have brought you into my life. You took every monstrous part of me

and twisted it to your desires.”

Rhys withdrew as if he'd been slapped. He narrowed his eyes, curling his lips back over his teeth. “You're going to regret this. I can't believe you're doing this to me after all I've done.”

“I'm sure I will,” said Munro.

Rhys let out a growl, casting one last glance at Hollen before he spun on his heels. “Get out of my way!” He pushed the newest patrons aside as they stepped through the door, warm air following him into the night.

Chapter Seventeen

Hollen

He leaned heavily against the counter, his fingertips slipping against the surface as sweat oozed from him. He'd been flashing hot and cold all night, his ears pounding in the worst moments, and his heart beating fast every time he carried something that was more than a few pounds.

Pure adrenalin was the only thing keeping him going, snapping him awake every time he nearly fell or when he accidentally poured hot water over his wrist instead of inside the pot.

“Go home,” said George, his calm voice slipping between his thoughts. Hollen grasped onto it, struggling to hold onto the tray in his hands. His fingers were almost numb, the tips more sensitive than should have been possible.

“So you can hit on my best friend?” Hollen shook his head, forcing a huff through his lips. “You know I have to stay the whole night if I'm going to be able to pay rent this

month. I've used up all my favors, and I'm not going to ask another one of Munro."

He was already behind, and the landlord would be knocking in a few days if he didn't cough up the money. A note had already been slipped under his door, which he'd managed to crumple up before Adair saw it.

"You okay?" asked Sean as Hollen grasped another plate, balancing the fancy tray with sheer willpower. His hand trembled, the glasses on it jingling as he shook. Each set had a different design, more often flowers and roses than anything sinful.

Hollen took a deep breath, blinking away the cloudiness in his vision. "I'm fine."

One moment he was on his feet, food in hand, and the next he was on his knees, glass tinkling as it shattered over the kitchen floor. He couldn't feel his arms or his legs, only a distant tingling in his fingers as his vision wavered.

Sean was at his side, his voice muffled by the noise in his ears. When Hollen let out a whooshing breath, his lungs ached, screaming for air. He dragged in a breath as deep as he could, but it did nothing.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

“Did the boss do this to you?” asked Sean, wrapping his arm around Hollen’s shoulders as he struggled to stay upright. Heat flushed over his skin, aided by the vents that always seemed to be cranked to their highest. His collar was too tight, clothes clinging to his skin.

Sean lowered his voice, leaning in close and grasping Hollen as he nearly keeled over. “I can help you get away. I know people.”

Hollen shook his head, his vision blinking at the movement. “No, he didn’t. He’s—I don’t know what’s going on.” He took in a shuddering breath as bile burned in his throat. “I have to finish my shift. I need the money.”

Sean let out a huff. “Buddy, you can’t stand.”

He leaned against Sean, pressing his palms to the cold floor. His knuckles burned bright, the flush traveling over his skin.

He flinched as Munro rounded the corner, his hair in disarray in the way it had been since Rhys had shown up. His eyes went wide as he spotted them before he hustled over, kneeling in front of Hollen.

“What did you do?” asked Munro, his glare aimed straight at Sean.

Hollen blinked, Munro’s words swimming through the molasses in his ears.

“Me?” Sean stiffened, his arm going tight. “I’m not the one who bit and fucked him so hard he can hardly walk straight. Did you fuck with his head, too? I thought you

said he was in the clear.”

Hollen’s ears buzzed, the conversation going in and out as Munro raised his voice. Hollen reached for him, but his fingers barely twitched, locked to the coolness of the floor.

In a blur of color, Munro stormed away, shouting as he moved to the dining room. There was an influx of sound, dishes crashing, and an echo of voices slowly getting softer.

“Finally, he does the right thing for once,” said Sean, hissing under his breath as Hollen leaned heavily into his chest.

“Sorry.” Hollen closed his eyes, trying to muster up any whiff of strength. “I can finish my shift. Just give me a second.” His tongue was slow, swimming through the same syrup that was in his bones. He was so,sohot.

Sean rubbed his shoulder, the touch soothing. “He’s kicking everyone out and shutting us down for the night, buddy.”

There was something in his chest for the first time Hollen could remember, sinking its fingers deep and churning his belly. Fear—so real that it shocked his heart.

He hadn’t believed George—not really—but the proof was in his shaking limbs and fluttering breath. He could have died. Hell, he might still if he let himself fall into the summoning slumber.

Munro was dangerous.

He blinked, trying to clear the shadows in his peripheral as Munro knelt before them. His eyes were cold, the flush to his lips more pronounced than ever. That

hunger in his looks was still there. Maybe it always would be that threat and promise that eventually would win him over.

If they were ever entwined again, so intimately that they couldn't tell limb from limb, Hollen would give in. He knew it in his heart that he would tilt his head back, offering his neck and hoping for that bite of pain that would bring so much pleasure. Even now he ached for it, like an addict solely focused on a fix instead of their rumbling belly.

"Get away." Hollen's words were barely a whisper but both men froze, Sean going tense against him. Hollen breathed through the ache in his chest and his pounding heart. "Munro, it's not safe."

It will pass. I'll feel better soon.

He tried to swallow but his mouth had forgotten how to work, saliva gathering at the edges of his numb lips. George stirring in his chest was the only thing keeping him awake, his presence warm and utterly complete.

I'm so sorry. I should have listened to you. His consciousness was slipping away, each strand of it snapping until there was nothing except a thin fiber.

"George, can you get me home? T—take me somewhere safe?"

"He's delusional," said Munro, that edge to him cutting Hollen deep. How many times had he heard something so similar from others who looked at him with concern or fear? Munro should understand. He was the only one to really get him.

"Give the guy a break." Sean grabbed him when he started to slip sideways. "He's barely conscious." His hug smothered Hollen in bread and spices when what he really needed was fresh air.

George stirred, spreading from his chest to his limbs and pushing the numbness away to the very tips. “Yes.”

It was the strength amongst Hollen’s weakening limbs, the fibers straining harder until his eyelids slipped all the way shut.

“Trust me, Hollen. I’ll keep you safe.” The voice was so deep inside that it was everywhere, even mixed with the desperation of his own thoughts.

As Hollen receded to the last thread, George surged ahead. Sometimes it felt like that when he was on the edge of his dreams, but George had never been somuchbefore. It was that security blanket that he needed so dearly, and the only thing that could protect him from the threat he longed for.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

Hollen jerked as a cool hand touched his cheek, opening his eyes at the sudden shock that strengthened him. Munro stared at him with his forehead furrowed, a frown twisting his lips. It took everything in Hollen to turn his head away and not lean in. Tearing away his gaze made his chest ache in a way he wasn't sure would heal.

Munro had protected him from Rhys and the others that night, but George was right. They were on different levels of the same food chain.

"I can't stay here, Munro." Hollen closed his eyes, leaning heavily against Sean as his vision swam. "It's not safe."

"I wouldn't hurt you," said Munro, the deepness of his voice breathtaking. Sean was shaking—or maybe it was Hollen trembling in his hold.

Hollen tilted his head back, trying to keep from looking. "You want to bite me."

It wasn't a question. Munro had been staring at his wrist since he'd arrived, his gaze flickering to his neck throughout the night, especially after Rhys had been sent away. Every time Hollen brushed against the marks that were barely tiny pink raised bumps, he wanted to tilt his head and feel those teeth pressed somewhere more intimate and dangerous.

If he moved with Munro biting him, would it kill him? His teeth had been so sharp—sharp enough to dent bone and slice through muscle.

"I won't." This time Munro did growl. Sean shifted, but he was too slow to get away before Munro placed a chilled hand on Hollen's shoulder. "I'm a vampire, but that

doesn't mean I have to listen to my nature. I'm not a beast."

"He's lying," said George, hissing in Hollen's ears. "He's a murderer—a monster. He's killed more people than you could imagine. Empires have fallen at his feet."

Hollen shook his head, trying to chase the voice away. None of that made sense. He didn't know who to believe. His heart snapped in two.

Hollen struggled to open his eyes, finding Munro in the dimming light. "If you bite me again, it will kill me. Now, a month from now or in a year—it won't matter." At this rate, that'll be this week.

"Oh." Munro rocked back on his heels, dropping his hand to his side. He narrowed his eyes, the look on his face heartbreaking. "I don't need to bite you to love you."

Love? Hollen trembled under the force of the word. He felt the connection, too, running deep and thick and binding him to Munro, even though he should have run away at first sight. He hadn't realized it might be love because he'd never felt anything like it.

"Can you take me home, Chef?" asked Hollen, his voice trembling as his eyes burned. He couldn't look at Munro right now—not with his heart sliced into little bits with the offering of a life he could never have. Munro was a vampire, and Hollen was always going to be part of the menu.

"Hollen—"

"I got ya, buddy," said Sean, cutting Munro off. "Let's get you home. Boss, I'll be back in a few. Hold down the fort for me, will ya? And make sure all those vamps leave." He gestured toward the dining room.

The world tilted as Sean stood, half-dragging Hollen to his feet. Sweat clung to every bit of him, all the blood from his body rushing straight toward his toes.

“Fuck, you’re heavy for a small guy.”

Hollen tried to help, but his feet slipped over the floor uselessly, buckling under his own weight. Sean strained, letting out a soft laugh under his breath.

George cleared his throat, drawing Hollen’s attention. “Allow me.”

Energy zapped through his limbs, a yelp pushing through Hollen’s lips. A moment later he was standing on his own, Sean looking at him with wide eyes and Munro with confusion etched into his features.

Every nerve buzzed, the kitchen highlighted with bright reds and oranges as a final tremble traveled down his leg.

“I should be good.” Hollen held out his hands, staring at them. He couldn’t exactly feel them in the way he normally could. It was almost like an echo—like touching someone else’s hand and imagining what they were feeling. When he clenched his fist, his fingers reacted a moment too late, curling before his eyes until his fingertips were pressed into his palm.

Sean let out a soft whistle. “Let’s get you home, kid.”

Hollen waved his hand. His gut was churning uncomfortably, but he was steady, the fuzziness mostly receded. “I don’t want to be a bother. I can find my way home now that I’ve got my second wind.”

Sean gave him a skeptical look as Hollen avoided Munro’s gaze. If he looked now, he would just end up lingering a few beats too long. The idea of Munro’s bed

soundedso good right now.

“Are you going to be okay?” Sean dropped his hand, cleaning the breadcrumbs from his knees. “It’s really no bother to take you home. I’ve got my truck parked out front, and Munro will make sure all but the crew are cleared out.”

“I’m good.” Better than good. Other than some weird tingling, he could probably run home and still have enough energy to make Adair a batch of cookies. Adair could struggle through them when he accidentally mixed up the sugar and salt, which was something he did way too frequently.

His hand trembled, the tips of his fingers strained dark against the paleness of the rest. Without looking back, he headed outside, sidestepping Munro’s outstretched hand. Get out. Get out!

“You know, for almost being dead according to you, now I feel great,” said Hollen, picking up his pace as soon as he hit the street and ducking into the alley that took him the short way home. It also would avoid any strange looks that he would probably get from his very white uniform and the rapidly spreading stain on his fingers. His knuckles were already getting darker, his nails the color of liquid ink.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

“I’m pervading ninety percent of your body right now,” said George. Hollen yelped when his hand rose seemingly of its own accord, his finger poking him in the cheek. “Think of yourself like a puppet being dragged along by willing strings.”

How terrifying. “I don’t think puppets live very nice lives.” He jumped over a puddle that was shining in the moonlight, clearing several feet beyond what he’d meant to. The slap of his landing echoed against the walls, the beat lasting so much longer than it should have.

“I was terrified of Pinocchio when I was a kid.” Hollen slowed his pace, touching his nose just in case. “I didn’t lie for a whole year because I thought my nose would get bigger.”

George chuckled, inkiness seeping up to his elbows and matching the dark shadows of the alley. They clung to nearly everywhere except the brighter spots illuminated by the moon. “Possession—even of adorable puppets—can be a terrifying thing, I’m sure.”

The click of a footstep sounded behind him, and before Hollen could turn, his breath was suddenly pushed through his lungs, his back hitting the nearest wall with the pressure of cool iron around his throat. He was momentarily stunned as his head knocked against the brick, the peek of the night sky through the tops of the buildings swimming before him.

“Hey, sweet rabbit. On your way home?”

Rhys’ voice sent a shock of utter terror straight through him. The vampire towered

over him, all broad shoulders and piercing eyes. The T-shirt and scrappy track pants did nothing to take away from the sheer intimidation that trickled down his spine.

“Rabbit?” Hollen coughed under the pressure against his throat, scratching at Rhys’ hands as he tightened his grip.

“Yes.” Rhys leaned in, dragging his lips over Hollen’s ear as he pinned him harder to the wall. “It’s the name Munro has called me for centuries. I thought it would be fitting for you—a lost little rabbit running through wonderland, just like I was.”

His gut throbbed, something akin to jealousy running hot. Munro wasn’t his, but their intimacy was something that couldn’t have been faked.

When he kicked out, Rhys only chuckled, nuzzling his nose closer to Hollen’s throat. With his hand wrapped around it, it wasn’t just a threat. “What? Did you think you had a chance? Fodder like you never last. Even the sweetest strawberries are easy to get sick of after time. And you are no sweet thing.”

Each word was like a slap, the pressure going tighter on Hollen’s neck until his breath was trapped in his throat.

“Let me take care of this bastard,” said George, the fire of him almost painful as it flickered beneath Hollen’s skin. The darkness covered his arms, but Rhys didn’t seem to notice. “Give me the word. Let me take complete control.”

“Don’t kill him.” It was almost impossible to get the words out, most of them silent syllables perched on his tongue.

Rhys threw his head back in a laugh, his teeth glinting in the moonlight. It was a full moon, the energy of it prickling over his skin. The darkness of his arms seemed to glow in it, soaking power from the rays alone.

“I would never kill Munro. We’re soulmates. The end of the earth is the only way we will ever be parted, and even then, we will be entwined together awaiting the next beginning.” Rhys dug his nails in, the points threatening to break skin.

Hollen didn’t give in so much as fade away, his vision narrowing to a tunnel of light down a long, dark tube. Fire filled his veins, roaring until there was an inferno burning over his flesh. Pale skin faded to dark ash, dust and gloom tumbling from his flesh.

Rhys let out a scream, the noise enough to piece straight through his ears. The vampire stumbled back, drawing his hand to his chest as it glowed red. Flames licked over his skin, the smoky ash twisting into the air with a thick, putrid scent.

Rhys stumbled, clutching his hand tight as he went to his knees, the skin burning brighter until only charred black remained. When he looked up, his eyes were narrowed with fury and pain.

“I’m going to destroy you.” Rhys surged to his feet, striking out at Hollen with his undamaged hand as daggered claws sprouted from his fingertips.

Hollen moved without even knowing it, George taking control faster than he could see and shifting him to the side. The chuckle that came from Hollen’s throat was startling and deep, rivaling Munro’s in his most passionate moments. Pure elation surged through him with the freedom of all but the narrowing tunnel of sight.

Rhys slammed against the wall where Hollen had been, falling to his knees and crying out when his charred hand struck the solid brick. Tears of thick blood rolled down his cheeks, strands of hair sticking to it until it streaked across his face.

He crouched, terror settling in his gaze. “What in the hell are you?”

Hollen tilted his head to the sky, letting out a laugh that echoed across the alley and out to the street. His stride was languid as he snapped his gaze on Rhys, reveling in the fearful whimper.

“That’s a secret,” said George, his voice echoing in the alley in the same way it would in Hollen’s head. “Would you like to hear it?” He laughed again, dark and low as Rhys simply stared.

“George! I told you not to kill him.” Hollen yelled it as loud as he could down the tunnel, but the words never escaped his mouth. George seemed to hear him, though, letting out a soft sigh that cut off his laugh.

“The kid wants me to go easy on you, but I have a feeling you won’t be stopped with a measly warning.” George grinned, lunging and wrapping a hand around Rhys’s throat before lifting him clean off the ground. He pinned him to the opposite wall in the same way Rhys had pinned Hollen, only George was dwarfed in size.

“I can make your neck match your hand,” said George, squeezing so hard that Hollen could feel the echo of Rhys’ pulse bulge beneath his fingertips. “But I have a feeling that might just kill you. I wouldn’t want to stomp on such a moral high ground. So instead, I’ll just take a souvenir.”

Faster than Hollen could think, George was prying Rhys’ mouth open, grabbing each fang before pulling it from his gums in a torrent of blood. The dark laugh hit the air as he tore the last one free before stepping back from Rhys and letting him fall to the ground.

Rhys twitched, reaching for Hollen as blood poured from his mouth, pooling on the blackened asphalt. His nails were still sharp, the points sharp enough to pierce flesh, but he barely twitched in his movements, obviously too weak to stand.

Page 47

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

George took a step, pressing the toe of his shoe into the back of Rhys' hand. "Test me, little vampire. Please do. Any excuse for a bit of fun is fine by me."

"George, please take us home," said Hollen, his voice still mute in his own head. He was getting quieter, muffled by the pounding of George's presence. "Adair will be worried."

George paused, tilting his head. "He has a point." His breath steamed as he exhaled, made of smoke instead of air. "We'll be off. Stay out of trouble, little vampire."

When he reached the end of the alley, he paused, looking over his shoulder. Rhys was choking in his own blood, his eyes burning with pure rage. "And if you don't—? Well...you know where to find me."

Chapter Eighteen

Hollen

He slipped in and out of consciousness as George used his body to walk them home, the skip in his step a stark contrast to the sticky blood on his fingers. Every few minutes George would hold up one fang to the light, a smile on his lips as he stared at the stained surface.

Hollen couldn't help the nausea that clawed at his throat, but George seemed to be able to dismiss it as easily as he ignored Hollen's weak thoughts. A few times Hollen had tried to speak as tears welled up, but George blinked them away with a satisfied hum.

Adair was waiting for them when they got home, his smile faltering as they stepped through the door. Darkness had spread over every part of Hollen's skin with scrawled tattoos and mysterious symbols. The blood seemed to almost glow against the canvas of his flesh, the four white jewels of teeth stark in his palm.

"Hollen, oh my God." Adair's eyes went wide as he clutched at his pajama shirt. He was ready for bed, his shirt loose and slipping off one shoulder and his shorts ending just below his ass. He was vulnerable, a bruise on his thigh that he'd probably picked up from dancing—hopefully.

Hollen tried to avert his eyes, a flush rising to his cheeks for no reason at all, but George stopped the movement. He swept any glimpse of control away, staring with no shame at all.

"Hollen?" Adair caught his gaze, whatever he saw making him take a step back. "You aren't Hollen."

"No, I'm not," said George, his voice rumbling in the kitchen. It had to be some sort of magic that made it so deep, even though he was sharing Hollen's vocal cords.

Adair took another step, pressing his back against the wall. Hollen had never seen terror like that etched over his features, his chest cracking wider at the sight. He'd already ruined one relationship today. He couldn't do that a second time.

Hollen thrust ahead, trying to gain control, but George swatted him aside easily.

"I brought you a gift." George opened his palm, the four sticky teeth resting in the center. Bright vermillion had dried dark, flaking bits falling to the floor.

Adair covered his mouth, retching. He turned, stumbling against the wall as he fled toward the direction of the shared bathroom.

“Huh.” George glanced at his hand, rolling the teeth around. The pulp was thick, the roots dwarfing the sharp tips that Rhys had probably used thousands of times. Thick satisfaction curled in his shared gut when he looked at them, even as Hollen continued to struggle.

Stop. Hollen tried—he truly did—but George just shook his head, closing his hand into a fist as he followed Adair.

George

Adair was bent over the toilet, his hair strewn about his face and his sides heaving as whatever was in his stomach hit the bowl. From the smell, it must’ve been something deplorable, like pizza.

“I thought you would have had a stronger stomach than Hollen.” George dropped the teeth into the garbage, having to flick one from his palm when it stuck to a layer of congealed blood. They hit the bottom of the can with the strangest sound of rock and glass.

Sweat stuck to his skin in the close room, the scent of tea and fresh bread still clinging to him. He curled his lip, pulling at his clothes as Adair continued to heave. He flicked on the shower before dropping the stark uniform to the floor next to Adair, stepping beneath the lukewarm spray.

“That’s better.” George tilted his head into the spray, letting the scents roll off his skin. The tattoos were stretched across every part of him, each telling a story that hardly anyone alive could recall, let alone read. He’d never regretted them, gritting his teeth against the pain of each one as it was burned into his flesh.

Steam swirled in the air, and he reached for the tap, turning off the flow of water and standing in the small, curtained shower. Water dripped in the drain, overshadowed by Adair's deep breaths. The heaving had stopped.

George stepped out, his skin prickling in the cold as goosebumps rose on his skin. The overheat fan kicked on, drowning out the sound of Adair's whimper as he clutched the porcelain bowl.

Adair stared at him with wide eyes as he panted, his eyes streaked red. "You—Where's Hollen?"

Hollen tried to speak up, desperate to get to his friend, but it was no use. He fell deeper into the swirling mass of darkness in his chest, buried beneath layers of exhaustion. George greeted him there with open arms, wrapping him in something soft that anchored him.

George kept his lips sealed, blinking as he smothered the last bit of Hollen's presence for the moment. It would just be like being trapped in a soundproofed room, his legs and arms bound and away from his control with any sounds sinking into the walls. Only, Hollen could still feel everything, including the water dripping down his back and the coolness of the tiles against his feet.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

“He’s safe,” said George, kneeling next to Adair and touching his shoulder. He was clammy and cold to the touch, sweat and humidity clinging to his skin.

The first time he’d seen Adair was before Hollen had realized George had taken up residence. Adair had been curled on the couch in pajamas a few sizes too big, a man next to him who had disappeared from their lives shortly after that encounter.

He had been caught by Adair’s exotic brown eyes, perfectly symmetrical but large and soft. Hollen had leaned in to place a kiss on Adair’s lips as George had squirmed, desire flaring through him. Some of it was his own, and some was Hollen’s.

What parts were his were directly tied to the rush of adrenalin that had been plaguing him since Hollen had offered himself so willingly.

But there was something so purely handsome about Adair, even when his eyes were filled with tears. George had noticed early on, resisting the attraction until the moment he saw Adair dance. After that, he knew it was no use resisting.

George shifted, his naked knees pressing against the cracks between the tiles. A shiver worked over his skin, all but his hair quickly drying. “I didn’t mean to scare you.” He moved his hand along Adair’s arm to the spot of nakedness beneath his sleeve. He was drawn to it, staring as his fingertips brushed warmth and softness. “Did you need a shower to get cleaned up?”

“I— How do I know you didn’t hurt him? I want to talk to Hollen.” Adair flinched away, swiping at his mouth with the back of his arm. His gaze was locked on George, his eyes narrowed. When his gaze strayed for the slightest moment, a flush rose to his

cheeks, smothered by his golden freckles

George shook his head. "He's too weak right now." He reached deep, only to find Hollen slumbering in the same spot he himself had called home for months. "I'm only watching over him until he's strong enough to come back."

He'd told many lies in his extended lifetime, but this wasn't one.

Standing, George grabbed a glass from beside the sink, filling it and holding it out to Adair. "You need to trust me to keep him safe."

"I don't trust you," said Adair, glaring at the cup as if he hadn't seen George fill it a moment before. "You just came home with four fucking teeth in your hand."

Touche. This century had been quite the eye-opener. No seemed to want trophies anymore unless they were stuffed and hanging on the wall. Should I suggest a necklace? Hollen would never let him live it down if he heard something like that.

"I plucked them from a vampire who tried to attack Hollen." George squeezed his hand shut, only a bit of dampness remaining. The tattoos flexed as his knuckles strained. Hell, he had missed them. "I had to protect Hollen. He's the most important one."

Adair opened and closed his mouth a few times. "Oh."

"Let me help you as I helped him." George pulled the shower curtain back, starting the water again. Instead of the cooler water he'd used, he turned it warm, until steam filled the room. "I won't hurt you."

Adair didn't run from him or turn away. "Promise?" The question was heartbreakingly soft.

“I would gladly die before I hurt you or Hollen.” Hollen was a given—his host, his life force, and his current source of amusement. Adair should have meant nothing in comparison. But perhaps Hollen was rubbing off on him more than he cared to admit, the pureness of his soul matching with the love for his best friend.

Adair reached out, flinching when George clasped his hand and gently led him closer to the open bit of the curtain where steam billowed out in great gray clouds. They were close—close enough that George could scent his skin and see a stray sparkle caught in his eyelash.

He could feel the small shivers go through Adair’s body from the warmth, every bit of attention pinpointed on their connection. The slight chill of the bathroom was gone, heat pouring between them instead.

“I need to get undressed,” said Adair softly, his hand still clasped in George’s. He turned his wrist, sliding their fingers together until they were entwined. Perhaps it would not have felt quite so intimate if George wasn’t naked, his accomplishments and failures on display.

Adair let out a sigh, his eyes slipping shut as his trembling finally stopped. “I’m so tired.”

“That’s the adrenalin crash.” George released him, slowly clasping the bottom edge of Adair’s shirt and pulling it over his head. There was no resistance left. Perhaps Adair had given in to him—or maybe it was the strange connection between them that snapped into place when George had first seen him dance.

It was difficult to undress someone when they were taller than you, but Adair helped him by freeing his arms and tossing the shirt to the ground. He wobbled, his face still pale and his eyes clenched shut.

“You’re here with me. I’ll take care of you.” George trailed a finger down Adair’s now-naked chest. He was unreal perfection, faultless muscles bound to a lithe frame that hid the true extent of his immaculate fluidity.

Centuries ago, George had looked after someone, bathing their skin and kissing the tears from their cheeks. Looking at Adair, the memories of those days washed over him with the warmth of the sun and the scent of the turbulent ocean. There was bitterness, too.

Although his love had lived, he had eventually failed, as all men do. The empty husk he left behind had haunted George so fiercely that he’d driven himself to madness. The people who had taken him from George had burned brighter than the eerie moments before an eclipse.

But now, so much time had passed, he couldn’t recall his lover’s name. It was buried along with every happy bit he’d had in his life. Hollen was the first thing to bring that back, pulling him from his weak existence and his darkness.

But Adair...

George didn’t hesitate before clasping the stretchy waist of Adair’s pants, easing them to the ground. There was nothing underneath except more perfection, perking with interest as George stared.

When he finally looked to Adair’s face, he was flushed, dark pink scrawled over his cheeks and dipping to his chest.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

“This is so weird,” said Hollen as he stirred from his slumber, his voice echoing in his own head but no further.

George quirked his lips as he tested the water again. It was perfect, the warmth tingling over his fingertips that had cooled in the air. When wet, his tattoos seemed to glow, coming alive beneath the droplets.

“Do you need help?” George couldn’t deny his own interest or his disappointment when Adair shook his head.

When Adair turned, George spotted two small scars on his back, so blatant against the tanned skin that they were startling. He couldn’t stop himself from reaching out and pressing a fingertip to one of the lines. It was flat and healed pale. “What’s this?”

It was none of his goddamn business was what it was. He dropped his hand as Adair turned his face away, stepping into the shower.

“I’ve had some shitty boyfriends.”

Oh. George gritted his teeth, staring at the gap in the curtain. He’d terrified Adair, and he’d never stopped to consider that there was more to his past than sweet purity.

Jerking the curtain to the side, George followed Adair, crowding into his space until the hot water thudded against his back. He was soaked again in less than a second, the stream pounding into his muscles as the water pressure stuttered and strengthened.

“Did you want me to pull their teeth out?” asked George. “Now that I’ve had some

practice, I'm sure I could do it even faster."

Adair paled, even in the heat, his throat bobbing as he swallowed. "I don't like talking about them." He reached for the soap, avoiding eye contact.

That won't do. "Don't let it fester." George leaned against the shower wall, giving Adair room if he so chose.

Adair scoffed, shaking his head. "I'm not taking advice from a—whatever it is that you are—when I would really rather just talk to my friend." He poured the body wash onto a cloth, lathering it up. "Why are you even in here?"

Good question. George shrugged. "I'm a demon, but I haven't always been this way—suffering through life and latching onto a host just to stay alive. There was a time when I could love, then the isolated purgatory afterward." That ache in his chest panged again. George pressed a sodden hand to his forehead. "I can't remember his name. Why the hell can't I remember? I can't recall the moment that it slipped away, either. He meant everything to me for so long. I lost my sanity to him. If he passed me on the street today, I wouldn't even be able to call out for him."

He trailed off, the sound of the shower and his own breathing filling the space. Adair's gaze was heavy, sweeping over his naked skin.

"Is this okay?" asked George, looking at his palms. They were etched with the same markings. For all of the writings and languages—some from a time where record keeping was through speech alone—not a single one carved his lover's name. "I can leave if you want. Hollen and I could both use the rest."

"Stay." Adair's answer was almost drowned out by the shower. "Thank you for trying to help. You aren't that different from Hollen, you know. He's always trying to help people, even if it hurts him."

“Can I?” George reached for him, placing a warm palm against an even warmer shoulder. Adair was slick with soap, bubbles floating against his skin.

“Hollen does all the time.” Adair shrugged. “I’m not sure it will be any different if you do it.”

It was different—breathtakingly so. George had been there—that little fly on the wall the last time Hollen had chatted to Adair while he waited for his turn in the shower, eventually abandoning his place on the stool to join him instead. The echoed sensations he’d received that day were nothing compared to doing it himself.

Adair seemed to notice, too. He stiffened, the flush on his cheeks stretching to his chest. His breathing grew heavy as George dragged the bubbles over his back and chest, staying strictly above the waist. Any lower, and he would be sorely tempted to do something that Adair might regret.

When the water started to cool, Adair shut the shower off, lingering as George grabbed for the single towel. Adair let himself be wrapped in the rough linen, shivering as the air rapidly cooled.

“Let me take you to bed,” said George, securing the tie and ignoring the prickling of his own skin as the cold battered him.

Hollen stirred, thrusting himself almost to the forefront of George’s thoughts. “No way.”

George chuckled. “I can see how this is distracting.” He said it to himself, but Adair perked up, furrowing his forehead, so he decided to explain. “Hollen is quite adamant that nothing further happens between us.”

“Oh.” Adair moved shakily from the bathroom, sitting at the edge of his bed. The

towel parted, showing a peek of his inner thigh. He was tanned, even there where the sun usually didn't touch someone unless they spent hours on a beach somewhere. "I didn't know you could hear him." He rubbed his hand over his face, letting out a soft laugh as he shifted on the bed. "This is so weird."

George reached for Adair's hand, bringing it to his lips without touching. A kiss was too risky. It would mean something that he wasn't willing to part with. That pathway was not meant to be trod upon. "I'll keep you safe, and I'll keep Hollen safe, too. Sleep well."

Adair seemed to relax, the towel slipping a little more. "You're different than I imagined." He tilted his head, his eyes glowing. "Please never do that thing with the teeth again. The rest wasn't so bad. A smile lit his lips. "What did Hollen say your name was?"

"He didn't," said George. He squeezed Adair's hand, reveling in the smoothness of him and the heat blooming beneath his fingertips. It had been so long since he'd been able to touch someone like this, their body against his in its purest form. Every nerve was going haywire, his borrowed brain going at full speed. "When you've lived as long as I have, you tend to accumulate names. Hollen calls me George. Many years before that I was Gorgo. I'm not sure which I prefer."

Adair clutched at a blanket, drawing it over his lap. "I like Gorgo. It suits you."

"Indeed it does." George smiled, his lips curling over his teeth. He was given that name at the very base of himself when he was more darkness and madness than man.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

“Goodnight, Adair. In the morning, Hollen will be awake, and all of this will seem like a dream.”

George grinned as he backed out of the room. Vampires aren't the only ones who can hypnotize someone.

Chapter Nineteen

Munro

He'd never thought there would be a day that he hated the scent of tea. Calming blues and the smudges of black leaves had nothing on Hollen's scent that still lingered.

Munro paced the kitchen, glaring at Sean every time he moved past the empty sink and counters. A whole night had been ruined, food put to waste and expensive steeps poured down the drain. He couldn't give a shit.

Hollen's words kept resounding in his head. Were they done? Would he ever see him again? It didn't seem like it. And he couldn't pinpoint the second it all went wrong. I should have kept my teeth to myself.

Sean ignored him as he swept by again, prepping for tomorrow's menu while sighing over the loss of today's. He flipped through a worn book, white pages faded to yellow and spots with dried moisture crinkling the page.

No one had returned after Munro had kicked them out the door, a few stragglers quickly turning away when they saw the empty interior. No one had questioned him,

and he wasn't sure if that was worse.

There was no Rhys at his side to point out the obvious flaws in whatever plan he'd been fooling himself with. There was no one to hear him out—a thousand at his command, but not a single ear at his disposal.

“If you keep pacing like that, I'm going to get dizzy,” Sean didn't look up from his notes, squinting at the lines of a recipe before scribbling a few words next to it.

Munro growled under his breath, the sound thudding in his chest. He wasn't sure if it was anger or guilt coursing through him, but it turned his stomach, every scrap of food around the kitchen souring as he looked at it.

“With that kind of growl, it sounds like we now have werewolves in the kitchen. I never thought I'd see the day.” Sean rolled his eyes. “The kid will be fine as long as you keep your pointy teeth away from him. What's the issue?” He let out a deep sigh. “He'll come back.”

Will he? An ache seized his chest. “He was afraid of me.” He paced the length of the kitchen again. “Rhys has had him in his hands before, ready to rip his throat out, and he wasn't afraid then. I stopped an entire room of vampires from feasting on him...”

“You're a scary guy.” Sean let out a sigh. “I used to be scared of you, too.”

Munro leaned against the wall, shuddering against the cold. Sean had shown up like a whirlwind one day when his family had settled in town, pitching Munro his idea and not taking no for an answer. There was no way he'd ever been afraid.

“He was so weak.” Munro lowered his head into his hands. “It was only a few sips, but I lost myself for a moment. I don't remember taking more, but what if...” He trailed off, biting his lip. His canine sliced through the skin of his lip easily, the sting

grounding him. It was healed in an instant, but not before copper bloomed over his taste buds.

Hollen's taste was so mingled with his own that it was hardly noticeable. It didn't stop him from running his tongue over the spot, seeking more, even after his skin was knitted closed.

"I know it's easy for you guys to get carried away sometimes, but you didn't kill him. For what it's worth, I've never seen you lose control." Sean turned, grabbing a bowl and a handful of spices.

Munro shook his head. Here he was, the oldest vampire in the world with family stretched across the continents, and he was taking advice from someone he could eat. His chest pulled tighter, his breath catching in his throat.

"Have you guys considered that it might be because of George?" asked Sean. "I don't know much about the whole situation, but I feel like that could be hard on a guy."

Munro blinked, every bit of guilt sharpening into pure rage. That name was something that needed to be abolished off the planet. Children would need to be renamed, and adults would have to flee because otherwise they were risking his wrath.

"What does he have to do with it?" asked Munro. He clenched his fist, trying not to let another growl escape. When he heard that name, he pictured a man not so different from himself, his hands on Hollen's naked skin and sharp words in his mind. No time would be too soon to end him.

Sean shrugged, turning away. "It was just a thought. Forget I said anything. It's Hollen's business, not mine."

No. Munro snapped, closing the space between them and grabbing at Sean's white uniform top. With a growl, he spun Sean around, baring his fangs as he leaned in. Sean's heart fluttered, pulsing blood through the delicate veins and arteries in his neck. It bloomed against the surface, thudding with each beat.

He never saw Sean's fist coming. His jaw sparked with pain as Sean threw the punch directly against his teeth, the skin of his knuckles bursting open as they scraped against the sharp points. Blood rushed between them, tainting the air in seconds.

Sickly cilantro, so thick that it was as if a bushel of the plant were in his mouth, rushed into Munro's throat as he reeled back, gagging at the overwhelming taste. He choked, his stomach clenching as his body instantly tried to reject the liquid that could never be called sustenance.

He went to his knees, the lingering taste pushing drool from his lips.

"Sorry, boss," said Sean, shaking out his hand toward Munro and sending the putrid drops flying. Tea and spices ceased to exist as everything was coated with the essence of such a vile weed.

Sean grabbed the nearest dish cloth, wrapping it around his hand. "I didn't expect you to get up in my space like that." He didn't seem that sorry, a small smile on his lips as he wrapped his hand tighter. "But I'm going to fight dirty if you are. I'm assuming you have the same gene every vampire does that makes cilantro taste like soap? Betcha didn't know I make sure to eat the stuff every day."

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

Munro gagged again, the taste weaved between the roots of his teeth. It was awful, vile and completely overwhelming.

The bleeding had almost stopped by the time Sean grabbed the first-aid kit, wrapping his knuckles with gauze before grabbing a glove and turning back to his spice bowl as if nothing had happened. All the blood had landed on Munro in tiny droplets, with only one speck going astray to land on the floor of the kitchen. The room reeked of it.

“Apologies.” Munro ground the word out, gasping between gags. Any strong tastes could affect someone’s blood, like garlic or onions. But cilantro always seemed to be the worst, nearly incapacitating with its soap-like qualities.

“It’s okay. You’re worried.” Sean let out a hum, grabbing one bag of a red spice that had fire licking through the scent.

Munro struggled to his feet before stumbling to the sink and ducking his face under the cold water. He let it run through his mouth until the worst of the taste was gone, replaced with the subtle metallic glint of the pipes. When he faltered back, he was nearly drenched, the blood on his shirt diluted under the cold water, along with most of the scent. It chilled him instantly, turning his movements into sluggish delays.

“Tell me why you think George is involved,” said Munro, trying to keep his voice steady through the worry and repulsion. “If he’s hurting Hollen, I need to put a stop to it.”

“Well, I guess he has to be involved, doesn’t he?” Sean tilted his head, looking to the ceiling as if in confusion. “If the guy is stuck in Hollen’s head, he’s got to live

offsomething. I'm not going to pretend I know exactly how that works, though." He shrugged.

"In his head?" Munro furrowed his forehead. It didn't make any sense. From the way Hollen talked about him, he'd assume George was a friend—an overbearing one who couldn't keep his mouth shut.

"Hollen called him a demon...said he was possessed and all that." Sean waved his hand. "If he wasn't such a level guy, I'd be worried for his sanity."

The air seemed to leave the room as Munro's world dropped out from under him, his stomach flipping as the blood seemed to grind to a dry halt inside his skin.

"A d-demon?" Munro had to lock his knees so he didn't slide to the floor. Demons were the worst plague that could have ever happened to the world. They were worse than a feral vampire who drained every person they came into contact with—or a faerie who had lost its family. Sucking the life from everything they touched, a demon would only grow stronger, until all that was left behind of their host was a lifeless hull.

"Fuck." Munro shook his head.

"I don't think I've ever heard you swear, boss." Sean glanced his way, his eyes wide.

Munro grabbed the nearest plate, throwing it hard against the opposite wall. Delicate china shattered into a thousand pieces, Sean jumping out of the way as the shrapnel dotted over the ground. "Fuck!"

"Whoa." Sean backed away, skirting along the edges of the kitchen until he was the closest to the exit.

“It makes sense.” Munro dragged a hand through his hair, jerking the tangled bits free from his scalp. “That’s why he tasted so good.” Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“Because of the demon?”

Munro shook his head. “Call it an evolutionary quirk, an act of mercy, survival of the fittest—whatever you want.” He let out a humorless huff. He was empty—completely drained. “When someone is close to death, it often calls to a vampire, luring us in to take just too much.”

His chest cracked wide, the ache so deep he could scarcely stand it. “Hollen tastes so good because he’s dying. George is killing him, and he’s close, barely teetering on the edge. If I had taken one more sip, it would have been everything he had to give.”

Sean’s eyes went wide. “Oh shit.” His spices were abandoned, the recipe book slipping closed. “What the hell do we do?”

“Nothing.” Munro closed his eyes, letting his head thud against the wall. All his strength and years were for nothing. The thirty-two university degrees and properties in every part of the world meant little next to the absolute darkness ahead for Hollen. The desperation was almost enough to push him into an eternal sleep.

“You can’t mean that,” said Sean. Munro opened his eyes as Sean crossed his arms, his jaw set. “I thought you liked Hollen. Hell, the kid is great, and you’re just going to give up like that? Figure out a way to get the demon out of his head, and he’ll be just fine. You gotta be a couple hundred years old, so I’m sure you know how to deal with things like this. Take it one step at a time.”

You poor, naive little creature.

The rest of Hollen’s life would be a sad existence of exhaustion that would approach

delusion until he finally snapped and slipped away. Once he did, his body would follow, but not before the demon would wear his bones and skin like a suit. If it was strong enough, the demon would rebuild itself, taking on Hollen's form until it found a better one to possess. It would eventually find another host—person, vampire, faerie—whichever was the best match.

"I've taken care of a demon before," said Munro, letting out a shaky breath. His pressed suit was stained and ruffled, but for once, he didn't care. Let him look just as worn as his life.

"Good." Sean seemed to relax. "You should be a pro, then."

"One would think," Munro said softly. He had to leave. One more sniff of cilantro and he was going to curl up on the floor. "He killed most of my family before I managed to bind him with the help of a magician."

"I didn't realize magic was real," said Sean, looking at his hand. A bit of blood had seeped through the gauze, staining the inside of the glove. The smell was overwhelming. "It makes sense, though. Vampires, werewolves, and faeries do seem a bit magical."

Munro let out a laugh. It was high and without an ounce of humor to it, approaching hysterical as Sean took a step back.

"That's the best part." Munro's laugh turned into a sob, his voice cracking. "As soon as I bound that bastard, I drained the magician dry so no one would ever be able to reverse the binding. He was the last of his kind—a dead breed to a lost race."

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

Karma's a bitch. It was all coming to a head—every mistake and poor choice he'd made in his life—the people he'd let die that night, to the wrong ones he'd let live, their faces permanent in his memory.

“I won't stand a chance alone.”

Chapter Twenty

Hollen

“Am I hungover?” Hollen let out a groan, his voice cracking halfway through. His mouth was bone dry, every muscle aching with a pounding in his head that was second to none.

He cracked his eyes open, wincing at the too-bright light filtering through the sole window of his bedroom. He'd expected wood, not the dusty gray paint and faded pictures of his own bedroom. Munro's calming scent was missing, replaced with laundry detergent and the litter box in the corner.

He couldn't help but be a little disappointed. The nights he'd spent with Munro were some of the best of his life, even if he couldn't recall exactly what had happened the night before. They must've kissed again—possibly more after Munro had sent Rhys away, the missing hours lost to pleasure.

“Shit. What time is it?” He rolled out of bed, grunting as he placed his feet on the carpet and steadied himself. At one point, he was sure the carpet had been plush and maybe even white, but now it was a flat gray thing that barely cushioned the concrete

and wood beneath.

A shiver racked his body, his stomach grumbling. As he stumbled to the window, he realized that it wasn't the sun filtering in, but a light from the apartment building that banished shadows from the front stoop. Usually, he would keep his blinds shut to ward off the yellow pest, but he must've forgotten to do that the night before, too.

George stirred, already tucked just under the top layer of his skin. He was everywhere, his warmth easing the aches of each muscle. "It's late." His voice was so loud, as if he were whispering against Hollen's ear and not from inside his head.

The headache sharpened, and he clutched at the wall. "I feel like crap." Hollen lowered his face into his hands. "Last night...what happened?"

He racked his brain, but other than a few flashes of taking tea to tables and Rhys showing up, there was only darkness. He had the strangest recollection of drowning, but that was impossible. "I don't remember much after Rhys showed up. I don't even know if I finished my shift."

His brain was decidedly blank, a few hours missing with nothing to replace them. Maybe his memories were hidden just behind his headache—or maybe they would come back when he wasn't so exhausted. "It must've been a late night." He cracked a yawn.

"You're getting weaker," said George softly. "The bite is still taking its toll. You need to stay in bed."

"Nah." Hollen waved his hand. There was too much to do and too many bills to pay to think about wasting a day in bed. "I'll be fine after a shower." The heat would do wonders for his muscles, as long as Adair hadn't gotten there first.

George tugged something in his chest, snapping his attention to him. “Hollen, you can’t.”

Hollen let out a long sigh. “Remember that conversation we had when you first spoke to me?” He smoothed his pajamas over his legs before treading toward the bathroom. “This is my body—not yours. You can offer advice, but the final decision is still mine. I’ve been living with myself a lot longer than you have.”

It was hard to think of a time when George wasn’t there, that whisper of a conscience in his ear narrating the most ridiculous parts of his life. It was even more difficult to think of where he would be without George—a different job, life and lover... He didn’t want to know.

“I’m trying to keep you safe,” said George.

“Safe is overrated.” Hollen ducked into the bathroom, blinking in the bright light. One look into the mirror and he had to wince away from his reflection. “Okay, so maybe I don’t look the best.” His eyes were sunken and dark, his face pale with a few streaks of red where the imprint of his pillow remained. “At least I’ll match my uniform.”

“Hollen, baby, are you in there?” Adair called through the bathroom door. A moment later he was turning the knob and letting himself in. Hollen leaned heavily against the sink, dreading the moment Adair saw him. It was tricky enough to hide how desperate their situation was without Adair seeing him like this.

Adair was stunning, with his golden skin and bright eyes, even in baggy track pants and a tight top that was fresh and smelling of laundry detergent. His hair was pulled back as if he were ready to head out. Sometimes his dance practices would run late, especially with more upcoming competitions.

“Hollen?” Adair traced his gaze up and down. “Is that you?”

“Umm...yeah?” Hollen blinked in confusion before glancing down at himself. It was the same scrawny body he’d expected to see. “Am I supposed to someone else?”

“I met Gorgo last night, and we had a chat.” Adair shifted, glancing to the side. “He seems nice—crazy, but sweet.”

Where the hell was I when this happened? Hollen racked his brain but came up empty. There was no trip home last night, and certainly nothing after that. “I’m not sure what happened last night.”

He should probably be alarmed, but with exhaustion weighing heavy, he couldn’t bring himself to care.

“Probably for the best,” said Adair, muttering under his breath. “Well, I just wanted to wish you a good day. I’ll see you later, honey.”

“Bye.” When the words came from his mouth, it wasn’t in Hollen’s usual high tilt, warped instead in George’s baritone that thudded straight from his chest.

Hollen jerked back in time to see something shift across his eyes—his green flashing to yellow before turning back again. He could have sworn that there were tattoos on skin, gone before he was certain they were even there.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

That was different. He looked at his hands, but they still looked and felt like his, his fingers curling without delay. George was simmering beneath his skin, stuck to every part of him.

“Oh.” Adair’s eye went wide, his cheeks flushing red. “Hi, Gorgo.”

“Hello, Adair.” Hollen’s hand moved seemingly on its own, grasping Adair’s and bringing it to his lips. He hesitated before placing a kiss on his knuckles. When he let go, the warmth of Adair’s hand lingered.

Adair was tinted red when he turned away, clutching his hand to his chest. “Have a great day, you two.”

“Yeah,” said Hollen, his own voice weak as he clutched the sink. His knees seemed ready to buckle with how much they were wobbling, the muscles aching and strained.

He waited for Adair to disappear and the sound of the front door opening and closing. “What the hell was that? You guys better not have fucked last night. That is not okay, George.”

“We didn’t,” said George, Hollen’s skin prickling and his fingers tingling. He wasn’t sure if it was out loud or in his head. “I simply introduced myself.”

“You’re an asshole.” Hollen quirked his lips. The porcelain was freezing, sucking the last of Adair’s warmth from his skin. Even when he started the shower, the water still seemed chilled. Unsteadily, he washed himself, pulling his uniform on after he was dry before heading out the door.

He hadn't gotten Munro's number. He doubted he even had one, so he wasn't able to give him a warning that it was long after opening by the time he made it to the street. A few lights were on, the sidewalk damp from a recent rain that he couldn't recall.

The walk to work was a blur, most of the buses having delayed routes since most of rush-hour traffic was over. His stomach rumbled along the way, and he realized he hadn't eaten anything in a long time. When he mentioned it to George, a soothing warmth filled his belly, his hunger fading away to nothing.

"It's a beautiful night," said Hollen, grasping the door to the teahouse and leaning against the handle. The sun was gone, but the warmth of it remained, adding to the dampness that hovered over the sidewalks. There were four cars parked in front of the teahouse. The red lettering on the foreign plates caught his eye.

He shrugged, running his hands through his hair before he stepped inside. Pure heat and spices washed over his skin, settling deep into his weary bones. The air inside was even thicker than the approaching fog at his back, countless murmurs filling the air.

Every table was filled, each chair occupied with other vampires looming at the edges of the room. Some he recognized from the regulars who had been there the few nights he'd worked, and others had been part of that terrifying night in the throne room.

The tables themselves had nothing on them but a few scattered bits of paper and pens. One woman dressed in red velvet had a silver dagger before her, the blade glinting in the light.

Am I early or late? Sean must've been putting the last of the menu together or changing it to suit Munro's critiques. But that didn't explain the packed room or why the conversation was dimming as he was noticed, eyes flitting his way and not wavering.

A thread of pure terror cut through him, his every sense on high alert. The last time vampires had looked at him like that, he'd been on the antipasto menu.

"Is that him?" a man seated near the middle of the room asked, curling his lip as he looked Hollen up and down. He scrunched his nose in obvious disgust as he flicked his tongue over his teeth. The sharp points were unmistakable as anything but vampire.

"What's going on, George?" Hollen whispered, backing against the closed door. It was thick and firm against his back, as if it were solid steel and not wood. His clothes were flimsy against his sweaty skin. "Where's Munro?" His voice was muted, barely making it past his own lips. There was bright hostility in so many gazes, but there was no Munro or the comforting iciness of his eyes.

All those nights ago Hollen had almost lost his life to them, with Rhys at the lead. Even with Rhys gone, their gazes were no less hungry. He clenched his hands into fists.

"I don't know," said George, his voice loud in Hollen's ear and sending a shiver of nerves over the back of his neck. "We should leave, Hollen."

"Not without Munro." This washisteahouse. If he was hurt somewhere or if his followers had rebelled and bound him to that icy table, he couldn't leave him behind.

His breath caught as Munro stepped into the dining room, the vampires parting around him without a word. Instead of his usual suit, he wore red tonight, the fabric shimmering in the low light of the teahouse. If there was blood dripping into the collar of his neck, Hollen wouldn't have been able to spot it against the dark vermillion.

He still smelled of the same spices as he paused in front of Hollen, the air practically

saturated in it. That soothing scent called to a base part of him that had no worries about money or hungry stares. It was the same part that made him want to pull Munro in for a kiss, despite the audience.

“What’s going on?” asked Hollen, clutching the door as his knees went weak, the shaky adrenaline hitting him hard. It was easy to forget about the others as Munro stepped closer, touching his chin with cool fingertips.

“How could I be so blind?” asked Munro, his gaze almost sad. “You’re right there—on the edge, and I never even saw it.”

“Munro—” Hollen started, but Munro cut him off as his grip went tight on his chin.

“Tell me about George.”

Hollen swallowed, his eyes watering as he held Munro’s gaze. Munro’s fingers dug into his chin, too strong to tear away from. Those icy eyes were colder than he’d ever seen—colder than the day they’d met.

This wasn’t the same man who had made love to him or the one who tugged at Hollen’s heart strings. Behind those lips was someone who could kill Hollen with a single bite.

“I can’t,” said Hollen. George’s presence flared beneath his skin, a shadow slipping over his flesh. He was so close to the surface right now and barely hidden beneath his knitted consciousness.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

“Was it George this whole time?” asked Munro, lowering his hand to wrap loosely around Hollen’s neck. “As we grew closer and when we kissed—when I brought you into my bed, was that George I was giving myself to?”

Hollen shook his head, swallowing against the pressure on his neck that threatened to end him. He could scarcely breathethrough the tightness in his chest, his heart pounding. There was a shuffling of cloth as others moved silently behind, their shapes flickering over Munro’s shoulder.

“No. Munro, please believe me. That was always me. George is...” Hollen trailed off. He’d already said too much if the growling in his head was anything to go by. George had never had a problem with him telling anyone, but Munro was different. “He’s my friend.”

“Yourfriend?” Munro’s face flickered, his brows shooting nearly into his hairline. “He’s a demon.”

Hollen shivered. It was the same thing that had happened before with every other job, but this time Munro didn’t think he wascrazy. “And you’re a vampire. I don’t hold that against you, but if you have a problem with him, then you have a problem with me.”

“Hollen.” Munro’s face softened, his icy stare gaining a touch of warmth. “Tell me about him.” He loosened his hold, letting Hollen suck in a quick breath.

“George?” Hollen raised his voice when there was no answer. He could feel George there like a black, impenetrable wall. He seemed to shimmer with the effort of

holding himself back, the tendrils of his strength growing and wrapping around Hollen's chest like iron bars. There was a warmth to the tendrils, only it wasn't soothing this time.

"Tell your boytoy to fuck off," said George, his voice resounding inside Hollen's skull. "You belong to me." The bars tightened until they were bound closer than the hand on his neck. "You're mine, and I'll do everything I can to keep you safe."

"Hollen," Munro said soothingly, the very opposite of the screaming vowels in his head. He stroked his thumb over Hollen's pulse, sending a shiver over his nerves. "I just want to help you."

Hollen jerked away, breaking Munro's grip with surprise more than strength. His head was fuzzy, his nose burning as the smell of his own blood overwhelmed him. He could see it in the way that Munro's pupil's dilated that he could smell it too, only in Munro it unleashed a starving beast.

"What are they here for?" asked Hollen, his voice so small in the room that he wondered if he might melt away. The others loomed close to Munro—men, women, but all of them predators.

"For George." Munro looked over his shoulder, tension running through his limbs. Hollen braced himself.

"I can't let you hurt him," said Hollen, clutching at his chest. His heart was beating so hard it hurt, the ache spreading along his ribs. "He's my friend."

Munro narrowed his eyes before curling his lips over his teeth. He'd never looked quite so lethal—a predator more than a lover. Fear trickled over his nerves, wrapping around George and holding them both tight.

“He’s not your friend, Hollen.” Munro closed the space between them, pressing Hollen’s shoulders to the door and pinning him in place. The wood creaked from the strain, Hollen wincing under the touch. “He doesn’t care for you.”

Yes, he does. George was the one who looked both ways before they crossed the street and helped him get back up every time he was thrown down. George had instincts primed to keep them both safe. George had even offered to leave a dozen times, but Hollen had refused, terrified of the gaping wound he was sure to leave behind.

“I don’t believe you.” Hollen let out a hiss, trying to break away, but he was too weak. Munro’s hands must’ve been made of pure titanium—unbreakable and cold. A few others shifted, the chairs nearly vacated as they moved closer. There was a coldness to their beings that made the hairs prickle over his body.

“I wish you did.” Munro lowered his gaze, staring at Hollen’s lips. “I would never be able to describe the depth of my feelings for you—not with every language I have learned over the centuries. Know that I would kill for you and end it all just to see you thrive. Right now, all I can see is your demise, and it’s breaking me.” Munro shifted his gaze, his eyes shiny as his lips went tight.

One vampire behind stepped forward, his hair so dark that it shone blue. “Just kill him and be done with it.” Munro jerked at the voice, snarling as he turned on them. “I didn’t drive for twenty hours just to watch you lose your nerve.”

Hollen closed his eyes as George reared up, and he felt something slip within him. Munro’s hands faded away, the touch a distant echo of hurt and betrayal.

The sensation of falling down a dark tube was so familiar that he knew it had happened before. Flashes of blood and screams swept over his memory—of George plucking Rhys’ teeth from his mouth and of the black fire that had consumed Rhys’ hand.

When he opened his eyes, he knew it wasn't himself that Munro was seeing, but George.

Chapter Twenty-One

Munro

Yellow slipped in place of green, shadows scrawling over a pale landscape as Hollen went rigid, his eyes going wide with an unnatural glow. It wasn't the first demonic possession that he'd seen, but they always terrified him.

On the outside, demons were often small and cute...or even sexy. Just like Hollen. On the inside, they were rage and wrath, sewn closely with absolute chaos. They could twist one heart or an entire civilization.

"Hello, Munro."

The words came from Hollen's lips, but it wasn't him. There was a depth to the words that were unnaturally deep and dark, echoing long after the silence began. Each syllable seemed to hang, coating Munro's skin in an oily slick.

It was the demon staring back at him, with yellow eyes and skin that swirled with endless patterns. He knew some of the languages that the tattoos spelled—so lost now that the words resonated in his memory alone.

"Is that what they call you these days?" the demon asked, licking his lips. His tongue looked sharp over dull teeth, Hollen's body already starting to change from its pure innocence. It wouldn't be long before there was nothing of Hollen left but a cooling heart and a faint echo of his face.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

The last time he'd seen something like this, his gut had curled with enough rage that he could have murdered a thousand just to rid himself of the demon. Now there was terror laced through him, sweat curling in his damp palms.

“What should I call you?” asked Munro, putting space between them. He loathed to be any farther from Hollen than he had to, but demons were quick. They could strike and kill a vampire before he could react, burning his flesh or merely stripping away his will.

There were others that hated demons, too—the fae, the weres—even some of the more elusive kinds who had come into contact with them at some point during history. None of them stood a chance against the inky darkness and a power that was so close to the lost world of magic.

Vampires were the only ones who had ever been able to contain one. With help. It was not a feat that he or any of his brethren would be able to attempt unless the demon was weak to begin with.

“Hmm.” The demon tapped his chin, a smirk on his face. Hollen's features had twisted, going sharp as he was slowly lost. How far gone was he? Was it already too late? “Don't you recognize me, Covi? You used to call me Gorgo.”

Munro drew back, nearly stumbling into his son Erie, who had rushed from his lovers to be at his side. Erie had resisted at first until Munro had told him about Hollen—about the demon. Erie had only been alive a decade or two when he'd had his first run-in with one, and he'd nearly lost an eye. He had escaped with his life, but his chest had been left with massive black scars that stretched from shoulder to hip.

“It can’t be.” Munro drew his hand over his lips, darting his gaze up and down. “That’s impossible.”

He remembered the night clearly from centuries before and the heat from the fires as the cities burned. Most of his family had fallen, others strewn about the flickering alleys, barely alive but not stirring. The magician at his back had kept himself hidden until the demon had stepped straight into the trap. He could still hear the screams when he closed his eyes.

“We bound you to the lowest creature on that street,” said Munro, his hackles rising as he approached. His self-preservation had no place now.

“A flea.” The demon rolled his eyes, keeping his hands to his sides, even as Munro wrapped a hand around his neck. “You should have squashed me when you had the chance.”

His smile fell, darkness seeping into the yellow of his eyes. “Instead, I had to watch you drain the only person who could have saved me from that fate. Do you know what it’s like, flitting from creature to creature and barely clinging to life for centuries?” The demon growled low in his throat. “But magic has a funny sense of humor.” A smirk spread over the demon’s face. “Once I met Hollen, I knew I had a chance again. He tasted like magic. Even now he’s saturated in it.”

Munro scowled as the demon licked his lips, saliva shining against the dark tattoos. He’d known Gorgo when that hadn’t been his name at all and when his skin had been nearly blank. Every time they’d met, the stories on his skin had spread. There was a time when that had lulled—when Munro had believed Gorgo was capable of something more. But it didn’t take long for that dream to spark into ashes.

“Hollen found me lashed to the heart of a cat and living on city scraps and whatever small creatures I could catch. My claws were blunt and stilted—nothing compared to

what I am now. Hollen couldn't have been a better match." He flexed his hands as his nails elongated into sharp points before caressing softly over the front of his shirt.

"Gorgo." Munro spat the word before wiping his hand over his mouth, trying to rid himself of the taste. The air was thick with tension and unstruck blows, Erie vibrating next to him with the same suppressed anger as his. Munro could feel the wrath of it pumping beneath his skin.

Erie had been one of the only ones to survive that time, pledging himself to Munro as the final embers burnt away. He was certainly the only witness to Munro's prime mistake.

"Yes?" George smiled, his yellow eyes blowing wide. "I've always liked that name the best. Although, I'm quite partial to George as well. Hollen and I are the closest of paramours you see, and he can call me whatever he likes."

"Leave Hollen be." Munro stood to his full height. There were so many at his back, but they were useless compared to a demon. Even Erie was on edge, fur clinging to his shirt in milky tendrils.

"You're killing him." Munro tried to keep the edge of pleading out of his voice. "He deserves better than you—than this. He's already become so weak—."

"I'm not." George suddenly turned serious, all bits of humor and smirks disappearing. "I'm not killing him. I would protect Hollen with everything I have."

Munro blinked, shaking off the manipulation. A mind was never safe in the hands of a demon. "You know the only way this ends."

An image of Hollen's lifeless body flashed through his mind. There would only be a husk left—nothing real except the deadened heart that would slowly turn to dust. But

from that dust, George would rise.

It should have been impossible with Gorgo's strength ripped from him at the hands of a magician. But somehow...

A frown tugged at George's lips, the tattoos paling on his skin. "You can stop the posturing now, Munro. I offered to leave, but Hollen wants me to stay. There is nothing you can do against a soul given willingly."

"Impossible." Munro tightened his grip, shaking George by his throat. "Release him."

George let out a laugh filled with darkness and wrath. "No."

A blink and yellow was suddenly green, the darkness and markings of Gorgo retreating as if they had never been there. Tight limbs turned soft as hands grasped at Munro, scratching at his stranglehold.

Hollen gasped, tears tipping over his eyelids to track down his cheeks.

"Munro?" His strangled voice cracked, trembling in fear as he tried to breathe.

Munro dropped his hand so quickly that Hollen nearly hit the floor, rocking back against the solid frame of the door. He started to crumple, but Munro closed the distance in an instant, wrapping Hollen in his arms and pulling him tight. Tears soaked into his shirt, mingling with sweat as Hollen sobbed.

The scent of those tears carved a hole straight through Munro's chest. With Hollen's natural scent, they were amidst a thunderstorm, coating the air with rain tinted by blood.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

The others dispersed without a word, Erie the only one who stood by with a frown etched on his face. Go. Just go. Munro turned away from his son.

“Am I going to die?” asked Hollen. He trembled so hard that his teeth chattered, digging his hands deep into Munro’s clothes. His cheeks were so pale, his eyes streaked red and wet.

Munro inhaled sharply before tilting his head back to glare at the ceiling. He couldn’t lie to Hollen, but he couldn’t bear to say it. He was warm now—here and breathing with that beautiful beating of his heart.

Hollen relaxed, heaving a sigh of what sounded like relief. “George says no. He says I’m safe.”

His heart cracked wide, the lies and truths trapped behind his teeth. Damn you, you demon bastard.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Hollen

Munro was so warm, his usually cool skin soft and heated as Hollen buried his hands into his shirt. He’d been clinging to him in dining room of the restaurant for close to a half hour, but he couldn’t bring himself to let go. Once he was standing on his own again, he knew he’d have to face the facts.

Someone is lying to me.

He could see it in Munro's face when he asked if he was going to die. The word 'yes' must've been right on the tip of his tongue before George spoke up, his voice so strong and clear in his head that it seemed louder than his own. "I won't let you die."

"I didn't realize you'd taken on a lover."

Hollen peered over Munro's shoulder to the only other vampire who remained in the room. Everyone else had retreated to either down the hall or had trickled out of the front door once George had decided enough was enough with his posturing. The other vampire was beautiful, with long hair tied into a ponytail and blue eyes almost as pale as Munro's.

"It wasn't planned, Erie," said Munro, "Just like I didn't dare hope for the best when I sent you on your task. But I'm glad things turned out the way they did...on both counts."

Erie.Hollen gasped, his eyes going wide. This was the one George told him about—Munro's son who lived with wolves in the mountains.

"It's so nice to meet you," said Hollen, slipping out of the hug and holding his hand out for Erie. His knees wavered, but he locked them. "George told me all about you. It's nice to finally put a face to the name."

Erie stared at his hand for a moment before gingerly accepting the offer. His palm was even cooler than Munro's usually was, the pale skin stark against Hollen's slightly golden hue.

"Pleasure." Erie frowned, shaking Hollen's hand before snatching it back.

Hollen forced a smile on his face, even as his knees shook. There was still a warmth in his limbs from George, but he was weak. It was terrifying to think he could slip

again at any moment.

“I didn’t realize we were acquainted,” said Erie. He wiped his hand on his pants, his lips pressed into a thin line. Bits of fur, both black and white, clung to his clothes, sinking between the fabric strands.

Hollen could spot the similarities to Munro with the way Erie held himself, his neck a touch stiffer than most, along with the strange accent that Hollen hadn’t realized was there until he’d heard it on someone else’s lips. And those eyes— They were bright with something that he couldn’t quite describe.

“We aren’t.” Hollen dropped his hand to his side before leaning into Munro, who had come up behind him. He shot a look up at Munro, sheepish. “I might have pretended to know you to get the job here. George said you lived in the mountains.”

“Not quite.” Erie narrowed his eyes. “Did he tell you anything else?”

Hollen nodded, even as Munro stiffened behind him. He was treading dangerous ground with George still grumbling in his head and Munro at his back. They were two opposing forces, but they both seemed to want the same thing—him.

“George tells me a lot of things. It doesn’t mean I’m going to repeat them.” Hollen wasn’t sure how George knew the details—maybe he slipped into minds other than his own or cruised in the heart of an eagle some days. Either way, there were things about Erie that were best left unsaid, especially when his choice of lovers might turn every vampire against him.

Erie seemed to relax, dropping his shoulders and his gaze. “I should be going. My new friends will be missing me. Munro, are you prepared?”

Munro shook his head, his hair tickling Hollen’s cheeks. “That depends on Hollen.”

“What should I do, Munro?” asked Hollen. He touched the back of Munro’s hands, which were grasping his waist. He couldn’t keep working—not when he could barely stand, but he couldn’t go home either and pretend as if the last few hours hadn’t happened.

“Erie, I may need your help. Stay here—bring your new friend if you need to,” said Munro, suddenly tightening his grip on Hollen’s waist. “I’ll never ask anything of you again.”

Erie narrowed his eyes, a frown on his lips. “I’m not dragging my mates into this mess, no matter what your promises are. I came here to help you destroy a demon, and that’s as far as this goes.”

“So there is more than one,” said Munro, avoiding the true topic. He flexed his hands, pulling Hollen tighter.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

“He means soulmate,” said George, whispering into Hollen’s ears alone. Oh. How beautiful. At least vampires did one thing very, very right. But could that mean that Munro... was his mate? It hurt his head just to think of it.

“You tasked me to leave my family behind and bring the cultures together,” said Erie, letting out a huff. “I risked my life and nearly died, but I completed my task. I owe you nothing.”

“I didn’t ask you to fuck them,” said Munro, dipping his hands lower to Hollen’s belly, his grip steady and soft.

Erie paused, his cheeks tinting pink. “I love them.”

“And I love Hollen.” Munro squeezed. “I won’t do anything to hurt him.”

Hollen couldn’t smother his gasp, his face burning as Erie’s gaze dropped to him. There was surprise there—the same surprise that was thudding through his own veins. He had guessed that Munro’s feelings ran deep, but he’d never thought love was on the table. He hadn’t even considered it for himself, too swept up in a new world and life.

Erie nodded, shifting his gaze to the side. “I can’t help you—they can’t either. They’re wolves—and not the kind that you’ve met before. There is something completely wild about them...and possessive. If someone else steps on their territory, they’ll rip them apart the same way they did me.”

Hollen bit his tongue. That sounded awful. He could picture Erie in a dark wood,

bleeding from a bite to his side as he was stalked through the trunks of the trees.

“But I’ve heard some whisperings,” said Erie, locking gazes with Hollen. “The faeries say they lost a gem. Word is that it has incredible powers.”

“I have no use for jewels.” Munro shook his head. His hands were getting dangerously low, skirting the top edge of Hollen’s pants. It was possessive and staked his claim in the most obvious way. “I need magic.”

“I don’t know,” said Erie, shaking his head. “Some of the stories... It sounds like magic. I’ve never heard anything like it.”

“Can it help Hollen?” asked Munro. He stayed silent, staring at Erie as he looked away.

“No.” Erie shook his head. Lowering his gaze, he regarded Hollen. “I don’t know. I would never be able to find it.”

Hollen swallowed, trying not to flinch when Munro let out a low growl.

“Do you know how easy it would be for me to make them disappear?” Munro didn’t move a muscle. “Wolves are nothing to my power. You should remember that. I wouldn’t have to lift a finger for them to be gone, their entrails the only thing to be scraped off the pavement on a back road to nowhere.”

“You wouldn’t.” Erie took a step closer, his wary gaze still locked on Hollen. He flexed his hand, the tips of his nails unnaturally sharp. “I’ve always been your favorite. You wouldn’t touch them.”

“You underestimate my desperation.”

Hollen gulped, his gut swirling. Here they were trading death threats over him—him. Without George, he was a nobody. He didn't have fangs or claws or wings—or even much in his life that was exciting. He could be happy with his best friends and his cat, curled up on the couch, listening to Adair in the kitchen and George in his head.

“It's okay.” Hollen placed his hands over Munro's. “I'll be alright.” He turned, leaning up on his toes to kiss Munro's chin. “You can let me go now.”

It caught Hollen off guard when Munro dipped down, sealing their lips together. There was a grip in his hair, holding him fierce as he opened his mouth in a quiet gasp. Munro was everywhere, with spice in the air and his taste on Hollen's tongue.

“Don't you dare,” said Munro as he pulled back. “I didn't wade through centuries of mind-numbing dullards to finally find love, only to be denied. You ask the impossible.”

He brought their lips together again, touching one hand to Hollen's chest. He was sure Munro could feel his heartpounding, his blood pumping through his veins as he curled his toes.

“I don't know what this is,” said Munro, grasping Hollen's hand and bringing it to his own chest. His chest rose and fell with each breath, denying every legend about the undead. “But I've felt it since the moment I met you. You make me feel real.”

“I don't want anyone to get hurt.” Hollen stared at his hand on Munro's chest. Someone strong should never look so afraid.

“Try to get rid of me,” said Munro, bringing their foreheads together. “It won't work.” He touched Hollen's chin, slipping over his lips with his tongue. Hollen was harder than he should have been while standing in a teahouse, and luckily George

seemed to take that as his cue, instantly retreating.

“I’ll try to find something—a jewel...magic—whatever I can,” said Erie.

Hollen pulled away, his cheeks flushing hot. He’d forgotten Erie was even there, his watchful eyes on them.

Erie shook his head before pressing his fingers to his forehead. “But I’m not making any promises. And after this we’re done.” His gaze was steady. “I’ll never hear from you again.”

A smile lit Munro’s face, banishing the darkness.

Munro

He couldn't part with Hollen—not yet—but he still let go, leading Hollen home and turning away at the door. The room had smelled like cookies and sweetness before the door was shut, the flimsy wood not enough to keep anything out.

When he arrived back at the teahouse, his stomach was in his throat, his gut churning sharply. The others had left, dismissed almost as soon as they had arrived, except Erie. He was bentover a thick yellowing volume, scanning the page before flipping it to the next gently.

There was no calm permeation of spices, only a quiet loneliness that had steadily been getting louder. In the hours between Hollen, a bleakness had settled in.

“I won't be able to find this, Munro.” Erie straightened from the book. His eyes were clouded with red. As far as Munro knew, he hadn't rested since he'd left his home, clearly on edge since he'd arrived.

Munro closed the distance between them, peering at the page. The ink was tiny and swirled, the language barely recognizable.

Erie stretched his hand across the table, rubbing his pinky finger against the back of Munro's hand. “You and I both know what needs to happen here. I can go through these ancient books and comb the past for magic, but I won't find it here.”

“I won't do it.” Munro shook his head. “I can't.”

“As much as you think you are, you’re not alone in this world.” Erie lowered his voice, the syllables soothing. “I’ll help you.”

A sob was caught in his throat, tears dangling in his eyes as he burned. He couldn’t respond. Strength had been his ally for the entirety of his life, but now he was reduced to a whimpering beast by a demon.

“Don’t help me.” Munro shook his head, wiping his cheeks with the back of his hand. His fingers came away wet.

“Munro.” Erie let out a long sigh, closing the book with a thud. “You don’t have a choice anymore.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Hollen

Adair touched his cheek, his hand a gentle caress in a tumultuous dream. The landscape of sand and golden tapestries slowly retreated until he blinked his eyes open, staring at the ceiling above.

“You okay, baby? You fell asleep on the couch.” Adair touched him again, his nerves prickling as he retreated. A chill was left in his wake, streaking across Hollen’s face.

“Am I...okay?” Hollen rubbed the sleep from his eyes. His limbs were heavy with sleep and something more, his stomach twisting from hunger. The air smelled of peppers and something fresh, the taste of it on his tongue where there had been salt and sand a moment ago. “I don’t know.”

Adair’s face darkened with concern as he placed the back of his hand over Hollen’s forehead. “You’re not warm. If anything, you feel a little cool. Did you need a

blanket?”

Hollen shook his head. If Adair put a blanket on him, the weight would surely squash him. His clothes were heavy, made of iron instead of light fabric. Even breathing was difficult.

“You’ve been working too hard.” Adair bit his lip. “Night shifts are always hard on you, but this one seems worse. The next time I see your boss, I’ll give him a piece of my mind.”

“Don’t.” It was barely above a whisper. “I can’t do this right now.” Hollen closed his eyes, the dreams beckoning him again. It had been so peaceful there with the warmth of the sun on his tanned skin and his lips aching from kissing someone. He had a feeling it wasn’t Munro in his dreams but someone else. A flash of blond hair and brown eyes shifted over his vision. They seemed so familiar.

“Hollen.”

Hollen shifted at the sound of his name, slowly blinking his eyes open again. The lines on Adair’s face had deepened, concern etched into him.

“What’s going on?”

Hollen let out a huff. It was impossible to explain. He could feel himself in his own skin, the fractured slivers lying next to George and shrinking by the day. “George.”

George shifted, whispering beneath his skin. “Sleep.”

Adair touched his face again, frantically moving his fingers. “What do you mean? Hollen?Hollen?”

George

“He’s asleep,” said George, his voice echoing through Hollen’s lips as Hollen slipped away to the back of his mind, the dreamscape George had built for him more peaceful than any of his waking days. “He’s been working hard, and he’s exhausted. Please let him sleep.”

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

Adair leaned back, worrying his lip as George sat up before slipping his feet off the edge of the couch.

“Don’t fret.” George reached for Adair, grasping his hand with a light touch. “He’s just feeling a little under the weather. Give him a couple of hours, and he’ll be as good as new.” He swallowed at the lie, forcing himself to hold Adair’s gaze.

“I’m worried.” Adair drew his hand to his chest. “He’s worked strange shifts before and been at places where he’s out all hours of the night, but nothing like this has ever happened. It’s like he’s fading away.”

George shook his head. “I won’t let that happen.”

“But...” Adair slid next to him on the couch, shifting on the uncomfortable cushion. Of all the modern amenities, couches had to be one of the best and worst. In theory, they were wonderful things, with cushions piled high and a place to rest his weary feet. But ones like this, with groaning frames and bursting springs, were worse than a bench made of stone.

George pushed himself up. His back ached from sleeping on the surface, muscles twinging before energy rippled beneath his skin to heal him. Hollen faded a little more along with the ache, drawing deeper into sleep. “Hollen is very important to me. Trust me to keep him safe.”

Adair ducked his head. “I do— I mean, I don’t really think I have a choice. You don’t seem like a bad guy, but I really want to be with my friend. I barely see him anymore. I just want to sit with him and snuggle on the couch, watching crappy television like

we used to. Can I at least talk to him?"

George shook his head. "He's deep asleep right now. I could hurt him just by trying to wake him." His stomach tightened as he looked from Adair's eyes to the curve of his lips. He really was one of the most beautiful creatures he'd ever seen. When sitting quietly, he was all softness and gentle pleasure, the warm glow of his skin echoing the sun. It was nothing to the moments when George had really seen him move, though.

"I could watch with you instead?" George smoothed his fingers over Adair's hand, bringing it close. His skin was so warm, the tan a contrast to the swirling tattoos. He could picture the natural gold of his own skin from centuries before matching Adair's, perfectly sun-kissed and flawless.

"I usually sleep when you and Hollen spend time together." George squeezed his hand. "Up until recently, at least." He cleared his throat, shifting on the couch. "I saw you dance the other day. I've never seen anything like that before."

Adair's cheeks colored, his lips quirking. "It was just a dance."

George shook his head. "No, it wasn't. You were the music. I didn't know someone could move that way—their body more fluid than man. I've seen...illusions like that, but nothing so real and perfect."

Adair shifted uncomfortably. "Now you're really sounding like Hollen. I swear he's my one-man cheering squad. It's nothing...really. I mean, I'm not even that good."

George shook his head, reaching to tuck a few loose strands of hair behind Adair's ear. Adair shivered at the touch, something heated in his gaze. "I can't believe that someone so beautiful could be so blind."

“I’m not.” Adair swallowed, his throat bobbing. “Please.”

“Please what?” asked George, skimming his knuckles along Adair’s shoulder, higher and higher until he touched the pulse at Adair’s throat. “Whatever you ask, I won’t deny you.”

Adair sucked in a breath as George moved his hand, placing his fingers around Adair’s throat. He was so vulnerable and sweet, but with one move he could squeeze the life out of him. And yet, he lightly traced the golden skin of Adair’s neck, relishing in the pure life of him.

“What do you want?” whispered George, leaning in close until he could smell the tremor of Adair’s limbs. Nervousness and fear swirled between them, but George wasn’t certain if it was Adair’s or his own.

“We shouldn’t. This feels so strange.” Adair caught his gaze, the glimmer drawing him in. “Hollen is my best friend.”

Guilt twinged in his gut so strongly that George had to drag his gaze away, his heart pounding. He had almostkissedAdair—something he promised himself would never happen again after his true mate had been torn from him.

Adair touched him, a warm pressure against his cheek. “That doesn’t mean we can’t.”

Before George could react, Adair was kissing him, a light brush of his lips and the soft wetness of him. He sucked in a breath through his nose at the sheer shock of it that crept up his spine with dazzling urgency. A hushed moan seeped through his lips before he grasped the back of Adair’s neck, drawing him closer.

The sensation was so familiar yet startlingly different to his nearly forgotten memories of lazy kisses and more with a lover who had meant everything to him. For

one, Adair was taller than him by enough that he had to crane his neck, his spine aching from the angle.

There was also the realization that he had no idea what he was doing. Adair didn't seem to mind, taking his time before sweeping his tongue against him, asking permission rather than taking it. George stiffened as he gave in, his eyes open and locked on Adair's closed ones.

I don't deserve this. The guilt in his core thickened to a dark disease.

He turned his head to the side, breaking the kiss with a gasp. Adair didn't try to follow, opening his eyes and regarding George with hesitance in his gaze.

"I'm sorry if that was too much," said Adair, flicking his tongue over his bottom lip. "Was it weird?"

George shook his head, the lump growing in his throat as his stomach threatened to betray him. He hadn't been sick in a thousand years, but the deepest betrayal was apparently the thing that was going to tip the scale.

I don't have a choice. He couldn't do this—not to Hollen or Adair...or that bastard vampire who was the true meaning of foul.

"I-I have to see Munro." George cleared his throat. "Hollen's boss. I think he'll be able to help us. Hollen is..." He trailed off. He could scarcely feel the dear boy, nestled in that small space he'd created next to the nexus of his heart. "He's more weary than I expected."

Page 60

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

Adair jerked to his feet, panic cross his features. “Will he be okay?”

George nodded, his movements stuttered. “I promise.”

He moved to stand, but Adair reached out to grasp his shoulder. “I can’t let you do this alone. I’m coming with you.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Munro

The lock on the door was turned, the thick wood shut tight on a dark evening for the first time since Munro had first bought the place and renovated it out. Not a single shadow had passed by the door, the display as empty as the gaping wound in his chest.

Sean had resisted at first, claiming he would look after the place while Munro did whatever it was he had to do, but Munro had sent him away with the promise of pay and a well-deserved vacation.

Only Erie remained in the quiet building, the turning of each page cutting through the steady sound of Munro’s pacing footprints. Every page was a disappointment and a step closer to failure, with yellowed words in a language that only few could understand. It left no clues.

The long saga of his life was coming back to bite him in the worst way. There had been a time when he’d destroyed anything with a hint of magic. Everyone had, from

the faeries to the obscure families who rarely wore a human face. Magic was chaos and a threat wrapped in a volatile package—unpredictable, dangerous, and deadly.

When he'd bound Gorgo, he'd murdered the last person on earth who contained an ounce of magic, draining him dry and pilfering everything he'd owned. The writings and journals were added to the other tomes he'd collected to gather dust without the hope of retaining another master.

The words were gibberish to him, but he'd held on to them.

Erie seemed to grasp them, humming under his breath at some inscriptions and pausing sometimes for a full minute on one sentence. Inevitably he turned the page, eventually moving onto the next book and the next until the pile diminished.

“Anything?” Munro snapped, running his nails along the closest table.

Erie raised one brow without looking up. His eyes were carved with red lines, the bags underneath the darkest black. He hadn't stopped in over twenty-four hours, even when his head had surely started aching.

Grasping the edge of the table, Munro ground his nails into the wood, easily cutting through the fragments. He was useless here—unable to do more than throw a tantrum while his love was dying only blocks away. But if he approached unprepared, Gorgo would take them all to their graves.

“Are you done?” snapped Erie, quickly glancing up before he strayed back to the book. “Trying to translate this chicken scratch is worse than watching you lose your temper.”

His breath left Munro in a rush as he stalked closer, leaning over to see the pages. He could catch a few words here and there, but nothing that would be of much use. There

was one line about the sun and lunar cycles, but the rest was gibberish.

“What is this?” asked Munro, pointing to the worn page. It was dry and fragile, so weathered it was nearly illegible, but it looked like a list of items scrolled down the page.

“A poultice or a potion, I’m not sure.” Erie flicked his tongue over the edge of his teeth, the quick scent of blood sparking. “Or maybe it’s a recipe for fucking soup, I don’t know.” He pushed the book away, letting out a sigh as he leaned back in his chair. “None of these are remotely useful. The last one was more diary than anything else. This one is nothing but lists of random things. Six hours ago, I was trying to decipher some kind of religious propaganda. We’re wasting our time with these.”

A low growl echoed from Munro’s throat. “If I tell you to read this, you’ll do it. I won’t risk missing a single word that could help Hollen.”

Erie stood, pushing his chair back until the seat toppled over, sprawling against the ground. “You know what? Fuck you. I should have never come back. I know you’re a self-centered, arrogant asshole, but I guess I was just wishing you’d changed.”

Munro hooked his fingers into the edge of the table, tossing it to the side in a fluttering of books and pages. One particularly heavy one cracked open on its spine, the yellowed parchment seeping over the floor. “Test me. I dare you.”

A second growl joined the first as Erie stalked up to him, his eyes narrowed and his gaze level. “Do you know why the weres can’t stand us and the faeries break every standing alliance? Their hatred runs deeper than you could ever imagine, and it’s all because of you. You sent me into that chaos to be killed, but luckily, I could show them we aren’t all like you. Some of us have a beating heart in our bodies, and some of us give a shit about others, even if they don’t have fangs.”

Munro flinched, turning his cheek as if he'd been slapped. His face burned, his ears ringing. "You have no idea what you're talking about."

His stubbornness drained from his limbs in an instant, and he grabbed the nearest chair, leaning heavily. The sharpness of his fangs prickled against his lips as he sagged his head. The youth and vitality that Hollen had given him in the few swallows of blood was a parched desert in his mouth now.

Munro shook his head. He was long past grief or longing about what could have been if he hadn't made such a grave mistake on the night he'd murdered the last magician.

"There is a very good reason they hate me so much. I doubt any of them alive today could tell you the exact moment that I ruined so many lives. You were there, too, but I pulled the veil over your eyes so you wouldn't see."

That night had been the first and last time Munro had hypnotized one of his own kind. Erie had been nearly broken, bleeding from the blackened wounds on his chest that Gorgo had inflicted. There had barely been a spark left in his eyes as the city had burned around them, screams fading to sorrow. That was probably why it had been so easy to slip inside Erie's mind and snatch away the knowledge that had plagued Munro since.

"What?" Erie crossed his arms over his chest, his body stiff.

"Magic." Munro shook his head. "Magic made us—weres, faeries, vampires—all of us. There is no one else who knows that fact, save the two of us and Rhys. There are legends, of course, that weres pass around their packs and faeries teach their children, but they are more folklore than truth. Magic was the only way into this life and the only way out."

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

He looked up, eyeing Erie's frozen face. "The knowledge and the whys faded from their memories, but the hatred remained. No one was there but us, but somehow they knew I took magic from the world and sealed the fates for every kind. Generations upon generations hate every vampire, even if they don't know the real reason anymore."

Erie took a step back, shaking his head as he ran his tongue over one fang. The sharpness had blood filling the air instantly, one drop spilling over and dragging a line along his chin.

"I put the burden upon us all when I sealed Gorgo to his fate." Munro let out a tired laugh. "I didn't have a choice. Gorgo would have killed us all if we didn't bind him, and I couldn't risk the magician releasing him. But Gorgo still found a way to escape."

"I didn't know." Erie shook his head. "It makes sense, though."

Munro ran a hand through his tangled hair, snagging the knots. "I would do anything to go back, but there's only one way out of this."

Erie nodded, his face grim as he dropped his gaze to the scattered books. They smelled of dust and earth, with a hint of mildew clinging to their pages. "The faeries..." Erie cleared his throat. "They thought they'd found something powerful—someone. But they were lost."

"Then we have to find them," said Munro. "If there is even the slightest chance—the tiniest drop, that they could save Hollen, then we have to take the risk. I won't make

the same mistake twice.”

“Jesus.” Erie ran a hand through his hair, closing his eyes for a few long seconds. “All this time I thought this was just the way things were meant to be, and that we were all some kind of evolutionary miracle.”

Munro’s hands ached as he leaned harder against the chair, his knees so weak that they almost gave out. “Before I was a vampire, I traveled deep into an unmapped woods because of a rumor of someone with strange abilities. When I found him, he showed me magic for the first time. I begged for immortality and for the same unnatural strength he had. He gave it to me—for a price.”

Munro turned away. He could still taste the close cedars of that forest and the damp undergrowth. His journey had wound through the trunks along a path that was more a game trail than anything that was traveled by people. Three times he’d collapsed on the way, the sickness in his body almost overcoming him. A few hours more and he never would have made it at all.

“But the other families, and the faeries—”

“Word spread quickly with loose lips when I decided to show off my new-found powers.” Munro smiled sadly. “Others found him the same way I did and begged for their favors. They all paid the price. Our price is to watch our loved ones come and go for eternity, thirst parching our lips every day.”

A soft scrape followed by a knock at the door drew him from the past, the forest and echoed tortures fading. On automatic, he strolled to the thick wood, turning the lock to open the door wide. As he threw the door aside, his heart nearly stopped. Yellow eyes stared back at him, perched on a body scrawled with tattoos.

Munro bared his fangs, a snarl escaping from his lips as he drew to his full height.

“Gorgo.”

Oddly, Gorgo seemed to wilt, lowering his gaze to skim along the interior of the teahouse. He gnawed his lip, holding up his hands defensively. They were Hollen’s hands, nearly unrecognizable with so many markings across them.

It turned Munro’s stomach to see it, rage curling in his gut. But the submission was strange enough to give him a moment’s pause—that, and the stranger at Gorgo’s back who was peering tentatively over Gorgo’s shoulder.

“Munro.” A long sigh escaped Gorgo’s lips. “Let me speak.”

“Give me one good reason I shouldn’t destroy you.” Munro curled his fingers into claws.

Gorgo looked up, meeting his gaze. “I need your help.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Hollen

“I thought they would burst into flames in sunlight,” said Adair, snuggling closer into Hollen’s side. His arms were loosely looped around his waist, his head on Hollen’s shoulder, despite their height difference.

Hollen held back his smile, tilting his head into the sun and closing his eyes against the potent rays. He’d clawed his way back into that sunlight after hours of blank nothingness, trapped inside a dream that made no sense. One moment he’d been nothing, then the next he’d been standing in front of Munro, their hands clasped together in a handshake.

He let out a soft sigh as the warmth sank straight into him. “They get dehydrated really easily, so they have to be careful, but otherwise the sun doesn’t bother them.” He pressed a kiss to the top of Adair’s head. Munro tracked the movement, but he didn’t approach, deep in conversation with a man Hollen barely recognized.

Maybe he should tell Adair that mermaids existed and werewolves could shift at any time of the month but were forced to during the full moon. George had even filled him in on some strange anatomy quirks that were sure to open Adair’s eyes and make him blush.

“Where do you think we’re going?” asked Hollen, leaning heavily against the side of the brick building. The teahouse was locked tight behind him, the display desolate and the street empty except for the single car with the plates from provinces away.

“They didn’t say.” Adair shook his head, squeezing Hollen tighter. “Something about some old fairy the one guy knows. I still can’t believe they’d use a term like that, but I guess they’re really outdated and old.” He let out a huff. “Still, you sure we can trust this guy? He seems sketchy.”

“I don’t think he meant...” Hollen let out a laugh, tilting Adair’s face up. “He wasn’t being derogatory. There are actual faeries out there. George even said they have wings.”

“No freaking way.” Adair straightened, his eyes wide.

“Are you sure you want to come?” asked Hollen, reaching for Adair and threading their fingers together. Without Adair beside him, there would be something missing, but he wasn’t sure how dangerous the road would be.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

“Someone has to look out for you,” said Adair, squeezing his hand. There was a dusting of pink on his cheeks, his lower lip caught between his teeth.

“I’ll be fine,” said Hollen. He glanced at Munro, who had crossed his arms, standing tall with his spine rigid. Erie was refusing to back down, a set to his jaw that was just as familiar.

“And Gorgo, too, I hope,” said Adair softly.

Hollen looked at his friend—really looked at him. Dancing has always been his passion, and even when times were rough, it kept him focused and energetic. Some might call him immature, with the way he depended on Hollen so much, never bringing in a dime to support them. But there was so much love in his heart that it made up for everything.

“You like him,” said Hollen, a grin on his lips.

“He was sweet to me,” said Adair, looking away. That flush deepened until his freckles stood out. “I wasn’t sure at first with the whole ‘demonic possession’ thing, and then there was the teeth incident. Since then, though... I don’t know. He’s not like any guy I’ve liked before.” He shrugged.

Should I ask about the teeth thing? Hollen shook his head. “Well, if he hurts you, I’ll kick his ass.” Hollen laughed, knocking his knuckles lightly against his forehead. “Did you hear that, George?”

George stirred. “Your friend is a delicate flower and needs to be treated as such.” His

presence thickened, Hollen's vision going suddenly brighter. "His lips are the softest petals, the touch of his skin like the whisper of pollen ready to inspire life. And I can't wait to get my hands on that stamen."

George's voice had grown stronger, to the point that Hollen was surprised that no one else could hear him. He was right there, the words almost springing to the tip of his tongue.

Hollen snorted, covering his mouth with his hand.

"What? What did he say?" Adair perked up, his eyes glowing.

"He called your dick a stamen." Hollen chuckled as Adair gave him a blank look. "A stamen is that pointy part at the middle of a flower where the pollen is."

"Oh.Oh." Adair couldn't possibly get any pinker. "That's sweet. I think?" He chewed as his lip, looking to the vampires who still hadn't come to an agreement. "I'm surprised Gorgo isn't putting up more of a fuss. From what you told me, he hates Munro. Even if he does need his help, I didn't expect him to be so civil."

George stirred before fading, a frown tugging at Hollen's lips.

"I think George wants the same thing he always has—what's best for the ones he cares about." Hollen ran a hand through his hair. Even if Munro doesn't realize that yet. Munro had checked on him no less than a dozen times, fetching him drinks and little snacks from the kitchen that were only slightly stale.

"He's also stubborn as hell and refuses to listen to most of what those two are saying." Hollen strained his hearing, but George grumbled right when he caught Erie whispering about silver chains.

“I’m not getting much out of it, either,” said Adair, moving to put his head on Hollen’s shoulder again. “I think we should just start walking and see if they notice. That car has mountains on the license plate, so if we head west, we’ll hit them eventually.”

“Let’s start walking,” said Hollen. He pushed away from the wall, his legs shaking as his knees threatened to give out. Even with George filling him with an unnatural warmth, he was still unsteady. It was energizing, but in a false sort of way, like caffeine or sugar that led him to a crash a few hours later.

Munro didn’t look up as Hollen grasped Adair’s hand, heading the opposite way of the sunrise. The maps application on his phone would probably be of more help, but Erie was already giving them a look as Adair giggled.

“Flying is more efficient,” said Munro, loud enough to be heard over a passing car. “And if we get into that car, we won’t make it at all. With this amount of bickering, we’ll be down to one in an hour. And you have no sense of direction. I haven’t forgotten about the Greece incident.”

“Somehow I made it here okay,” said Erie, snarling back. “I’ve made it for a few hundred years without you, Covi. I know how modern technology works, even if you’re still using a sundial.”

Hollen covered his mouth with his hand, smothering his laugh as they ventured out of earshot. “I thought my parents were bad, but at least mine kicked me to the curb before I could get too traumatized.”

Adair nodded. “They sound like my grandparents before grandpa left. Are we going to argue about the price of orange juice next? Or who makes the most dust in the house?”

“Hollen.” Munro appeared before them in a wisp of black fog, a few feathers filtering from nowhere. “We’ve come to a decision.” He sent a glare toward Erie. “You will fly with me, and Adair will travel with Erie. With the route I have planned, we should arrive an hour or two before them.”

“Then you’ll have to fly slower.” Erie raised his voice to reach them. “This is my source, not yours. They won’t trust you.”

“I could drive with them,” said Hollen softly. As much as he ached to be with Munro, a flight sounded terrifying. He wasn’t exactly sure how they were going to accomplish that with the nearest airport an hour away, or how he would keep from fainting.

“Hollen.” Munro touched his cheek before bringing their foreheads together. He blocked out the sun, a halo of warmth and light, an outline against his dark clothes. “Please don’t make me lose you from my sight again. I was terrified I would never see you again. My heart can’t take that.”

He brought their lips together—sweet and soft and over before Hollen could fall into it.

“We’ll meet you guys there.” Hollen reached for Adair, hugging him tight before letting him head toward the car. Erie was already inside, revving the engine as it sputtered.

Once Adair was inside, Erie pulled into the street without looking, Adair leaning out the window and waving at him excitedly. He was probably already planning his next three questions for Erie, likely filling the silence in the car for the entire trip.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

Hollen waved to his friend, his arm straining until he finally dropped it when they turned out of sight. He held it to his chest, warmth brimming there. A month ago, he'd thought that George and Adair were the only ones there for him. But now there were others—a stranger, even—who were fighting for him.

“Which airport are we headed to? The nice one is about two hours away, but there's a tiny one much closer. And you never told us where we're really going.” Hollen leaned against Munro, letting his head rest against his chest. There had to be something about the wind or the sun that was changing his perspective. Even this close to deadly fangs, nothing but the feeling of safety entered his soul.

“We shouldn't need much of a runway,” said Munro, casting his gaze up and down the street. There was one person walking their way, but after Munro caught their eye, their gaze quickly clouded over, and they turned around. Wherever they'd been headed, it had obviously been wiped from their thoughts.

“Helicopter? I don't think it can land on the teahouse.” Hollen huffed in a deep breath of peppermint and bergamot. He'd always been a coffee person, but he could see himself religiously switching to tea.

A touch on Hollen's chin had him opening his eyes. Munro stared back at him, a soft smile on his face. It didn't take much to close the space between them, lingering on Munro's lips in a soft kiss. Hollen deepened it this time, barely getting a hint of taste before Munro pulled back.

“Sometimes I forget that you're new to this world,” said Munro, placing a final peck to Hollen's lips as a dark cloud suddenly enclosed them. The sudden fog was so thick

that it blotted the sunlight from his vision, surrounding them both in a tight blanket of darkness.

Hollen reached for the darkness, blinking unseeingly. Instead of air and the dampness of fog, he met something solid and cool with the tips of his fingers. He jerked at the smoothness of it, the sound of crinkling paper following his movements. A piece broke free, and he brought it closer to his face, squinting as his eyes adjusted.

The outline was distinct against his palm, the small fluffy tufts outweighed by thick bands of rigid keratin. The base was sharp and thick with crimson, a drop of blood seeping from the hollow point. It smeared on his fingertip, quickly drying dark.

“A feather?” He turned it over in his hands as Munro wrapped his arms around him, tugging Hollen in tight. “How?” He reached again just as the solid mass of feathers seemed to move, a sliver of sunlight poking through.

“Hold on.”

The screech that Hollen let out was less than dignified as the ground suddenly dropped out from beneath them and sunlight streamed in as their little dome of darkness suddenly became wings. They beat against the air, louder than any bird, with feathers breaking free as they surged higher.

Still screaming, Hollen wrapped his legs around Munro’s waist, scrambling to hold onto his neck tight as the top of the building went from a large to an impossibly small square. Wind whistled through his ears, tugging at his clothes as the air temperature sharply dipped and his breath caught in his throat.

As he clutched at Munro’s shoulders with all his might, he inevitably slipped, moving his hands to Munro’s back. His mouth dropped open when he found something that he hadn’t expected. The wings were Munro’s, sprouting from his back in thick joints

that flexed with each stroke.

“Oh my God.” Hollen’s arms went weak as he slipped downward, and he scrambled to hold onto anything he could reach. Munro brought his arms up to support him just as Hollen clawed at his shirt, a few buttons and some cloth ripping free. Munro’s skin beneath that cloth was colder than before, as if the air itself was sinking straight into him.

“That should be high enough,” said Munro, the wind calming as he paused, and they hung in the air. A moment later he thrust his wings wide, the front edge tilting back toward the earth as they broadened into massive petals aloft on the currents.

Hollen couldn’t stop screaming and clawing at Munro as they suddenly tilted back the way they’d come, the buildings below nothing but pinpricks. They were small enough that he panted, wondering if there was even enough air up here for them or if he would slowly suffocate, only to crash back to the earth.

But as their speed picked up, something strange happened. A lofty warmth seemed to hit them from below, lifting them weightless until they were at a similar height as before. The weightless moment didn’t last as long this time before Munro tipped his wings again, letting them slip closer to the ground.

Hollen couldn’t tear his eyes away from the sight, even as his scream died on his lips. They were flying—actually flying—and he’d never been more terrified in his life. With his arms growing weaker by the moment, it was only a matter of time before he slipped and plunged down toward the ground. There was no amount of flapping that would stop his descent.

“Relax,” said Munro, breathing right into Hollen’s ear. “I’ve got you.” He flexed his hands that were supporting Hollen’s ass, where he was very much wrapped around Munro like a monkey. When Hollen’s arms at last gave out, Munro caught him, not

letting him slip more than an inch before he was cradled tight again.

“Never ever do that again.” Hollen leaned his face into Munro’s neck, trying to blind himself with spices and softness. He was trembling, his teeth chattering, but not just from the cold. “This probably isn’t the best moment to mention that I’m afraid of heights.”

He took one peek below, shuddering at the specs of buildings that had morphed into soft fields colored yellow, brown, and green. Their linear shapes were unmistakable.

“I probably shouldn’t mention that I don’t often fly, then.” Munro chuckled as Hollen hugged him tighter, his fingers dipping beneath Munro’s clothes. He dug his fingers in hard, clutching Munro tighter.

“I can’t—” Hollen glanced down, his stomach swooping. The constant up and down, on what had to be wind drafts, was making his stomach churn as if he were on a rollercoaster. This had to be the worst coaster of his life as they dipped a little lower the next time, picking up enough speed that the wind clawed at him, buffeting against his ears.

“Do something.” Hollen whimpered, fighting back tears. “I can’t do this. Let’s find the car. We can ride on top of it for all I care, but I can’t do this the whole way.”

Munro hummed, most of his voice lost to the wind. Hollen couldn’t miss it when Munro spoke directly into his ear, the tendril of his breath sending a shiver along his spine. “I could distract you.”

“Please. Anything.” His teeth were chattering now, tears building in his eyes. Even George was starting to stir, obvious in his concern. But what could a demon do against a thousand feet?

“Look at me,” said Munro, his voice brooking no argument.

Hollen only hesitated for a moment before tilting his head up, but he couldn't open his eyes again. He couldn't see the wasteland that the sky was, the moisture gathering on Munro's clothes as they passed through a low-hanging cloud that strained at his lungs.

Lips touching his pulled him straight out of his terrified spiral. With the air carving through his hair and pure weightlessness in his core, the kiss was like a dream. The cold didn't matter, and neither did the unknown as Munro deepened the kiss, sliding their lips together before begging for entry.

“You need to watch where you're going,” said Hollen, mumbling against Munro's lips before letting himself be led deeper. He would never get used to that perfect touch—or the taste of spices over his tongue. Munro was unlike any man, and that was exactly the way he liked it. Each lick into his mouth was a surprise, every scrape of teeth or nip a seduction.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

Munro let out a low moan as Hollen kissed him back, reaching to touch the base of those delicate and powerful wings. He wasn't sure if they were sensitive, but the noise that escaped through Munro's lips certainly made them seem so.

Munro faltered for just a moment, his wings going slack as they tilted into a spiral. He grinned against Hollen's lips as he let out a squeak, the air rushing past them before Munro managed to level out again, his wings catching the air and sending them upward.

"Again," said Munro, his voice almost lost to the wind.

Hollen let himself explore the muscles and ridges of the wings as much as he could reach, dipping his fingers between the feathers like strands of rigid silk. When he dug his nails in, Munro let out a strangled moan, and they dropped again, Munro panting against his lips as he recovered.

"I might lose myself if you do that again," said Munro, his voice shaky. "We have the whole sky between us, but maybe we should save that for solid ground."

"Okay." Hollen withdrew his hands to Munro's neck, clutching at the thick muscle there. The cold seemed to have faded, but there was moisture gathering on his eyelashes that only got worse as they passed through a thick fog. He closed his eyes, trying to ignore the throb in his gut and the dizzying heat that fizzled through him.

"I didn't mean for you to stop."

Hollen blinked, looking up at Munro. If his hair hadn't been tied back, it would have

been a true disaster. The strands that had escaped were flying all about, catching the sun that was over Munro's shoulder and sending dazzling specks of light everywhere. Hollen blinked against the brightness before burying his face into Munro's collar.

There, just like on his own neck, was a throbbing jugular that pulsed with each beat of Munro's heart. It seemed to sink with his wings, the rise and fall matching almost perfectly.

Without thinking, Hollen placed a kiss on the smooth stretch of skin. What had seemed perfect was bumpy under his lips, faded circular scars dotting the entire surface. He could hardly see them, but he found them with his lips, stroking one of the larger ones with his tongue. It was a place that was so sensitive on him, and he could imagine what it did to Munro. His own wrist still throbbed when he brushed it, the nerves frayed and oversensitive since Munro had bitten him. With so many bites, it had to be worse.

"How many times have you been bitten?" asked Hollen. In truth, he hadn't expected it. Munro was the one who did the biting. The thought of him exposing his neck to someone else had jealousy curling in his belly.

"Too many times to count." Munro squeezed Hollen's ass where he was supporting him, pushing a gasp through Hollen's lips.

"How many times did you like it?" The jealousy thickened into something dark, and Hollen nipped at the skin, tracing his own dull teeth over that surface. He had no chance of breaking skin, but Munro reacted as if he had, bringing Hollen flush against him.

"There was a time when I found it pleasurable." Munro kneaded his ass, moving his fingers deeper to the clothed crevice between his cheeks. "That was a long time ago."

It was almost sad.

“Can I?” Hollen kissed the spot again before bringing his fingertips to the surface. It was damp from his saliva and the air, but it quickly dried as another draft lifted them skyward.

Munro nodded, a groan on his lips. “Yes.”

Hollen let out a whimper, inadvertently grinding against Munro’s belly as he eyed his prize. He took a deep breath before leaning in, pressing his teeth to the flesh.

“Hollen.” Munro tightened his grip.

He’d never heard his name said quite like that, and it urged him on, until he was digging his teeth in harder, and he knew he would leave a mark—hismark. Munro’s breath turned ragged, and they slipped sideways through the air as Hollen released him, only to bite again in the same spot. His teeth slid into the little divots he’d created.

“What you do to me,” said Munro. Hollen had no choice but to let go as Munro lowered him, bringing their groins together in a rush of air.

Munro was hard—unmistakably hard and probably aching in the same way Hollen was. The touch only lasted a moment before Munro heaved him higher again, and Hollen latched onto his skin. Instead of biting down, he sucked the skin into his mouth, likely leaving a bruise behind that was sure to sting.

It wasn’t enough. It never was with Munro. Even when he knew a bite would kill him, he still ached for those savage points in his flesh. A bed was what he really needed to explore Munro the way he wanted. There was a finality to the trip and the question looming over his head that made it even more urgent.

“Can I touch you?” asked Hollen, whispering against Munro’s skin and kissing his way up his neck. “I don’t want you to fall.” The proximity to the ground was just as important as his apparent forgetfulness about his fear of heights. It was hard to focus on fears when he was throbbing.

“Just be careful.” Munro closed his eyes. Whether it was against the wind or to center himself, Hollen didn’t know.

The problem was, Hollen had never been careful a day in his life. If it was a bad idea, the payout was always better.

Locking one arm behind Munro’s neck to brace himself, he trailed the other down Munro’s chest, flicking more of his buttons open. It would have been easier with his right hand, but he muddled through with his left, struggling as the fabric resisted him. Munro’s only response was a single twitch of his lips and the flex of his hands.

Is this where the expression ‘flying fuck’ came from? Hollen grinned to himself before dipping his hand inside Munro’s shirt. It probably wasn’t fair to strip him completely and let his clothes be taken away on the wind. When they arrived, Erie would have some strange looks and stern words for them.

Cool skin and pebbled nipples met his hand, Munro’s chest heaving as he gasped. He was so very sensitive, but hard down to the very shape of his chest.

“Is this okay?” asked Hollen, touching one nipple then the next. They seemed to be keeping aloft now, and hell, he was ready to push.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

“I’m usually a patient man, Hollen,” said Munro, licking his lower lip. “But you’re testing me.”

“Hmmm.” Hollen slowed his touch, instead kneading one pec. Munro flexed beneath his hand, the muscle bulging. “I wouldn’t want you to fall.” He reached for the nipple between his fingers, pinching it hard.

Pain could go one of two ways during sex, and from Munro’s groan and his stuttered wingbeats, Hollen had nailed his preferences. Before Munro could recover, Hollen dipped his head, taking that same bud into his mouth and biting down just hard enough to leave marks. He could picture his teeth as pronged metal clamps that would hold on, even if they tumbled.

“Consarn.”

Hollen wasn’t sure if that was a curse or a praise, but neck aching, he moved his mouth to the other nipple, this time licking and sucking at the bud until it grew hard. His arm shuddered at the angle of holding on, but he didn’t give in.

“You made me beg last time,” said Hollen, speaking between each kiss and suck. Munro’s chest was flushed pink, even if it was cooler than his own. The cold air around them was taking its toll.

“I’m sorry,” said Munro, his voice cracking. “I’m not sure I can take much more if you don’t touch me.”

Not quite. Closing his eyes against the pretty picture, Hollen hauled himself upright

before bringing their lips together. Munro was hungry, devouring him, even if he was being noticeably careful to keep his teeth to himself. Hollen tried not to lose his grip on reality, slipping just as much as Munro was.

“Jesus.” Hollen pulled his lips free, bucking his hips against Munro’s belly. He was hard there, too. Every part of him seemed to be tense, muscles strained as he held himself back. It was a wonder to think what would actually happen if Munro let go.

I would fall and die. That thought was less than sexy.

“Do you think we can fuck like this?” asked Hollen, whispering against Munro’s lips. The steady up and down would probably add to the friction with the way his belly was swooping with each shallow dive just pushing him closer to the edge.

“No lube.” Munro was all business, slipping his tongue into Hollen’s mouth between words. “And if I drop a button from up here, it might cause some questions if it lands on someone below.”

“Spit will dry as soon as I get it on your cock,” said Hollen, nipping at Munro’s lower lip. “But I’ve got an idea.”

He reached down, dipping past the button and inside Munro’s pants. The angle was harsh, his wrist already aching, but he found exactly what he was hoping for. Munro was warmest here, the tip of his cock slick, even with his pants absorbing some of the pre-cum. It probably helped that he wasn’t wearing boxers.

Hollen let out a gasp when Munro followed suit, spitting on his fingers of one hand and immediately sliding into the back of Hollen’s pants. He hefted Hollen higher with his other hand, pulling his cheeks wide through his clothes.

When Hollen stroked at the head of Munro’s cock, Munro dipped inside him with

two fingers, going as deep as the angle allowed. It was too shallow to hit his prostate and just enough to stretch him.

“So tight for me,” said Munro, nuzzling into Hollen’s neck and sucking deep through his nose. “So good.”

“I can do three.” Hollen let out a gasp, rocking into Munro’s belly then thrusting back on those brutal fingers. He’d had quicker, but it still stung in that exhilarating way that never failed to get him off. The third slipped inside him a second later, and he let out a curse.

“How quick can you recover?” Hollen didn’t wait for the answer before he started jerking Munro off. At first it was dry, his hand spreading warmth over the shaft, but with each pass over the head, Munro grew slicker. Munro’s breath stuttered, his breathing going deep.

“I’m not three hundred anymore.” Munro dipped his head, placing his open mouth on Hollen’s clothed shoulder. There were no teeth, but the threat was there.

If only. That bite would be perfect right now, turning his nerves into highways of euphoria. Instead, he got to work, jerking off Munro as fast as he could in the limited space he had to work with, twisting his wrist to palm at the head. It didn’t take long for Munro to let out a groan, wetness coating his hand and dripping down his cock.

Hollen did his best to spread the slickness, keeping Munro’s cock protected from the wind. Munro stayed hard—not throbbing, but still solid.

“Hold on,” said Munro.

One moment Hollen was clinging tight and the next he was falling, his hand slipping from Munro’s pants as he was turned around. Munro’s hands never left him, merely

spinning him in the air and gripping him by the chest and hip. The world was beneath him, and he was staring straight into it with Munro above him, still flying and somehow holding them up.

He pulled his pants down just past his ass and a second later Munro was pushing his slick cock between Hollen's cheeks, then deeper, impaling him all the way in a slow, smooth thrust.

Hollen let out a yell, more of exhilaration than fear as they dipped, him dangling down with only Munro holding him up. He reached back, clutching at Munro's hips as Munro pressed his chest against Hollen's back.

It stung, his eyes watering against the wind until he closed them, giving himself completely over to Munro. There was movement, but he couldn't sense if it was up or down. Gravity didn't seem to matter much when he was flying with a cock in his ass.

"Keep your eyes open."

Munro suddenly flapped his wings, sending Hollen lurching forward and slipping almost entirely free from his impalement before they settled. As the world tilted against, Hollen slid all the way to the base with a gasp and a flaring ache in his spine.

It's so beautiful. What had started as a lovely day was bright, the cold nothing when there was sweat beading over his skin. There was a elegance to the organized chaos below, little dots of cars zipping at a sluggish pace and people nothing more than specks moving in groups as they bustled below. Erie and Adair were probably among them, blended in as ants in a colony of daily life.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

A burst of pleasure struck him as Munro bucked his hips, sending his cock straight into Hollen's prostate. The view blurred, the city fading from his thoughts in an instant.

His arms were aching, his back throbbing from the angle as Munro let the wind take them. That small strip of exposed skin on his ass prickled as he realized how high they actually were when he spotted a radio tower below.

"Don't drop me." He squirmed even as he said it. He was usually moving all over the place when he was having sex, and all he could do right now was essentially dangle and hope.

"Don't worry, baby." Munro nipped his ear, hiding his sharpest teeth from the touch. "I've got you."

The ground disappeared as Munro suddenly jerked upright, lying back against the air as if it were a bed and pulling one of Hollen's legs free from his pants and hiking him atop. They were already falling by the time Munro grabbed his legs, spinning Hollen around until they were face to face with Hollen riding atop.

The wind picked up in an instant as their hover turned into a freefall, Munro's beats against the wind doing nothing with him upside down. Hollen's stomach jumped into his throat as he clutched Munro tight, his heart pounding. His body clenched, the thrill buzzing under his skin.

With a flap of his wings, Munro righted them, catching Hollen by the ass and helping Hollen wrap his leg around Munro's waist and his arms around his neck. The sudden

jolt drove Munro so deep that Hollen nearly came, his cock throbbing.

“Much better.” Munro grinned, bringing their lips together.

Flying had been one thing, but getting fucked mid-flight was on another planet of sensations that he’d never expected. Each wingbeat had Munro sliding in and out, rubbing against his walls in all the best ways. The kiss dissolved into something without meaning and end, as Hollen’s breaths grew harsher. His limbs tingled with both exhaustion and ecstasy, his mind whirling.

One touch was all it would take, but there was no way he was letting go of Munro to reach down and take care of himself. He rocked his hips the best he could, his pants barely clinging to one leg. I’m going to have fun explaining it if I lose my pants.

Munro’s breath suddenly grew fast, the pace of his beats stuttering with each thrust. Hollen could feel the warmth trickle from him as Munro came, the cum cooling almost instantly as he slid out.

Hollen whined at the loss, searching with his tongue and his teeth for that little extra push to tip him over the edge. In the end, it was Munro, pulling out only to thrust three fingers deep and fuck his prostate head-on.

Hollen came with a smothered cry as Munro forced him through it, still teasing him hard, even after he’d emptied himself. He couldn’t breathe—couldn’t think of anything but those lips and fingers in him, not the approaching ground or the glint of a plane far above. Nothing.

Munro finally slipped out as Hollen started whimpering in earnest, petting Hollen’s hair and easing his head onto his shoulder. Hollen tightened his grip, wincing as Munro squeezed his ass once before attempting to pull his pants back over his chilled leg. It didn’t work at all, his toes curled and the cum drying like instant cement.

“Does this mean we’re in the mile high club?” asked Hollen, huffing out a laugh. “I should really get a badge or something.”

Munro chuckled, patting his bare ass gently. “We’re only about three quarters of a mile up, but close enough. Keep an eye out for the next town you see, and we’ll stop to get cleaned up.”

Hollen hummed, burying his head. All he could see for miles was field after field.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Munro

Hollen was asleep when they landed before the blue house that Munro hadn’t seen in a decade. Hollen’s head was firmly placed on his shoulder and his lips parted in a soft snore from a rest he’d slipped into for hours.

Munro had half-expected Gorgo to appear after Hollen had slipped away, but the demon had kept his part of the bargain. “As long as you save Hollen, I won’t interfere.”

Hollen stirred as Munro retracted his wings, stumbling at the loss of their comforting weight. It had been a long time since he’d flown more than a few blocks—and longer still since he’d done those kinds of acrobatics. His back was aching now and probably would be for a week.

“Where are we?” asked Hollen, his eyes still closed as he let out a yawn.

Munro frowned, the stillness of the air grating him as even the crickets went silent. Compared to the others close by, the house wasn’t modern, a small dip in the roof showing where age had taken its toll. The siding was still fresh, though, the swing on

the porch painted and swaying in the breeze. Something about the smell was off, a wisp in the air that reeked of earth and trees.

“Did Adair make it okay?” Hollen fluttered his eyelashes before he went silent again, a slow breath pushing through his lips.

Munro didn’t answer. Erie and Adair were probably an hour or so behind them even after their brief rest stop, but he couldn’t wait.

“Sleep.” Munro touched his cheek, his frown deepening at the coolness of his skin.

Hollen shifted, snuggling closer to Munro and shoving his face against his neck. “I’m so tired.”

It would only get worse. Their aerial acrobatics seemed to have drained the rest of the life from Hollen’s limbs, and he’d slept the entirety of their time after. Even when they’d landed, Munro had gently cleaned him and tugged his pants on properly, all while Hollen dozed.

Hollen lifted his head, slowly blinking as he looked around. “This place looks familiar.”

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

“Shhh.” Munro touched the back of his head, easing him to settle into sleep again. “Sleep, my love. This will all be over by the time you’re awake.” I hope.

A few crickets spoke up, only to go silent again as Munro took a step onto the property. With a ripple of heat, the air changed. The natural blue of the siding and roof flickered to piled stone and thick moss. Close-cut grass gave way to long stems that swayed with the heaviness of seeds at their tips.

What had seemed like a manicured lawn became a wilderness, as Munro forced his way through the illusion. Even if magic had been lost, faeries excelled at illusions, able to morph an ethereal face into a beautiful one and a wild landscape into one which was much less likely to be on the HOA’s radar.

“We’re in the right place,” said Munro, tucking a few loose strands behind Hollen’s ear. He didn’t stir this time, wrapped deeply in a sleep that got closer to permanent with every heartbeat.

“Stop there.”

Munro looked to the source of the loud voice, grinding to a reluctant halt. A woman had stepped onto the porch, one hand on her hip and the other clutching a spatula. Her hair was graying, wisps clouding around her face from the humidity, but her eyes almost glowed. Whatever illusions she had on her body, they were so thick that Munro couldn’t see through them.

She glared, pointing the spatula at him threateningly. “Whatever you’re selling, I’m not interested.” The crickets grew louder, the brightness of the sun slipping behind

the rooftop of the house. It cast a shadow over them, thick and haunting. The smell of tomatoes and garlic wafted from the house, some sauce speckled on the apron she wore.

“Candara.” Munro nodded his head in greeting. “I never thought I would have the pleasure of seeing you again.” He shifted Hollen against him, offering his hand.

She narrowed her eyes, her lips set firmly. “It’s Dara now, as you well know. I left my old self behind years ago.” She brandished the spatula, a dollop of sauce smacking onto the porch.

“Apologies.” Munro nodded. “I had forgotten.” Twenty or so years ago she had wandered into his teahouse, her back still singed and her psyche torn to bits. Between sips of cinnamon and nutmeg, she’d asked him to take it all away—every memory and scar. But he’d been unable to convince her mind to forget when it was built on so many layers of illusions.

“I haven’t.” She raised her chin. She seemed to catch sight of Hollen, taking a step back. “What are you doing with him? Is he?” She trailed off, lowering her spatula and taking a forward step onto the porch that was made of accumulated logs instead of the perfect wood it had seemed to be before.

“I didn’t drain him.” Munro thinned his lips. It was so rare nowadays for a vampire to drain someone, yet the rumors always spread. It was so much easier to just pluck a memory away. “He’s possessed.”

Dara let out a laugh, standing much too tall for a crooked old lady. “Now I know you’re lying.”

Munro took a step closer to the house. The long grasses extended toward him, grasping at his clothes with sandpaper fronds. Below, branches of ivy tried to catch

his feet. He stomped on a flower, grinding it into the dirt. “The demon Gorgo latched onto his soul and is draining him as we speak. He’s close to death.”

Munro lowered his gaze. Hollen was so pale, a furrow between his eyes and his lips parted in sleep. His lashes didn’t flutter when Munro swept a thumb over his cheek or when he placed a kiss on his forehead.

“Never heard of a Gorgo before.” Dara’s glare intensified.

“I’m glad to hear it.” Munro nodded. “The last person with magic sealed him away centuries ago. I’m sure you’ve heard of the massacre and the fires that night. Even faeries aren’t so short-sighted that they completely forget the past.”

Dara stiffened as Munro grew closer. Hollen moved in his sleep, his head lolling back onto Munro’s arm and exposing him to the light. He let out a soft groan as a strip of sunlight strayed over his eyes.

Dara’s snapped her gaze to him in an instant, her spatula falling to the porch as a gasp left her lips. “Oh my God.”

The sound of a car roaring behind them drew Munro’s attention. He turned just as the vehicle hopped the curb, Adair shooting out of the passenger side before the car was even turned off. When Erie flung the door open, Munro could sense his rage.

“I told you to wait,” said Erie, his hackles raised and his sharp teeth on display. “For once in your life, why couldn’t you listen? Dara is my friend, not yours.”

Friend? Munro held back a sneer. Faeries had so little to offer to the world except their looks, and even that was an illusion. The span of friendship never extended between their two worlds.

“Grandma!”

Munro turned at Adair’s shout as he raced around the car, speeding past them and throwing his arms around the woman.

Adair was speaking rapidly, bouncing on his toes as Munro’s jaw went slack.

“I told Erie that I knew where I was, but he wouldn’t listen.” Adair hugged her tighter, a whoosh of air escaping Dara. “I get to see you a whole month early. How are you? You look great. Are you making lunch? Erie wouldn’t stop, no matter how much I complained. I had to pee in a ditch, Grandma—a ditch!”

Munro arched one eyebrow at Erie, who gave him an exhausted shrug, probably too tired to be surprised. The lines on his forehead were deeper, the whites of his eyes almost entirely pink in what had to have been exhaustion.

“What are you doing here, darling?” Dara asked softly, returning the hug with the same fierceness. “And what are you doing with them?”

Adair leaned back, a laugh on his lips. “We’re looking for a faerie, according to Hollen. Can you believe they actually exist? If anyone else would have said it, I would have called their therapist or something.”

The silence was so thick Munro could have sliced it with a well-placed flap of his wings.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

Adair didn't seem to notice much, but his excitement faded when he caught sight of Hollen in Munro's arms. His face fell, exhilaration replaced with concern. "Oh my God, Hollen! Munro, what did you do to him?"

"Adair." Dara's voice was sharp, but Adair didn't seem to notice her, reaching for Hollen instead and touching his cheek.

"Hollen? Baby?" He glared at Munro. "You told me he'd be alright—that you'd look after him.

"Adair." Her voice cracked through the air this time, and Adair froze, his hand still on Hollen's cheek. "Get in the house. And get away from him." This time she wasn't glaring at Munro, but straight at Hollen. "There's a terrible darkness in his soul. Don't touch him."

"Grandma?" Adair snatched his hand to his chest, his eyes filling with sudden tears. "You know Hollen—he's my best friend. I know it's been a while since he's come to visit, and things have changed, but you can't talk about him like that."

Munro resisted the urge to tap his foot on the ground. This was no time for a family reunion or to dig into the mysteries of Hollen's best friend. Hollen had never said a word about it to him, but he probably didn't know that there were two fleshy stumps protruding from Dara's back—or that her house was made more of leaves and wood than plaster. There was no way he could break an illusion the way Munro could.

Dara let out a heavy sigh, her shoulders slumped with more than years. "Perhaps it's best if you come inside." She looked to the mismatched group on her front lawn. "All

of you.”

Adair went quietly, slipping his hand into Hollen’s limp one before he followed Dara while keeping pace with Munro. The porch shifted beneath Munro, one of the loose logs rolling underfoot. Adair hardly seemed to hesitate before he hopped to the next, tugging them along.

Stepping inside was like popping through another illusion, the sounds of the city falling away to crickets and chirps of the forest. The walls were a deep forest green, ivy seeping between thick cracks in the wall. The roof was open, sun cascading from above with a few small birds perched in the branches of the high trees that leaned heavy against the walls.

To the left was probably a couch made of three massive and hard mushrooms as strong as wood with a knitted blue blanket tossed overtop. The kitchen took up the center of the room, a real fire crackling in a woodstove with the stack pushing a thin line of smoke into the air.

Without the trees and the plants, the heat would have been oppressive. But instead, the coolness of the leaves seemed to linger, moisture clinging to the walls as a pot bubbled on the stove.

“You dropped something, Grandma—a wrapper, maybe?” Adair leaned over, grasping a few stray leaves from the floor. They crumpled in his hand, dry and brown with a few wisps trickling back to the thick grassy floor. “Where’s the garbage?”

There was no way that Adair was seeing the reality that was before Munro’s eyes. In his eyes, a small wartime house was reflected, with a rickety porch and an electric stove, the green-tinted appliances older than the walls.

Munro looked sharply to Dara. “He doesn’t know.”

She shook her head, sadness mixed with a heavy regret. “Nothing.”

Munro barely knew Adair, but that still hit hard. Lies from someone close to you were one of the deepest betrayals, especially for a faerie. Family was everything to them. Without it, they lost their wings in a savage ritual that cast them out. Some of them struggled to live after that with nothing left to their soul but slivers of themselves.

“Know what?” Adair looked at them, his eyes wide and so cluelessly innocent.

Munro shook his head, dropping his gaze to Hollen. His face was ashen, the last of the color faded away. His chest was barely able to rise and fall, stuttered and slow as sweat beaded on his brow.

“I don’t have time for this,” said Munro, a growl in his throat. “Faeries lost something important, but it was your own doing. Now, can you help us or not?” He turned until Hollen’s face was under the stream of sunlight that peeked through the open roof. The golden light did little to correct his pallor.

Dara shook her head. She turned away, reaching for the lid on the pot and tugging it free. Steam swirled in the air, tomatoes and spices thickening the room. “I don’t know what you expect me to do. I thought demons had been exterminated, but you brought one to my house. How were you expecting I could help?”

Munro curled his lips back, exposing his fangs. Adair took a step back, his eyes wide.

Erie spoke up for the first time, his voice soft. “Magic.”

Dara went stiff, her knuckles going white on the fresh ladle she’d grabbed. The flames in the stove had dimmed to orange coals, the color dropping. For a split second she looked at Adair, her gaze giving everything away.

“You know they didn’t give Adair a chance.” Dara let a breath out, and the room seemed to dim. Adair looked to the ceiling as if he could see flickering lights and not a cloud overhead. “They murdered his mother, my most precious daughter, calling it a betrayal. I couldn’t stop them from taking his wings—cutting them off with that blasted cursed knife. I made them take mine afterward to settle the score.”

When she faced them completely, there were tears in her eyes, a few streaked over her cheek. “Those bastards cast me out when I refused to leave him. They never knew that he was different, and I didn’t either, until so much later.”

Munro tapped his foot. Hollen was fading faster than he could fathom, his heartbeat slowing as Gorgo leeches more from him, intentionally or not. Between one breath and the next, he threatened to fade away.

Dara caught his eye, her gaze steady. “He can’t help you. He’s not like what you think. He’s something this world has never seen before. His magic—or whatever it is-- won’t save Hollen.”

It was worse than a stab through the heart and the twist of a rusty blade.

She wiped the tears from her eyes, her lashes clumped together. “You know there’s only one thing left to do.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Hollen

There were feathers everywhere, filling his vision and tickling the bits of his exposed skin. His shirt had ridden up at his lower back, another wrist exposed and caressed by the thick feathers. There was a downy softness to them the same way there was that strength that had kept Munro aloft, even when they'd been entwined.

There was sunlight above and the strangest green ivy. To the side, he caught sight of a woman who was deeply familiar, but his mind was so sluggish that he couldn't recall her name.

Munro's face was clearer, his fangs glistening with beauty in an unexpected sunlight. There was a steady noise buffeting against his eardrums that sounded more like a growl than anything else.

The sun, the lady, and the green stretch of leaves made no sense. There was no place that they should have existed like this—maybe in another world or across the ocean, but not here.

Someone squeezed his hand, and Hollen turned his head. It was Adair, looking so lost and confused, something heartbreaking in his voice as he whispered to him.

“I love you.”

He heard the words, not only from Adair, but from deep inside as well. George was stirring, his voice soft. “Let me take you away. You'll be somewhere warm forever where no one can hurt you. I'll never let a vampire or anyone else touch you again.

You'll be mine."

Hollen tried to shake his head, the movement almost too much. Tears dripped along his cheeks, drying so cold that even a shiver failed to escape him. "Stop, George. Just stop."

"He's going to kill you." George strengthened, a solid iron bar within silk walls. "I'll protect you."

He was so, so strong, darkness crawling over Hollen's flesh as his strength withered. Hollen forced his eyes open, staring at the man who clutched him to his chest. Munro was so beautiful, even in his rage, his wings wrapped around them as a desolate sky. They pushed Adair back, his grip failing.

"Let me out, Hollen," said George, writhing molten lava. Cursive writing scrawled over his skin, stamping permanently.

"No." Hollen sucked in a deep breath, trying to fill his aching lungs. He could feel himself fading, his vision wavering as Munro wavered before his eyes. Memories that weren't his flitted to the surface, sand and warmth beckoning him.

He could feel George—taste him, the metallic sweetness of his breath mingling with his own. It had never felt so wrong, the darkness more than any light George had ever brought to his life.

"Let me out, Hollen, or face the consequences," said George. "It's almost too late."

Even as he said it, shadows bloomed over the rest of Hollen's skin, taking over the pale landscape. His nails sharpened into claws, cutting into the skin of Munro's shoulder where he clutched him. He flinched, blood trickling over his fingertips.

“He’s good,” said Hollen, looking up at Munro. “Please don’t hurt him. I swear, he’s not the demon you say he is. Please.” Hollen grabbed at his chest where it ached beneath his sternum, blood gathering beneath his fingertips.

Instantly, George stopped struggling, Hollen’s chest empty as the demon went lax. The warmth faded, icy starkness seeping in.

“Have it your way, Hollen.” George’s voice was so close, wrapped around the very stem of his brain and whispering into his gray matter.

“Munro?” asked Hollen, putting a hand on Munro’s chest. Blood soaked into the white fabric, seeping into the strands and staining them beyond repair.

“Yes.” The world shifted as Munro went to his knees, sunlight filtering between his feathers. He could hear sobbing, Adair calling to him softly.

“George told me about the last time he almost died... How did it end?” Even passive, George was so strong. He didn’t have much time left before he split at his very seams.

“That was another time,” said George, his voice emerging from Hollen’s lips. There was barely any power left, Hollen’s eyelids dragging downward. He forced them open, squeezing his fist tight.

“Tell me. Tell me the truth,” said Hollen. There were tears in his eyes, a few spilling over. He never would have believed George capable of the things that were flitting through his mind, their memories mingling and tying together. “I remember a fire...and screams.” Hollen tilted his head back, trying to see the rest of the memory that was trapped in George’s thoughts.

“He burned a city to the ground,” said Munro, his voice hard. Those blue eyes...

Hollen had never seen them look so much like ice. “Every living person of every kind was murdered in that town in one night.”

“They killed my love.” George hissed, the brutal sounds cutting through the softness of down. “I told the king I would kill them all if he didn’t hand over the murderer. He left me with no choice.”

“A thousand deaths are not just payment for one.” Munro shook his head. His hair had long since broken free of the tie, wisping around his face.

“I would have killed a thousand more,” said George, raising his voice until Hollen’s ears ached.

“You killed most of my family,” said Munro, his jaw tight. “Do you know what it’s like to watch a child die? A hundred of them? They should have lived forever, but you took that away from them.” Munro let out a growl, grasping Hollen’s hand hard. “And now you’re stealing the one I love the most. Let Hollen go, and you can still make this right.”

Hollen slipped further, hardly able to keep his eyes open. George was so strong, taking over his limbs with shaky movements.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

“I can’t,” said George, shaking his head as he took over, Hollen barely a wisp of thought anymore. “Hollen was the first one who saw me forme.He welcomed me in, loving me in a way that no host ever has before. I got too close.”

George reached for Munro, flinching when he met the wet and sticky blood. “I thought I could save him if I gave him everything I had, but all I did was tie our fates together. Do you see it?”

Munro shook his head, digging claws deep into Hollen’s hand. George felt every snap of nerves and jar of agony as the tendons were severed. “You’re lying. You can leave.”

“I can’t.” George closed his eyes, trying to sense Hollen and give him that bit of energy that he could come out of his rest one last time. “I’ll let you say goodbye. Hollen, wake up.”

He felt Hollen stir, paddling toward the surface as George withdrew. The next time he saw daylight, he knew it would be Hollen’s last.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Hollen

“George,” Hollen whispered, blinking his eyes against the darkness that he hadn’t expected to see again. There was an ache in his limbs, the dryness in his throat too real to be a dream. For a split second there had been sand and soft skin, a warm caress against his chin, but it was ripped away with fire and murder flashing over his mind.

“I’m sorry,” said George, his voice a soft plea in his chest.

Munro was still holding him, his hands trembling and his eyes red.

“What’s going to happen?” Hollen rubbed at his throat, swallowing at the ache. Even moving his arm in the simple action had pain shooting straight through his core, his hair standing on end as tears gathered in his eyes.

“Without you, I fear everything good in me will disappear,” said George, his voice reserved just for Hollen. “I am wrath, and all that goes along with it. I will miss the sweetness of your soul, and the meaning it brought to my life. There is truly no one like you.”

“Will you hurt anyone?” asked Hollen, flickering his eyes over the room.

Munro seemed lost to the monologue echoing in Hollen’s thoughts, shaking his head.

“Yes,” said George. “I won’t be able to stop myself. Just like you, I can’t resist my nature for long. A vampire lives by drinking blood, and I sustain myself by other means.”

By taking my life. Hollen closed his eyes against the ache in his chest, his heart pounding when it had been so slow before. “I need a minute with them, George. Let me say goodbye.”

“Of course.” George withdrew, shrinking until he was a hard ball in the middle of Hollen’s chest. He could still feel the traces of him in every limb, tingling and sparking, but he knew he was effectively alone.

“Munro?” Hollen whispered, reaching for Munro’s cheek. There was blood there for some reason, more on his fingers and stained between the cracks of his palm.

“I’ve got you. You’re okay,” said Munro, swiping his thumb over Hollen’s cheek. “Deep breaths, baby.”

Each breath was harder, every inhale an effort.

“I can’t let him hurt anyone ever again,” said Hollen, using the last of his strength to lift his arm and pull Munro to him, until his lips were settled against his neck. With the smell of his blood still in the air, Munro stiffened, placing a kiss on the area and trying to pull away. Hollen held him tight, refusing to let him escape—holding as tight as he could.

“I need you to bite me,” said Hollen, tightening his grip. “I want it.”

There were tears in Munro’s eyes as he pulled away, shaking his head as they streamed down his cheeks. Hollen half-expected them to be tinted with blood, but they were clear, just the same as his own. “I can’t.”

Hollen smiled, sinking into Munro’s arms. He tilted his head, exposing his neck. If he concentrated, he could feel the thud of blood under his skin there, each rush going to his head. “Yes, you can. Just open your mouth and take a bite, like you and I both want.”

“You don’t have a choice,” said Dara. “If the demon isn’t watching right now, this may be the only way to end him.”

Hollen blinked at her as Munro parted his wings, recognizing her for the first time. Adair was sobbing in her arms, his face pressed against her. He was wailing almost non-stop and getting louder with every inhale.

“I know.” Munro shuddered, closing his eyes. “I know.”

“I think flying with you was the best moment of my life,” said Hollen, letting his eyes flutter as he remembered the rush of wind. He could almost feel it on his cheeks, drying his tears as quickly as they came. “Your wings are so beautiful.”

Exhaustion tugged at him. “You don’t have much time.”

“Do it, Munro, or I will,” said Erie, taking a step forward.

Page 71

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

Munro let out a shuddering breath. “I love you.”

Munro

That taste was just like the first time, with liquid vermillion flooding his senses in an instant. The room was soaked with the scent of blood and earth, swirling together until it fizzled over his skin with absolute power.

Hollen went limp at the moment of the bite, his eyes rolling back as sweetness flooded his senses. Such a frail thing was filled to the brim with power, flowing into Munro’s mouth and coating his throat in warmth and darkness. His heartbeat stuttered, so close to failing that a rush of tears flowed over Munro’s cheeks, even as he swallowed. Hold on, baby.

“No! Stop!” Adair screamed, clawing at Dara as he was held back.

Blood filled his mouth again, even as Hollen’s heart slowed to nothing, pooling and flowing down his throat as he swallowed again and again. He sucked harder, drawing more until he could scarcely keep up with the flow.

Gorgo didn’t respond, Hollen’s body still.

It had been a long time since Munro had taken so much that he’d forgotten the thrill and high of it. But through the adrenaline, he had to watch his lover grow cold, all traces of life draining from his system until even the tattoos from Gorgo faded.

Hollen let out a sudden gasp, his eyes yellow as he opened them wide. Munro caught the sight in his periphery, clamping his teeth down hard.

“Bastard. This wasn’t our deal.” Gorgo’s voice was thick with agony. “I’ll kill you.”

Munro couldn’t take another swallow, blood bubbling past his lips as he pulled away, choking as his throat was flooded. Hollen’s arms were straining, his body rigid as he let out a low keen. Munro clamped down on his limbs, holding him still.

Yellow faded then flickered over Hollen’s eyes, his gaze locked on Munro’s.

“You killed him, you bastard,” said Gorgo, a hiss on his breath as he tried to move.

“No, you killed him,” yelled Adair, his screams cutting through the darkness.

“If you care for him like you said you did, you’ll let go now,” said Munro, wrapping a hand around Hollen’s throat.

Gorgo curled back his lips, blood staining his teeth. “They took love away from me. I haven’t known the meaning of it since.”

“Gorgo?” asked Adair, his voice soft and filled with grief.

Munro stayed his hand, turning toward the sound. Gorgo found him in a second with his gaze, his yellow eyes going wide. “Adair.”

“Hollen loved you,” said Adair, his back pressed to Dara with her arms wrapped around his waist. “I think I loved you, too.” He took a deep breath. “Please let him go—for me.”

There was a moment of hesitation when Munro held his breath, fire and sweat itching

over his skin.It's no use. We're doomed.Their advantage was lost with Gorgo present.

Gorgo closed his eyes, his forehead smoothing as his struggles ceased. Blood seeped sluggishly from the wound on his neck, coating the floor in it. With death in the room, it should have smelled putrid, but it was the same as always, calling to Munro as he licked the drying blood from his own lips.

"I could have given you the world," said Gorgo, his voice soft.

Adair shook his head. "I just want my best friend."

Gorgo heaved in one last breath before his chest paused, his tattoos turning to mist that hovered in the air before disappearing as the sun cut through the fog.

"He's gone," called Dara, relaxing her hands. Adair cried out, lurching ahead and breaking her grip.

Jesus.Munro never thought he would hear those words. Hollen was so pale, his chest and heart still as the blood stopped flowing from him. In was clotting in a sticky pool, soaking into his hair and Munro's clothes.

Adair rushed to his side, grasping Hollen's face as a scream emerged from his mouth. It was the same scream that was trying to escape Munro's own throat.

Not today.

He pulled Hollen close, scooping him under his legs and shoulders and lifting him from the floor. Hollen's head lolled back, exposing the pierced wound on his neck.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

“H-ollen,” said Adair his voice cracking. “No, let me see him.”

Munro shook his head. Am I doing this? His heart pounded as utter realization settled in.

“I’m the first vampire, and I created the second. When I did that, I gave him half my power, splitting myself in two. I never made another after that, letting the others split themselves until the line was diluted beyond repair. I hate what my line has become.”

He lowered his head to Hollen’s chest. The empty quiet was a wound to his heart. “But I can’t let you die, my love.” He brought his wrist to his mouth, ripping into the flesh until bone was exposed.

With blood streaming down his fingers, he plunged his hand into Hollen’s chest, his claws cutting through skin, and his strength breaking bones until Hollen’s heart was in his hand.

He squeezed it once before letting it go, willing his own blood to fill the gaps and soak in like a sponge after it had been left out to dry.

Hollen lay still, his head lolled back and his mouth dry.

Munro growled, squeezing his hand again and nearly crushing Hollen’s heart beneath his palm.

Hollen screamed, his eyes wide as he jerked, clawing at Munro’s hand. He would be able to feel everything, from his broken bones to the stretched and torn flesh.

Munro squeezed.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

One Month Later

Hollen

Hollen balanced the tray of sweet desserts on one hand, a small decorative cup scrawled with flowers in the other. The spices of the night filled the air with fresh orange zest and cinnamon, candied bacon atop the most unsuspecting of the desserts.

His mouth watered at the smell, but his stomach didn't rumble. When he'd tried the treats earlier, the taste had bloomed over his senses, better than he could remember anything tasting, save one thing that he'd sampled frequently over the last month.

Munro was leaning against the wall in the warm kitchen, his arms crossed as Sean worked away at a thick dough he'd been shaping into cookies. They had a full house and crew, each influenced in little ways to forget who exactly was writing their paychecks.

The secrets grated on him more than anything else, threatening to pour from his throat any moment. But who would he tell? Adair was quieter than ever, frequently staying at his grandmother's or spending long hours dancing. Hollen had tried to speak with him about it, but Adair always shook his head. They both had their own secrets to keep now.

"You know what will happen now if you are exposed—what will happen to us? They will hunt you down, and I'm no longer strong enough to stop them." Munro had said those words to him after he'd finally healed from the gaping wound in his chest, what little remained of his own blood squeezed from his very body and replaced by

Munro's.

It wasn't the way he'd envisioned Munro inside him again. There were so many better ways that didn't hurt quite so much. The scars on his chest still ached every day, especially when his stomach growled.

Delivering his plate quickly, he headed back to the kitchen, throwing his arms around Munro's neck as soon as he was close enough. No one gave them a second glance, Sean shaking his head with a soft chuckle on his lips as he worked away. A frown tugged at Munro's lips as he settled his hands on Hollen's hips.

"Are you hungry?" asked Munro, kissing the top of Hollen's head. His breath lingered in Hollen's hair, spices soaking into him. "You don't have to serve them, my love. Come to bed with me instead."

Hollen nodded his head, placing a peck on Munro's cheek. He kept his hands to himself in the busy place, even if most of them weren't really watching. Their eyes were unseeing, tea the only thing on their minds.

There were a few perks to having a vampire as his boyfriend, especially when the same blood flowed through his veins.

For one, they could feed from each other for hours, taking little sips as they made love. It sated Hollen's hunger, heat building within him until he couldn't resist and longer, tilting his head and letting Munro take his fill. There was nothing quite like perching on Munro's cock with teeth piercing his neck.

The other benefit was that they could lie awake with one another, speaking of nothing for hours. Sometimes Hollen would doze, but he rarely slept for long stretches anymore. The only day he'd managed a full eight hours was when an eclipse had kept them indoors.

Hollen grinned, trailing his nose over Munro's neck. "It's my night tonight. Adair is home—he was going to make us pizza." Hollen grinned, slipping into Munro's arms and turning to watch the bustling kitchen. He'd started to love the place, from the quiet patrons to Sean, who had swung his fist into Munro's face when he'd first discovered what had happened to Hollen.

"I thought vampires were born, not made. What the fuck?" Sean hadn't stopped swearing, even when Munro had taken the first hit, along with a second.

"So naive." Munro had shaken his head, accepting the punches as if they were a mere annoyance.

Sometimes it still startled Hollen to think that Munro had split his power to save his life. Next to Munro, Hollen was the most powerful vampire in the world. Munro had knowledge and centuries on his side, but Hollen's talents soared.

Infiltrating minds was easier than breathing, and he was stronger than he thought possible. His teeth were razor sharp, and biting his lip was more than an innocent inconvenience now.

Source Creation Date: May 26, 2025, 3:07 am

The best part was transforming. Becoming a crow, or disappearing in a whirl of feathers, was amazing, but it was nothing to flying for the first time. He hadn't quite been able to echo Munro's wings, his own feathers tainted silver instead of straight black like Munro's.

"Let's go." Munro took one last look around before ushering Hollen outside and sprouting feathers right there. Hollen followed suit, floating above the buildings as if he'd been born for it. Munro still kept a close eye, hovering near him in case a sudden wind gust caught him off guard.

When they collapsed on the couch in Hollen's apartment, orange zest still clinging to his clothes, Hollen let out a sigh. He rarely locked the door anymore when he was home, keeping tabs on everyone in the building if he simply stretched his mind out and reached. At first, it had been overwhelming, and a little gross, but he'd figured out who to avoid and when.

Adair peeked his head out of his room, waving to them both as he headed to the kitchen. "Hey guys. You're early."

He didn't look at them, averting his eyes and keeping his gaze locked on his path.

Hollen swallowed, shifting on the couch. "You okay?"

Adair only gave him a stilted nod.

The first week after their return had been hard for Hollen, but Adair had seemed to take it far worse. Sometimes Hollen saw Adair staring at his hands, as if expecting

tattoos to appear out of nothing. There were some nights that Hollen looked for them, too.

Hollen dreaded the silence, the reassuring presence of George in his mind gone forever. When Adair left for days, Hollen would play music as loud as he could when he was alone, spending the rest of his time with Munro just so he didn't have to hear the quiet.

"Let me know if I can help," called Hollen, snuggling closer to Munro when Adair didn't answer. When his friend was ready to talk, he would be there with open ears.

"Here," Hollen grabbed for the remote, flicking the television on so the news could drone in the background. The breaking news banner didn't catch his attention at first, but the frantic voice of the reporter did. There was always something going on in the world, but so little of it affected his small bubble.

The lady on screen was pale, her red lips pressed tight. "Some viewers may find these images disturbing. Viewer discretion is advised."

Hollen pressed his face into Munro's chest, inhaling deeply. He could never get enough of him—not before and not now. Munro wrapped an arm around his waist even as he stiffened, his gaze caught on the screen.

"Rhys."

Hollen snapped up, whirling on the picture. The lady had disappeared, his heart thudding in his chest at the new image.

There was Rhys with a crisp silk shirt clinging to his thick frame. One sleeve was long, but the blackened tips of his fingers poked out, still seeming charred and fresh. His eyes were relaxed, a grin on his lips as he lounged on a leather chair.

“Welcome,” said Rhys, his smile spreading and shifting in the darkness. There was little light, shadows taking up most of the screen. The man at his feet was naked and shivering, blurred lines across the screen obscuring most of his face and exposed body. There were tears on his face as he whimpered, cringing at the sound of Rhys’ voice.

“You may recognize the man at my feet...or perhaps not.” There were gaps in Rhys’ grin as he spoke, the memory of yanking those teeth out splashing through Hollen’s vision.

“Perhaps they will use technology so he will stay anonymous, denying you the same pleasure as myself.” Rhys reached for the man, petting the top of his head. There was a glint in his eyes, the top of his lip curling. “What you may not know is that this man is a murderer.”

Rhys grabbed the man’s hair, tugging him to his knees and exposing his throat. The thick lines of his neck bulged, his chest rising and falling fast. He scrambled as he tried to cover the blurred bits of himself, but Rhys only laughed, shaking him from his grip. The man moved like a wicked puppet, unable to free himself.

“Tell them what you did,” said Rhys, his voice soft. Hollen recognized that tone. It was the same one Rhys had once tried to use on him—one that he could use himself now to influence another’s mind.

“I killed them,” said the man, his teeth chattering as he said it. “The girls.”

“Hmm.” Rhys shook him by the hold on his hair, the man’s body flinching about as if he weighed very little. “You have to give us more than that. Tell them about what kind of monster you really are.”

The man sobbed as his story spilled from his lips, his confession of killing close to forty preteen girls making Hollen’s stomach curl and bile rise in his throat. Every

word was the truth, Rhys' hold on the man absolute.

Rhys sat back on his worn chair that he made look more like a throne, dragging the man into his lap with him.

"I fear, I have a confession of my own," said Rhys, tilting the man's head back until it bulged, on the verge of breaking his neck. "I'm not very forgiving."

He lunged for the man's throat, slicing into him with his remaining teeth a moment before the video cut off, revealing the pale face of the reporter once more.

The reporter cleared her throat, her hands trembling as she clutched at a few papers before her. "A report from our source within the police department has confirmed that the man in the video has turned himself into custody. They've confirmed reports that he is not human. This report was released before government officials stormed the police department. The man apparently disappeared..."

Hollen's ears were buzzing, his voice caught in his throat. Rhys...you bastard.

He startled as Munro threw his head back, his laugh echoing through the apartment. Hollen stared at him, his eyes wide.

"There is no wrath like a lover scorned," said Munro, the lines at his eyes going deep. He shook his head, a hand on Hollen's leg—squeezing tight. "So it begins."