

## Chapter Six: A Hollow Night

?2018?

Isaac remained glued to the story without blinking. The hair on the back of his neck was standing at full attention as he switched to the second page.

At the top left-hand corner was a roughly two-inch by two-inch diagram of a pair of long-fingered hands. The left had its middle and index fingers extended together, pressing the tips into the palm of the right as if writing on it.

Underneath was a phrase that wouldn't translate; *Næ'chäb älmæ dä ægö sävänim*. The remainder of the page seemed to shift and warp so Isaac couldn't make out what it said. He whispered the phrase to himself clumsily.

Isaac frantically pushed apart every book on the surrounding shelves, hoping to find something else like these pages, but came back with nothing. He sunk to the floor, clutching the story to his chest, and hung his head back against the shelf.

"What happened next, damn it?" Isaac asked no one.

When he heard a shuffle around the corner, Isaac quietly pushed himself to his feet. He should have been the only living thing in the building. Suddenly, Isaac wished he hadn't talked to himself out loud.

Isaac fought his trembling hands and shaky breath and peered through the shelves to find the source of the noise. He scanned as much of the

room as he could from his spot for several seconds. There was no person or thing in the place that he could see. With his noun-check complete, Isaac turned toward the writing desk, intending to get home before anything else could startle him.

Just as Isaac was going to move away, a filthy-looking man of about fifty or so stumbled from behind a neighboring shelf. His stringy, salt-and-pepper hair was hanging from his slightly lopsided head onto the shoulder of an oversized, battered Carhartt jacket. The man walked with a severe limp, with his left leg dragging lamely behind his right. His face was waxy, and what skin was visible was covered in scars.

*Great, a junkie, Rage* said bitterly.

*Great, a judgmental ass. You don't know what's up with that guy,* Panic shot back.

Isaac grabbed the first book he saw, hid the pages inside, and stepped out to let the man know the library had closed, and he needed to leave.

Isaac hated this part of his job. Homeless people came in from time to time to get warm or job search online. It had never been easy for him to approach someone face-to-face, and he never looked forward to telling someone in a tough situation to get back out in the cold. He consoled himself with the facts that A) It was nearly midnight, hours after closing, and B) This bum had scared the shit out of him.

After a struggle with the lead weights which had suddenly replaced his feet, Isaac dragged himself out of his safe spot to confront the stranger. He gathered a lungful of air, straightened his back, and generally sought to make himself look and feel more powerful than he really was.

Isaac looked straight down the width of three bookshelves and tried to sound as firm and official as possible.

“Hey... uh... buh,” Was about as far as he got.

The man took a few slow, painful-looking steps, not even pausing when Isaac appeared. In response, he emitted a rasping, scratchy wheeze like his lungs were lined with sandpaper.

*Hopefully old Wax-face was looking for a dictionary, Rage quipped.*

*You're one to talk, Uh-Buh, Panic shot back. Neither one of Isaac's thoughts made him feel any better.*

Against his will, Isaac began to giggle audibly, and even more against his will, tears found their way down his face.

The intruder, now about six long paces from Isaac and lumbering nearer, was less than pleased at the new sound. The old man stopped dead in his tracks for a moment, and every part of Isaac froze.

Wax-face seemed to notice Isaac for the first time, widening his eyes - which Isaac saw were gray with cataracts, streaked with red - and leering at the librarian with a predatory fascination. His jaw slowly fell open, a stream of blood flowing down his chin to the floor.

Isaac attempted to flee, but his feet were giving his brain the silent treatment. The best he got out of himself was turning his head to look over his shoulder. Two more lumbering, waxy, blood-dripping freaks limped out from behind bookshelves and toward Isaac.

Our hero would claim for most of his life beyond this event that the sound he emitted was a leonine roar as he suddenly found the courage to fight his attackers off and escape.

However, he knew completely well that the noise which escaped his lungs was a high-pitched, birdlike screech as he attempted to mediate a debate between Panic and Rage over the course of a second or two;

*Oh fuck, zombies.*

*Don't be ridiculous.*

*Find a weapon!*

*You don't even know how to use any.*

*Find one anyway!*

*It's a library, are we going to papercut them back to death?*

*Do we think this is the zombie apocalypse?*

*I feel like we're wasting a lot of time here.*

Panic ceased its babbling and made a noise not unlike a police siren.

Rage decided now was as good a time as any to hop on a hop on a dream-bus and see the world before the useless skin-sack they inhabited got himself killed, offering Isaac no more survival pointers.

Isaac jerked back around to face the original zombie (a word he was still hesitant to use but had now become the only discernible thought he could latch onto).

The monster had completed its examination, raised its raspy wheeze to a blood-curdling shriek, and made a mad dash for its prey, blood flying every which way from his gaping mouth. Isaac could hear the two behind him do the same.

*Well, there you go you useless lump, you went and got us killed.*

*It's not his fault, there was nothing in orientation about an after-hours zombie attack.*

The argument in Isaac's head descended into a cacophonous volley of insults, mocking tones, and detailed instructions for the other to misbehave with a tree.

Isaac reminded his debating thoughts that they were all part of the same person, so tree sap on one's privates is tree sap on the others. Also, he added that the zombies may have been close enough that he could smell iron on their breath, but the well-dressed gentleman with silver hair in the doorway seemed calm and ready to help. By all laws of logic and probability he was aware of, Isaac would be dead in three and a half seconds anyway, so no need for extra stress.

Panic and Rage stared out through Isaac's eyes. They agreed that there was indeed a rather pale man with silver hair and an incongruously cheerful smirk standing at the fair end of the room, absent the blurry gray doppelganger Isaac normally saw with people and seeming to emit a faint glow. He was dressed in a white suit with vague green specks all over it, with a feathery gold and silver cape to go with it.

Whoever he was, he seemed more-or-less qualified to handle such an unexpected threat.

The new arrival was pointing the palm of his left hand at the scene, his thumb extended at a right angle. He twitched his hand down at the wrist and every molecule in the room sang out in unison, connected by static electricity.

*“Dí’prætä.”*

A razor-thin hemisphere of light erupted in a three-foot radius around Isaac. The zombies, all of whom had just taken a flying leap for his neck, landed on the bubble and bounced off.

They each landed on their backsides with a dull *thud*, totally incapable of processing this development. They caught the pale man’s scent and turned on him, assuming he would make a decent meal as well.

The suited man shut his eyes and delicately pressed his fingertips together, then his palms before he turned them toward the zombies. He intoned a series of syllables in a steady waltzing rhythm, continuing to use the molecular structure of the library as a network of loudspeakers.

*“Tä’gläci äy æ’chévän.”*

They all froze, and a few of Isaac’s rapid heartbeats later the monsters disappeared into thin air. As they went, the electric buzz throughout the area died down until it vanished entirely, along with the bubble around Isaac.

Without a word, the new arrival sniffed the air like a bloodhound while wandering toward Isaac. He stopped every few steps and screwed up his face in concentration. He finally followed his nose to Isaac and began sniffing the young man’s scalp, seeming to not notice there was a person under the hair. He jumped back in surprise when he finally did.

“Oh, I am so sorry! I did not realize that you were a person.” The new man said with a grin and an accent with traces from most of Western Europe. His voice, though still bouncy and full of life, had lost the musical quality it had when the entire building spoke for him.

“Who are you?” The stranger asked.

Isaac stared at him without blinking, “Uh...Buh” floating through his

mind again. He waded through a mess of scattered vocabulary to find a coherent response until he finally landed on, “I-Isaac Falc-cone.”

The activation of the various anatomical components required for speech set off a domino effect which rattled every other bit of their host, who began to shake violently as tears once again fell down his face.

The newcomer twitched slightly. “Just a fair warning, Uh-Buh, you ought to take care not to give away so much of your name to strangers. I mean you no harm, but many entities may take it as an invitation.”

“Inv... Wha...” Isaac stammered.

The man with the silver hair smiled, grabbed Isaac’s wrist, and helped him to his feet. He swept some loose zombie dust from Isaac’s clothes, looked him in the eye, and spoke with extraordinary calm. Isaac couldn’t decide if he was comforted by or terrified of the stranger.

“Unimportant. Uh-Buh I-Isaac Falc-Cone, nice to meet you,” The visitor said, still holding on to Isaac’s wrist. “You may call me L’æon. *Næ’vös shívæ!*”