



What Hides in the Shadows

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Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

The large door of the manor I'd recently inherited creaked with my nudge. Poking my head inside, I puffed out my cheeks with my gusty exhale.

Nothing to be scared of. Ghosts couldn't touch me, and it wasn't like I hadn't spent most of my life accompanied by the voices. I fiddled with the crucifix hanging from the chain around my neck, rubbing my thumb over the smooth gold-plated sterling silver.

As used to them as I'd become, the dreaded voices had never been this loud—If I wasn't counting when they'd landed me in an involuntary psychiatric hold three years ago.

I licked my lips and stiffened my spine. I couldn't let myself hang around outside all night. There was so much to unpack, and it wasn't like they could do anything to me.

Entering the corridor, the chill of the house caused goose bumps to travel up my arms. I dropped my car keys on the slim entryway table. Resounding thuds echoed across the linoleum floor with each step. The hall opened up to the right, leading to the kitchen. I flipped the light switch on, but nothing happened, leaving me in the dark with only a sliver of moonlight beaming through the window above the fridge.

Fear swelled in my throat.

"I'll be okay," I said, my voice echoing loudly in the empty house I'd been in for a handful of days. I headed to the chair and hung my purse on the back, then strode over to the box of dishes I'd been in the middle of unpacking before I left a few hours ago. I opened the cabinet beside the fridge and carefully fit the two plates on top of

each other. I scooted them to the side to make room for bowls.

I rubbed the back of my neck, and a shiver coasted down my spine. Something or somethings were watching me. I'd become used to the sensation, but it only seemed to intensify with each passing year. Earlier, I could have sworn I heard someone whisper my name. I had collected my keys, dashed to my little Kia, and zoomed into town.

I'd spent hours outside a coffee shop sipping my drink and switching between people-watching and scrolling through my phone. It hadn't been lost time; I'd gone through my emails and filled out a few job applications, since there hadn't been any responses to the ones I'd already submitted. I'd be fine since the house was paid off and my late Aunt Vee had bequeathed me a small fortune, but I needed a distraction.

Something grazed my shoulder, and I yelped, whirling. My heart pumped so hard my chest hurt. I swatted at the touch again, and my fingers tangled with my hair.

Exhaling harshly, I wiped my palms on the front of my skirt. Shrill beeping ripped a scream from my throat. I put my hand on my chest and hurried to my cellphone, which was still in my purse. After successfully digging for it, I brought the screen up to my face. I squinted from the brightness, struggling to read as my eyes adjusted.

Email notifications wishing me a 'happy birthday month.' My birthday wasn't for weeks, and I'd take each and every second left of being twenty-nine.

Birthdays . . . didn't make me feel good. Not even a little bit. The anxiety that came with them wasn't only about getting older; it was how, each year, the voices became stronger. I couldn't shake the feeling that something really fucking bad was going to happen soon.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and exhaled slowly. There was no one in my life I

could expect a call from on my actual birthday, so these company emails were all that I had.

I had one friend from high school that might have called me in the past, but I doubted she'd remember. She'd become a mom of twins recently, and our friendship had slowly dwindled. The realities of growing older; priorities changed. As much as it sucked, I couldn't begrudge her happiness. She'd been the single person who didn't turn her back on me just because I was a little different. I placed my phone on silent and put it back in my purse.

Unintelligible whispers accompanied me on the way back down the hall.

Yelling out 'leave me alone' when the voices were too much had lost me more than a few friends. The very few times I had tried to explain myself hadn't gone well.

Extensive therapies and medications had never made them go away either. Inhaling sharply, I rolled my shoulders out. I'd already showered before heading to get coffee, but I needed to clear my mind under steaming water.

"Everything will be fine." I had a difficult time believing it, though. The hushed whispers enhanced a few octaves, sending a chill down my spine.

I ran up the stairs to the first room to the left. I tried the lights, but they were useless.

"Go away," I croaked, cupping my hands over my ears, staggering toward the bed. Once I plopped down on the edge, something flickered at the corner of my eye. My stomach soured as I whipped my head around. There was nothing there.

Nothing was coming to get me. The voices were not real. I rubbed my arms and inhaled sharply, closing my eyes to work through my breathing exercises.

The voices began when I'd turned eighteen. Faint whispers that were easy for me to explain away.

And they wouldn't stop.

I groaned, hanging my head.

Ignore it. Nothing is there.

I squeezed my eyes even tighter. Maybe I should call Father Drummond to come bless the house. He seemed nice enough when I met him at church yesterday.

The wind picked up outside, making the long, gnarled branches tap repeatedly against the windowpane.

Something was watching me again. I whipped around, but like the last few times, there was nothing. I rubbed my arms, soothing the goose bumps.

". . . Mine. . ." The snarled word struck me frozen. They had never said anything before.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

My chest pumped up and down with ragged bursts. “Who’s there?”

The shadowed bedroom seemed to pulsate, like the darkness was alive.

“The time has come.”

The weak, frail human trembled, her wide eyes searching my shadows. Her efforts were useless. She would not see me unless I allowed it.

I did not usually begin watching my sacrifices until just before their soul was ready, as they reached their 30th year. But she proved an addiction. When she reached adulthood, I sent my shadows to view her briefly from afar, as I did with every sacrifice. The mortal intrigued me.

So, I watched her—often.

The binding energy repelled me once the bargain for her soul was struck, but had I been able to touch her before now, I would have dragged her to my realm long ago. She did not understand her fortune.

Her soul shone around her, the brilliant pale color close to blinding.

Pure of heart.

She would taste delightful on Novareth, but until the day of sacrifice, I would punish the human for what she had done.

The window rattled and sprang open with frightening force. Wind shook the pane, and my hair lashed against my cheeks. I hurried to swing it closed and grabbed at the latch. With a bit of maneuvering, I was able to hook it in place, cutting off the whoosh of the wind.

My harsh, ragged panting made my chest ache.

Turning around, I froze.

This was it, I'd officially lost it. I was so terrified that every limb stiffened to the point of pain. I blinked quickly, like it would change what stood before me.

The looming creature wasn't human. His eyes were pitch black; a deep, dark void. As frightened as I was, I couldn't stop staring as I searched for a pupil, for something, in their inky, terrifying depths.

He was an amalgamation of different creatures. Features of a cat, complete with slanted nostrils and the slightest cleft tipping up the middle of his upper lip, giving them a pouty aspect. Ram horns curved upward from silky-looking . . . hair? Moonlight fell across the strands, enhancing the feather-like texture.

My heart pumped in my chest with violent thuds. This thing was terrifying.

Something moved behind him, and two huge, arching wings twitched, bending close to his body. He was so large that the top of his head was just shy of touching the eleven-foot ceiling. This is going to get me committed again.

I closed my eyes.

"You're not real," I chanted over and over. I gripped my cross so hard that the sharp edges dug into my palm.

Oh father, who art in heaven?—

The vilest sound I'd ever heard left the creature before me. Grating and mocking. I'd officially lost my mind. The softest graze caressed my chin. My eyes popped open, and his mouth spread in a grin, wider than any human could manage, displaying sharp, elongated teeth. In the upper left and right quadrants of his mouth, his slightly hooked incisors jutted out. The rest of his teeth were just as sharp and pointy, but they weren't as curved.

He leaned closer, and all I could manage to do was suck in a harsh breath. He cocked his head, and his pure black eyes remained on me.

Moisture slicked my hand grabbing the cross, and I released it. The copper tang of blood reached my nose, and I lifted my trembling hand in front of my face to see the small bleeding cut. He gripped my wrist so suddenly I wouldn't have been able to avoid the monstrous claws even if I had wanted to.

I stiffened, watching him with wide eyes. His touch was harsh and cold.

"Don't, please," I choked out.

That terrifying mouth spread, and he ran his inhumanly long tongue across my palm without letting go of my gaze. The graze was rough like that of a feline. Nausea clenched my stomach.

"Don't please," he mocked. His voice was deep and gravelly; low-pitched and as powerful as he looked. I wasn't short, but he made me feel like a speck in comparison. A pitiful, weak, speck.

"You should have obeyed me." He clicked his tongue in a faux disapproving manner.

What was he talking about?

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

His stick-straight hair fluttered around his shoulders as he cocked his head eerily. He threw my hand down, and I took the opportunity to stumble back, but before I could make it far, something slithered around my wrist, stopping me.

A dark shadow wound itself around my arm, slowly making its way up to my elbow. I desperately yanked and swatted at it, but the inkiness tightened, pulsing and expanding to grab my other arm. They tightened, keeping me in place.

“Let me go,” I whimpered.

His large wings stirred, causing his loose shirt to flutter.

“Let me think about it.” He was suddenly an inch from my face. “No.”

His sharp teeth were much too close.

In a swift movement, I was dragged by the hold on my arms and landed on the bed with a hard bounce that rattled my brain. I screamed, struggling against the shadows that had manifested into a more solid entity to pin me on the mattress. The very shadows that always appeared at the corner of my eye, but dissipated before I could get more than a glimpse.

But this proved it, I wasn't insane. Each time I'd heard things or seen things, they'd really been there.

The creature approached until he stood over the bed. I lifted my head, straining for freedom while he watched me writhe. He did nothing but watch.

“Why are you doing this?” I cried out, panting.

“You know what you did, Beatrix.”

“What are you talking about? I don’t know you,” I said, energy leaking away with each attempt to get free.

His large hands took hold of my thighs. He forcefully spread them, and my skirt pooled around my legs. His claws dug into the skin above my knees, causing small punctures. The sharp, stinging pain zipped to my shin. I flinched, but my legs refused to close.

“You should have obeyed.”

The shadows inched my skirt higher and higher until it wrapped around my waist. With a quick movement, the shadows delved under my underwear and ripped them off, causing the cool air to brush against my bare sex.

This wasn’t happening. Oh, God, please no.

Tears blurred my vision as I thrashed with more effort, using every ounce of strength possible to break free. It was no use. The bed dipped as he crawled onto the mattress, slowly inching up—torturing me.

“We-we can talk about this. I don’t know what I did, but please, I repent. I’ll be a better person.” I trailed off once his face hovered over mine. His hair fell forward, and the tips tickled my cheek.

“You should not have fucked the human male,” he said.

My mind raced. There was only one person I’d slept with. Andrew, my ex-boyfriend.

Each moment of intimacy had led up to the night we fucked. But in the lead up, we'd fooled around, and without fail, the voices became so intense I couldn't get into it. The time I'd shown up at his apartment in the middle of the night, I'd felt rebellious and angry. It felt like the voices were trying to deprive me of happiness, so I went to him, pushing through the insistent, indiscernible voices. But they'd won. I couldn't focus on sex, which made the entire event . . . unsatisfying.

But how did he know about that? And why punish me? The shock stopped the pleas in my throat.

"You belong to me."

The memory of the hushed whispers overwhelmed my thoughts. It dragged me back to that night. How I had squeezed my eyes tight and gritted my teeth through them. Except, unlike before, they weren't unintelligible, and it wasn't multiple voices; it was the creature hovering over me.

"You have always been mine." His mouth spread into that creepy smile again. That cadence—that voice. . . The whispers were always him.

A touch grazed my leg, but his hands were braced on the bed.

"Why?" I croaked.

"You should have obeyed."

Something cold touched my knee, and I gasped, peeking down between the sliver of space between us. It felt as tangible as a hand against my skin.

More shadows slithered up and wound around my wrists, pulling my arms up so high it verged on pain. Struggling against them was useless. They were too strong.

He rose onto his knees and sat back on his legs. His long limbs were covered in clothing; the linen shirt split at the top to allow me a glimpse at his too-smooth flesh. The pose seemed inconspicuous and laid back, like he didn't have a worry. Even though his eyes were pure black, I could feel his attention on me. The shadows slackened the slightest amount, and I took the window of opportunity to slap my thighs together.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

Strands of shadows wound up my ankles until they reached my knees, and they pried me apart, baring me to the creature once again. I hadn't had the chance to even scoot away.

He cocked his head, staring down at my sex. I was close to hyperventilating. I couldn't move, and my heart pounded so hard I could hear it in my ears.

He lifted a finger, the tip of his sharp, black claw pointed upward, and shadows spawned. From mist to a thicker consistency that was more tangible than it looked. The pitch-black shadow slid down, and I had to tuck my chin closer into my chest to watch it lower between my legs.

"Stop." I peeled my eyes so wide that it hurt.

The shadow grazed my sex. The initial touch was so cold that my entire body stiffened. Why was he doing this?! My throat hurt from how hard I was panting. The cold sensation prodded more insistently.

"W-w—" I choked off with a cry. The shadow pushed inside me; the iciness invading and stretching my core uncomfortably.

Gritting my teeth didn't abate the pain, and my lower lip trembled. This couldn't be real. The monstrous creature sat back, watching me writhe helplessly in place.

The shadow worked deeper, and I winced.

"Would you like more?" The eerie way he stared at me sent chills skittering up my

spine.

The thing pulsed inside me and grew.

I screamed, writhing to get away from the discomfort, but all it did was move. The pressure was more than I could handle, far greater than the fullness I had felt when fucking Andrew. Nausea swirled in my gut.

“Please stop.” My voice shook.

“You’re going to kill me.” I struggled to speak. Right when it felt like it would rip me apart from the inside out, the shadow inside me pulled back, and the forcefulness turned into something different. The prolonged pain turned to something worse . . . something pleasurable to the point that I could no longer breathe. Its attention spread to the button of nerves. I gasped, my stomach contracting.

The gentle caress became more insistent, and with it came electrical spikes that traveled up my spine.

Pleasure fired through my belly and pooled between my legs. A small whimper slipped from my lips. Such overwhelming shame accompanied my need, but even then, I didn’t want it to stop.

The creature looked demonic, staring down at me with shadows whipping around him. And still, its otherworldliness invited me in to explore. I wanted to touch the soft-looking feathering.

God help me.

He cocked his head, and the gentle rub against my clit and the shallow throbbing of the shadow inside me, tore my breath from my lungs. My hips lifted toward the

delicious sensation licking through my flesh. Bunching the comforter under me, I whimpered. I felt so full and desperate for more. Flames licked through my core so intensely that I gasped. I was so, so close to the pinnacle. Coming felt wrong. I didn't want this, but I couldn't stop my body's response. My legs wouldn't stop shaking. I wanted—I wanted . . .

“But even your pleasure . . . I can take it away—just like that.” With the twist of his hand, everything stopped. The orgasm slipped through my fingers, elusive, as if it had never existed. My breaths sounded especially loud to my ears. I met his onyx gaze, then took in the impassive expression on his strange, angular face.

“You're evil,” I spat. And I'd wanted to come even if the evil staring down at me was the cause. Heat flooded my entire body, and I twitched my hips with the bit of freedom they now had, trying to grind against the fullness that had gone still inside me.

His sneer widened.

“And you are mine.”

Just like that, the shadows disappeared to join the others binding my wrists together. The monster flicked his hand in an upward motion, and I was pulled upright.

I tried to pull my wrists apart, but it was no use. He gave them a little jerk. Just enough to turn my gaze to him. He held the end not attached to me like a leash. Keeping my gaze, he tugged, making me stumble forward with a gasp.

“Come, weak mortal.”

He said it like I was some sort of animal. Not that I would ever treat an animal this poorly, but he spoke as if I were nothing. I scanned the tension around my wrists.

Kidnapping 101: Never let the kidnapper take you to the second location.

I kicked my foot out, connecting the tip of my sneaker against his pant-covered leg. I held my breath, waiting for the death blow. But he threw his head back . . . and let out a booming sound, similar to a laugh, but raspier and frightening. Nausea rose in my throat and my heart thundered so hard that it hurt.

The shadows gathered behind him, accumulating. They seemed to be undulating and alive. So slowly, he made the tendrils drag me closer to the black mass.

As much as I fought, I couldn't stop the slow progression to him.

I'd be another statistic. Another woman to just . . . disappear.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

Darkness enveloped me, its cold embrace consuming me.

I was weightless, floating. It felt timeless, like there was no meaning to anything . . . a void. Then I was on a cold stone floor, dry heaving. My stomach churned, and my head spun.

“Stand, mortal,” he ordered, and I was dragged to my feet by the hold on my wrists. I staggered after him, my eyes wide and wild as I scanned the pathway. Torches lined the top edge of the wall all the way down to a wooden door, and he was pulling me toward it.

I had no time to think, much less act, and then we reached the destination.

“Here we are.” He gripped the back of my neck with his freezing hand. The door creaked open. “Your temporary home.”

He threw me inside so hard my ankle twisted, and I landed in a pile. The iron-framed wood door slammed shut with a resounding thud. Shakily, I stood and leaned against the wall to scan the room. Floor-to-ceiling wooden . . . pantries? They lined the furthest side of the wall, but my focus returned to the door. I carefully stepped on my foot, and the barest twinge went up my shin. I limped, trying to keep weight off it on my way to the door. I banged the side of my wrist against the surface, but nothing happened, so I tried again and again until a burn started up in my shoulder. By the twelfth pound, my efforts felt stupid.

I shuddered with a dry sob. Pressing my palm to my mouth, I slumped against the door and slid to the floor. My ankle didn’t like the movement, but the pain wasn’t

enough to rip me out of the agony in my chest.

Why had he taken me?

If he was Satan, or a demonic entity, I hadn't done anything that would merit this. A shudder wracked through my body, and I hugged myself.

Something moved in the dark corner of the room. For a split second, I expected the usual shadows, but there was a woman slumped against the wall, her face turned away from me. Her shoulders moved in a disjointed pattern, as if she were in pain. Slowly, I stood and hurried over, dropping to my knees next to her. Her head lifted from where she leaned against the stone surface. I froze, my breath stalling in my lungs. She had an odd face, her features off and eerie. The bridge of her nose was flatter, and her ears were pointed, poking out through her brown hair. Very similar to the creature that dragged me here, her skin coloring looked inhuman, and hers gave the impression of granite marbling.

A jagged bit of rock lay to her side, and her arms were stretched out over her legs, allowing me a clear view of the bright red blood leaking from her arms. She'd cut herself from the start of her wrist to the dip of the inner side of her elbow. Just one look at the flayed skin and I knew she needed help as soon as possible. She'd bleed out.

What was she? What were they? A cough rattled from her chest. She hadn't attacked me, only watched me from lowered eyelids.

As different as she looked, I couldn't let her suffer.

The gurgled sound spurred me into action.

"We need to get you help," I muttered, my hands hovering over her. I was scared of

touching her . . .

“Leave me to my death,” she wheezed, and her head drooped as if the muscles in her neck gave up.

“Help,” I screamed. Her hand lashed out just as I was about to get up from the floor.

“The Lord of Shadows will not help.” Her voice was soft and slightly hissing. Lord of Shadows?

Her eyes slowly opened, and I saw they were thin like a snake’s. A single sliver of a pupil. I gasped and tried to pull out of her grip.

She groaned, and I froze.

“I do not want to evoke his anger. I want to end this.”

“What?” I croaked.

Her lips twitched at the corners, and she peeked at me.

“Human, you must be here for Novareth.”

I sucked in a breath. She knew why I was here.

“Novareth?”

She groaned, her head thumping back against the wall.

Her lips twitched, her eyes fluttered shut. Blood stained the tip of my sneaker.

She was dying.

“Help!” Once on my feet, I limped to the door, going directly for the latch. I could have sworn it wasn’t unlocked when he dumped me in here, but I didn’t waste time when the door opened under my hand. The hall came into view.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

The endless, deep, dark hall. I didn't know how long I'd end up wandering its depths, and she didn't have time.

"Help," I screamed again, taking a halting step forward. There had to be a way to get him here, to summon him, or something.

I ran my hands through my hair.

Lord of Shadows. He'd been using them to watch me through them. I narrowed my eyes at the inky darkness clinging to the walls.

"I know you're watching. Come, please!"

Nothing happened. I expected something! I scrubbed my fingers through my long hair, exhaling sharply.

"What will you do for me?"

With a scream, I whirled to look at him, already standing inside the freezing room. He stood with his hands behind him. He stretched his wings out, and they fluttered.

"She's dying," I whispered, jerking my chin toward her.

He cocked his head and lazily looked at the woman.

"And?" I could only gawk in shock. For the life of me, I didn't know why his callous response shocked me. This was a monster. "Her life means nothing to me."

“Wait!” If I didn’t stop him, those shadows whipping around him would make him disappear. “I-I will give . . . you something.”

He stiffened, and his wings twitched. I could tell I’d caught his attention.

“A bargain?”

“Yes, a bargain,” I blurted.

He waved his hand, and the shadows began to gather.

“And what do you offer?” He cocked his head.

Her chest rattled with a ragged breath. I clasped my cross. She would die if she didn’t get medical attention. She needed help. There was no hope for me, and if I could save a life, then it was worthwhile.

“Anything. Just help her.” There was no magical glitter explosion with my declaration.

In two strides, he was at her side.

“Please no, don’t?—”

Just as quickly, his shadows dragged her upright and he sliced his claws through her arm, ripping the flesh to the bone all the way down to the palm of her hand with the ease of a hot knife slicing into butter.

She screamed in a way I’d never heard anyone scream before. I staggered back and leaned against the wall, nausea making me weak.

“Stop,” I wheezed. She thudded on the ground, flayed arm flopping to the side, the edges of her ripped skin jiggling.

He cocked his head, onyx eyes on me.

“She will bleed faster now.”

He flicked his claws and blood splattered across my cheek. The room spun and my knees gave out until I landed on my butt. She whimpered, her blood dripping on the ground with a rhythmic plop.

“She’s in pain,” I screamed. “Stop it.”

He bared his teeth in a macabre mimic of a grin. Suddenly, his shadows enveloped her. The sounds of wheezing reached my ears.

Her body emerged, emaciated, and shriveled. A husk of its former self. She was dead. The creature shivered like he’d thrown back a shot of tequila.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

“You . . . killed . . . her.” My lips felt so numb, it was difficult to speak.

“Yes. I helped her.” His head tilted to the side. “As you asked.”

I could only gawk as he strode out of the chamber, and the knot in my throat thickened. Nothing would save me.

She dared to bargain with me?

I curled my legs up to my chest, hugging them. There weren't any windows in the room, so I couldn't tell how much time had passed, but it couldn't have been more than a day.

Wrappers and water bottles littered the floor around me. I'd gorged myself on the food in the pantry, eating and drinking as much as I could find. Once he took me, I didn't know if I'd come back. I didn't know if those crackers were going to be my last meal.

On a positive note, my ankle felt tons better once I woke up from however long I'd been asleep. I tapped my fingers against my knees.

Certainty about my coming death settled on my shoulders after watching the cruel way he killed the non-human woman's life. That must be how he planned to end mine, but why hadn't he appeared yet? All the waiting and wondering was slowly driving me crazy. I peered at the door leading to the scary hall. He hadn't latched it when he left . . . The thought gave me the push to get to my feet. I'd find out for myself.

I nudged open the door, left the room and started down the hall. My footsteps echoed off the walls, making them sound resounding and eerie. The place reminded me of a creepy, abandoned castle. Hugging myself, I picked up my pace. This could very well be Hell, but it wasn't the fire-infested pit I'd been taught about. I pressed my palm to my stomach.

Myth after myth flitted through my thoughts, but nothing fithim. Lucifer was a fallen angel, and the ram horns were demonic, but that was where the similarities ended, other than him being evil.

I rubbed my arms and shivered.

Was I getting anywhere? I looked over my shoulder at the chamber, now a decent distance away. Okay, so the hall had to end eventually. I picked up my pace to get my blood flowing.

Finally, the torches stopped, and the hall took an abrupt turn, opening to an ascending staircase. I hesitated a moment before climbing up the steep stairs. The sliver of each step was so small, it felt like a single mistake would cause a tumble and a broken limb. Creeping higher and higher, I kept my palm against the wall.

At the top, another hall led to a wooden door. I entered cautiously, but it only opened to a larger, empty space. There were windows on the far wall. I hurried to the pane to press my palm against the surface. I was frighteningly high up. Now the burn in my thighs made sense.

The sky was blanketed by a cloudy gray shade, and at least from this vantage, I couldn't see anything past the foggy blanket coating the atmosphere. Surrounding the grounds were patches of dirt and scraggly, dying trees. Pillars held up different sections and the whole structure was made of stone. This was a castle.

If there had been any doubt in my mind that I wasn't on Earth, there wasn't now. I backed away from the window and strode through the rounded archway. It led down another winding path and spat me out in a hall with more wooden doors. At the end of the hall, there was movement. I squinted to get a good look, but I couldn't make anything out other than flickering light.

Once I reached the end, after a painfully long walk, and crossed the threshold of a wide-open space, I discovered the flickering came from a large fireplace. The red flames spat and flared from the comfort of the brick cavern framed in black granite. The blaze was big enough to warm the entire chamber. A worn, off-red rug with silver designs at the edges spanned most of the area, leading to him, sprawled across a gigantic throne. The surface glinted from the reflection of the fire.

Shuffling closer, I ignored the twinge in my ankle to study the slumbering monster. Since the throne was bigger than him, it would dwarf me. His back leaned against the armchair, and his wings were tucked behind him, the edges poking out.

This was my chance to get a good look at him without his creepy eyes watching me. I grazed my fingertip against his arms. His gray flesh didn't feel like human skin, somehow it felt like velvet, yet cold and hard. He wore a linen shirt, and his sleeves were rolled to the elbow, allowing me a peek at a muscle-corded arm. They seemed to bulge with strength; thickness added in places no human had.

My gaze traveled lower. Would he look the same as a man?

The only warning I had of him waking up was the twitch of a wing, and then he hissed, gripping my throat. He sneered down at me. A chill slid down my spine, and I struggled to suck in oxygen.

"Curious little thing." His velvety voice coiled through my senses. Touches from his shadows kissed my skin, flaring the discomfort between my legs to life. I'd tried not

to think about the pleasure he'd forced me to feel. It was wrong to desire him . . . even if it was the first time I'd ever felt anything that intense. He released my neck, and his shadows took hold of me.

I choked on my words. His hands went downward and settled on the top of his trousers. Very slowly, he undid the top button, and the rasp of the parting fabric quickened my heart rate.

The outline of a shaft bobbed free.

I dragged in an unsteady breath. The shaft was long and thick, but there was nothing human about it. Instead of being a smooth column, the tip was more pointed, and as it went lower, the cock had the slightest ridges. A few inches lower, and it had another dip and then another—as if textured. The thing was way above anything I'd ever seen and would very likely rip me in half. His hand curled around the base.

“What are you going to do to me?” I asked, my voice trembling. A tiny part of me, deep, deep inside, waited for his response with bated breath.

I hated how my body reacted to him. It was sick and wrong.

He grinned, and I was jerked forward. He propped his other arm on the armrest. Shadows played along his wrists and wound through his fingers.

My breathing had turned ragged. Without a choice, I was tugged closer to the chair until my thigh hit the edge between his spread legs. I winced from the thump against the hard surface.

I met his black eyes and his eerie, too-wide grin spread. The next thing I knew, my mouth was being shoved against the tip of his cock. Forcefully, he clasped the back of my head and pushed past my pursed lips. The cold shaft grazed my teeth, the dips

of his shaft rubbing against the flat of my tongue. Tears trickled down my cheeks, and I couldn't breathe from the force of him against my throat. His cock was too big for it not to choke me, and without me relaxed, it made everything feel ten times worse. The hinge of my jaw pinched with discomfort until tears blinded me. I gagged, my gasp muffled, and so suddenly, he stopped, his length leaving my lips. I fell back on my butt, my palms slapping on the carpeted ground before his throne.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

I caught my breath between gasps.

“Enough sniveling,” he snarled. I frantically sucked in a breath, shaking. This was too much, too real, and if I stayed here, I wouldn’t survive.

“Please, let me go home.”

Leaning forward, he gripped my jaw and tipped my chin up. He squeezed until I met his eyes.

“After you take a mouthful of my seed, I will consider it.” He gave in too easily for me to believe he was being truthful but any chance to go home was worth a shot.

“Fine,” I bit out. “I’ll make you come, but let me go if I succeed.”

He studied me like a human examining a bug under a microscope.

“You are an odd human,” he hummed, his clawed finger tracing my bottom lip. The ridiculousness of my situation slapped me across the face and I scoffed. The monster thought I was the odd one.

She curled forward, holding her midsection. A sound leaving her mouth like she was choking on something. The corners of her lips turned up, causing her eyes to thin.

I had observed humans and Novians laugh, but never at such close proximity to me.

All prior sacrifices—except for one, many rotations ago—never left the feeding room,

choosing instead to snivel and cry until their end.

This frail human was a paradox.

A sliver of my shadows curled around her arms, and I pulled them back. I could not cease reaching for the Little Mortal.

There was something wrong with this one. From my observations, I knew she was seldom around others of her kind, had this caused her oddities?

“Let’s do this,” she breathed, lifting her chin.

I cocked my head. Very strange human and her very strange speech patterns. She would not succeed. I had claimed and been serviced by plenty of Novian females. A human could not hold a candle to them.

Soon she would be extinguished, and I would not have to question her unusual behaviors any longer.

I let out a shaky breath. All of this was unreal. How was this happening to me? The humor of the situation left as suddenly as it arrived.

If bringing him to orgasm would make him consider letting me go, I’d make him come so hard he wouldn’t have any other choice but to give in to me. Resolve settled on my shoulders. I’d made Andrew come plenty of times; this would be a piece of cake. I wasn’t sure where the spur of determination came from, but I was rolling with it. I had nothing to lose, literally.

He watched me from his sprawled position on his throne, arms settled carelessly on the armrests. His cock was still so hard it pointed to the ceiling. He watched me, silent and expectant.

I scooted a few inches forward on my knees, closer to the textured girth. The intimidatingly thick and lengthy shaft. Milkyliquid beaded at the tip, and I watched in awe as the droplet traveled down the side.

Leaning forward so the seat of the chair pushed against my ribs, I swallowed. Now, to do this with finesse, especially since his member was nothing close to a human one.

He bunched my hair, and the tips of his claws scratched my scalp. A shiver crept down my spine. I reached up to grip his wrist. The cold, hard surface was difficult to wrap my hand around, and it felt weird and longer than a human wrist, as if he had an additional joint.

“I lead,” I said, peeking up at him. He only stared, unreactive to my words. “My deal, my terms.”

That made his eyelids flare, and he grunted, releasing me. I smoothed my hands down the front of my shirt. Inching closer until I found a comfortable position for my knees, then I rested my palms against his thighs to brace myself. He watched me steadily, saying nothing.

“Your fumbling attempts will not succeed mortal,” he drawled.

My jaw stiffened, if he didn’t think anything would come of this, it was another way to shame me. Straightening my shoulders, I took hold of his shaft with one hand. My fingers struggled to meet, so I gripped him with my other hand as well.

I dropped my attention to the straining tip. If I kept watching him, I’d fumble from the nerves devouring my stomach. The cock pulsed under my grip, and I slid one hand upward to the pointy tip, rubbing my thumb against the moisture at the top, slicking the liquid around the smooth, cold tip.

His breathing hitched, so I repeated the motion, peeking up at him. He watched me with narrowed eyes. His obvious displeasure only flared my determination.

Narrowing the space between my thumb and pointer finger, I squeezed. His skin was an interesting texture. Smooth, but also cold. A bit like granite, but with more give.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

I slipped down to the base with a hard grip. His hips bucked up, forcing his shaft into my hands. More moisture dribbled down the length.

There was something alluring about the creature's reaction to my touch. That lust that had spawned earlier flooded between my legs. He turned me on more with just his cock in my hand than fucking Andrew. Wanting him was sick and wrong, but it wouldn't stop.

His claws rested against the rounded parts of the armrests. It gave me a better look at his hands. His fingers were longer than a human's and there was a sharpness to each dip and turn that mimicked his other features.

I took a deep breath and leaned forward, wrapping my mouth around the tip. Now that it wasn't being used as a tool to choke me, I took a moment to savor the thick liquid.

It tasted . . . good?

My eyes widened, and I ran my tongue across the tip to collect more of his pre-cum. He grunted, and his hands curled harder into his throne. I peeked up at him, and he watched me through lowered eyelids, the onyx of his eyes reflecting the flames flickering in the hearth.

I rolled my tongue along the side of his shaft, and he gasped, lips parting. After lifting off him, I turned my head to run my tongue up his textured length. Liquid dripped from the top and traveled down his inhuman shaft. I licked lower, passing the divots until I stopped at the small nodes surrounding his base.

I ran my hands upward to guide him into my mouth again, and this time I bobbed my head down until his tip pressed against the back of my throat. He hissed, and a high-pitched creak reached my ears. I didn't let it distract me. Saliva dribbled down his shaft, and I twisted my hands around his base. This was filthy, but my life depended on this.

A deep rumble built in his throat, and his hips pumped up. I gagged but managed to keep my rhythm, using my hands on the rest of him to make up for what I couldn't take in my mouth. He breathed raggedly, and his hips lifted again. He used his grip on his throne as a perch to pump deeper into my mouth.

Slowly, I dragged my hand down to his base, and then slipped it lower and felt for the heavy weight of his sack. Instead, I found two smooth, round protrusions tight to his body. I ran my hands over the dips, gently rubbing. He grunted like I'd sucker punched him. The orbs were velvety and heavy.

I rubbed my finger in the tight little divot running between them while licking his tip and squeezing his shaft. He leaned forward with a groan and then slumped back. His hips pumped into my mouth, insistently pushing himself deeper. Something about his pleasure sparked mine to life. I hated the need pulsing inside me, but his reactions were addicting. I managed to keep control of the depth, rolling and touching in conjunction with the bob of my head. My eyelashes fluttered and I couldn't contain my moan. Touching him was turning me on to a painful extent.

His cock stiffened until it was rock hard under my grip, and so suddenly, he exploded. Jets of cum coated my tongue, and I didn't stop my rhythm, taking, and touching, and rubbing. His sweet and salty taste was oddly addicting. I struggled to swallow, and the sheer volume made it impossible to take every drop.

His shaft jerked again, and a vein running up the length pulsed under my palm.

I peeked up to find his head tipped back and his fangs on full display, pleasure licking across his features. There was something so utterly erotic about the visual. I squeezed my thighs tightly together, needing to relieve the pressure between them.

Cum trickled from the corner of my mouth, trailing down my chin. He released a hissing breath, and his hips thrust up one last time.

Rolling my tongue across the tip once more, I pulled back and sat back on my legs, putting me much lower than him. His eyes snapped open, and he leaned forward so fast that I didn't have time to avoid him gripping my jaw.

The tips of his claws pressed into my cheeks, and I flinched.

"What have you done to me?" he snapped.

I could only gawk. "Speak," he hissed.

My lips parted and closed, and I tried to shake my head, but all I managed was to make the side of his claw dig into my cheek until it stung. He released me so abruptly, I fell backward.

He stood, and his wings stretched out, moving behind him. He leaned down until he ran the back of his claw against the corner of my mouth.

"What have you done?" he repeated, as if I suddenly had the answer.

"You orgasmed," I said hesitantly but with no less strength in my voice. Instead of addressing my comment, he gripped the back of my neck and forced me upright. I gasped, scrambling to stand on numb feet. He strode toward the hallway, towing me beside him.

My heart pounded against my ribcage. This was it, if I disappeared down the hall, I didn't believe I would walk out of here alive.

"I'm not going back to that cold room with the dead woman. We made a deal, you promised to consider releasing me!"

He stopped so abruptly I almost fell, even with his grip on my neck. I tried to turn my head to look at him but could only go so far with his thumb claw about to puncture my throat. His head slowly turned toward me.

"I considered it."

With that, he continued dragging me, and with each staggering step after him, my anger mounted. This wasn't fair.

I shoved his side, ramming my shoulder into him, not caring if his nail sliced open my jugular. The sharp edge of the claw lifted, managing not to harm me. He apparently didn't want me dead—at least not yet. The realization slapped me across the face. I just wish I knew why.

"You liar."

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

He turned, cocking his head to watch me with those eerie eyes. Jerking forward, I slipped out of his grip easier than I anticipated.

I licked my lips and inched back a step.

Maybe it was best that I enraged him to the point that he killed me now. I didn't want to find out what he had in store for me. If my hearing and seeing stuff started when he began to 'watch me,' then he'd been keeping tabs on me since I was eighteen, making it close to two decades now. Clenching my teeth, I lifted my chin and met his scary eyes head-on.

Instead of saying anything, his shadows exploded out of him and wrapped around my wrists. They pulled me, stumbling and tripping, into the branching hallway.

"I won't sleep on the ground."

He heaved out a breath, sounding more annoyed than he had the right to be. The shadows half-carried, half-dragged me down the hall. My feet gave out from under me and the cement rasped against the side of my sneakers. He entered a door, and it opened to another open, empty area. This place was huge, and every hall and room was so similar that it felt like I'd gone nowhere, which I knew wasn't the case.

Torches illuminated the path, and he crossed to another stone hall.

"You have pleased me, so I will reward you," he suddenly said after what felt like hours of silence. A reward? Was he letting me go?

He waved his hand, and his shadows opened a nearby door.

Once the shadows pulled me up to the threshold, I gasped and yanked until I was released. My bed! I shot toward my familiar violet bedsheets. I fell onto the mattress, bunching the rumpled blanket. The familiar smell of my detergent reached my nostrils. I was home.

I let out a gusty sigh of relief . . . then I saw the surrounding walls. Stone walls, similar to the rest I'd seen, made up the structure of the room. It was just part of my bedroom.

I sat on the edge of the bed before I fell to the floor. The bed creaked with the familiar squeak of the wooden frame. With my hands on my lap, I could only stare.

“Mortal.” His booming voice ripped me out of my thoughts. The corner of his eyes pinched slightly, and the feline-esque nostrils flared. He narrowed his eyes. “Your soul is pulsing.”

The comment was so odd that it took me a second to compute.

“My soul?” I whispered. “You can see my soul?” I said with more volume.

He made a sound that sounded like an affirmative hum, but it rumbled with a deep purr.

“I can see what is mine.”

“My soul is yours?” I scowled up at him. “How?”

“It does not stop pulsating.” He was suddenly peering into my face. “What emotion are you feeling?” His lip curled with disgust as he placed emphasis on the last word. I

jerked back, my eyes widening. He grabbed my jaw in a harsh grip. “Answer.” I winced at the push of his fingers into my face.

“Disappointment.” He cocked his head. “You’re not going to let me go . . .” My voice cracked.

“Ah,” he straightened, releasing my face. He said it like it was a huge discovery, but I was so lost. I didn’t know what went on in this inhuman creature’s head, and I didn’t want to know.

His proximity overwhelmed my senses. I stood so quickly that my chest brushed against him. The pleasure on his face when he’d come played in my memory. It lit the still simmering heat in my stomach. I backed away from him, fearful of the craving.

I was attracted to the monster.

My body had reacted to his forceful touches. He’d woken something dark inside me. A lust I didn’t want but couldn’t deny.

I eyed him where he still stood at the side of the bed, in deep contemplation.

His shadows crept out from him, like tendrils, reaching for my leg. It wound around my ankle, the cool sensation spurring the heat to flood south. I was close to panting now.

“Didn’t I please you?” I whispered, desperation seeping into my voice. I needed to get away from him; this sick perversion would only become worse if I remained here. “I know I did, you orgasmed.” His wings fluttered behind him, and he didn’t say anything, so I continued with my spiel, “Then why can’t I leave?”

He bared his sharp teeth, grabbing my hair in a harsh hold.

“My mortal.”

“You said my soul is yours.” The shadows licked up my thigh like the graze of a gentle touch. He yanked me forward by my hair so hard that I screamed, agony rippling over my scalp. I smacked against him. My harsh panting caused my nipples to graze against him, and the pinch of him gripping my hair turned up the flame that he’d caused. I gritted my teeth, and his chest vibrated. Suddenly, he tossed me, and I landed on the mattress with a grunt. With one of his sharp claws, he carefully grazed it across my forehead to move my hair to the side.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

“Enough.” He pulled the blanket over my body. “Sleep, Little Mortal.”

He leaned down and licked my cheek. I could only gawk at the length of his tongue; it was three times the length of a human one and the surface was rough.

He straightened, observing me expectantly. After another few seconds of him watching me, I licked my lips nervously.

“And you’re going to just stand there?” I blinked up at him. “Like right there?”

He didn’t answer, and those eerie black eyes didn’t waver. The light from the torches played along his features, making him look evil. I closed my eyes, not having the energy to fight. Not when I was already fighting the desire that he’d sparked to life.

As I slipped into sleep, the familiar sensation of being watched settled over me. I’d become used to it in the recent years, so it’d become a comfort, like I wasn’t alone.

As wrong as it was, clinging to the creature determined to have my soul seemed to be my only choice.

Weak,sniveling humans. They were only useful as a meal.

Yet, this one had made not one, but two deals with me.

She nestled deeper into the bed. Her lips parted with a small exhale. She had caused my release with that same mouth. My first from a human. With my prior sacrifices, one had tried to seduce me to gain her freedom, but her efforts were pathetic. I

believed it would be the same with this one. That I would throw her into the feeding room only to retrieve her once Novareth arrived—to devour her soul.

This Little Mortal had succeeded in bringing me to release in such a short span of time, when even Novian women always took much longer to pleasure me.

But I had already decided her fate . . . and I had no plans of letting her go.

The incessant sensation between my legs roused me from a deep sleep. I moaned, waking fully to my channel clenching with repeated throbs. I arched my hips to meet the tongue that hadn't stopped thrusting.

My brain struggled to catch up with the pleasure slithering up my spine. I focused on the large wings and ram horns within my view. I caught a flash of his long tongue shoved inside my sex.

“Stop!” I croaked, and he pulled back, but only to run his tongue up my slit again, inciting those same shivers. Dear God, this felt so good, but was so wrong. I couldn't stop my body from responding to the rough rasp. His head twisted the slightest bit, and he rubbed it against my inner walls. His tongue went so deep, I felt utterly full. He flicked the tip inside me, touching something. Gasping, my back arched off the bed. Sweet fucking bliss.

I whimpered, and my hands slid down to grip the top of his horns. My fingers slipped through the little nook, and the rough texture rubbed against my palms as I grabbed onto the thick protrusion as best I could. As I tipped my hips toward the pressure of his tongue, he thrust it inside me.

His sharp teeth were so close to my sensitive sex, but all I could focus on was the overwhelming pleasure.

He lifted from my needy heat and I cried out at the loss. The Lord of Shadows climbed over me, his body sinewy and movements too smooth. His knees pressed between my thighs. He paused there while his shadows tore the front of his linen pants open, making his cock spring free.

He leaned forward, propping his hands on the bed and continued the crawl up my body.

“What are you doing?” I breathed. He peered into my eyes, and the faint gray light from the window played along the side of his face, enhancing the eeriness of his onyx eyes.

“I am going to fuck you.” His roughened words reached into my stomach and fanned my flare of desire. He said it like he was gifting me something, but right now, I didn’t care.

He took my hips, the tips of his claws digging into my skin. My skirt bunched at my waist, and I pressed my palms to his torso. My hands spanned against his skin where his shirt split. The smooth, marbled texture was cold, but it did nothing to calm the burning in my body.

“At least let me wake up—” I cut off with a gasp. His cock slammed into me, and I gasped, stiffening from the invasion. “You’re too big.” I whimpered.

“You will take me,” he murmured, hovering over me. He reached out, and the back of his finger slid down my cheek in a caress. The careful touch was at such an opposite with how abrupt and violent he’d been when he kidnapped me from my home, but he moved hesitantly, as if he didn’t know how to be gentle.

“Stop.” My protest was weak and unsure, even to my ears.

He twisted his hips to feed another inch of his cock inside me. I screamed from the sudden stretch. Pain and pleasure molded together, fighting with one another.

“It hurts,” I whimpered.

“Hurts?” He cocked his head. “That is a good thing.” He sounded so sure, yet he seethed with confusion.

“No, it’s not.” I bunched the edges of his shirt in my fists.

There was a decision to make, and it was my only choice.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

What was wrong with my head that it intrigued me?

“It can feel better,” I whispered and smoothed my palm across his muscled, cold chest. His eyes widened, and a purr vibrated in his large torso. He leaned into my touch. “Let me get adjusted. Don’t move.”

Amazingly and mindbogglingly—he did.

I rubbed my fingertips against his skin and spread the linen, feeling his body. The smallest rounded feathers sprouted closer to his shoulders. They were so incredibly silky.

He groaned, and his hips twitched.

“No,” I said with force. He stilled at my order. My body relaxed another increment. I rubbed my fingers against the feathers.

I braced my heels into the mattress and lifted my hips. Rolling them in a circle, I exhaled sharply. My channel clamped onto the part of his cock that was pushed into me. His cock felt so different from Andrew’s. Not just the size. I could feel the dips in his shaft rubbing against my insides, while the thickness made his every movement stroke against my clit.

Dragging my palms down his chest, I tugged the shirt, and the fabric parted easily, spreading to give me a complete view of his body. The smooth line of his chest was lean and long. Feathers trailed down his sides, and I combed my fingers into them, digging my nails into the sensitive skin. His cock flexed inside me, and I became

wetter.

The tapered line of his waist flared out at his hips. Those same feathers ran upward from the hard plane of his belly. He didn't have a belly button and he was flat all the way down to his cock. I dragged my hand lower and rubbed my fingertips against the surface of the thicker base of his cock.

He grunted, his head falling forward. He was hyper-focused on my face, watching my every movement with an air of suspense. The small nodules at the base seemed to bulge more.

I lifted my hips again, and he thrust forward; this time, my sex stretched to accommodate his girth. He hissed, his upper lip curling up.

“Yessss,” I whispered, retreating my hips to thrust back onto him. Need dripped from my sex, and the wet sounds flared the blaze of need.

“I will not—” He closed his eyes and a shiver rippled through his body, and he shook against me. “Wait any longer.”

He grabbed my hips and slid out of me, letting me feel every inch of his long, thick girth, then he slammed back into me. The smack of my thighs against his body was hotter than it should be. He drew back and slammed into me once again, so hard it rattled my teeth, but my sex was so wet and needy that it only felt good. My hands dropped from feeling him up to the bunched bedsheets under me. He withdrew again, and I felt every inch of his ridged shaft.

I couldn't stop the movement of my hips. I writhed under him as he fed himself into me. A swell of need narrowed between my legs, and I strained as my release ripped through every limb. I screamed and grabbed at the feathers on his shoulders. He grunted and took hold of my hips, propping himself up onto his knees. He felt so good

pumping inside me. It was so wrong, but I didn't care right now. This was what sex was supposed to feel like. Not the dissatisfying experience I had with Andrew.

"Mortal . . ." He pumped his hips, feeding more of himself inside me. A purr vibrated in his chest, and the shudders reached inside my stomach and shot me into another orgasm.

I clawed my nails into his torso, dragging them down so hard that thin black lines sprouted.

Black blood?

He rammed into me harshly, a violent snarl ripping from his throat as he fucked me harder.

I didn't want him to stop.

His wings spread out, and he strained, his head falling back, making his feather-like hair flutter against his shoulders.

The creature fucking me was majestic and sexy in a weird way. His sharp teeth poked out from his lips. My channel flexed around his cock, and he pulsated once. Suddenly, agony flared through my channel, and I screamed, grabbing onto his hair again. He made a noise that sounded an awful lot like a gasp.

I writhed under him as the pain became a pleasure so intense I was thrown into a third orgasm. Every nerve ending in my body lit up.

My vision blurred, and he became a looming shadow over me. I wasn't sure how long I rode on the cloud of bliss, but when I came down, I was panting.

His upper body hovered close to my nose. The thin lines of blood had dried into his skin, and the scratches had healed.

I'd never lost control like that. I struggled to catch my breath as my mind raced. If this was a divine test, I'd utterly failed.

Pleasure rippled down my spine and settled over my limbs.

I tried to move my hips, and the tug inside me turned excruciating, stopping me from pulling away.

"Do not move," he hissed. "You will be shredded."

We were stuck together, literally. I panicked, pressing my hands on his chest and trying to pull myself up, but white-hot pain rippled through every nerve ending. I yelped and stopped moving.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

“Enough,” he hissed, his hand clamping down on my throat. He didn’t push down or restrict my breathing, but his point was made. “My barbs have hooked inside you.”

“Barbs?” My eyes were so wide that it hurt. What the fuck, barbs? . . . like a cat? I tipped my chin up to see his face. He slid his palm next to my head and bent in a way no human would have been able to. His wings stretched behind him, fluttering. I scanned his features and different explanations of what he was flitted through my head.

“What are you?” I whispered.

“Shadows.” His succinct answer explained nothing. The woman creature had called him ‘Lord of Shadows,’ but that gave me nothing other than what I could already see, which was that he controlled them.

“Why, how, where do you come from?”

“I am a creation of The Void.”

What did that even mean?! I bit back my angry words. He didn’t seem to understand what I was asking.

“What is The Void?”

“The creation.”

“Of what?”

“Everything. Universes, realms, energies, power . . .” He trailed off.

“Were you born?” I asked slowly, hesitantly. All creatures were born. They came from someone, but I was starting to get the feeling he was neverborn of anything. “Do you have a mother? Family?”

“The Void created me.”

I combed through myths in my head. After growing up with the whispers, I’d studied everything imaginable, trying to find meaning. Yet, I’d never seen anything that referenced a Void.

The expanding pressure in my channel suddenly disappeared with a throb of his cock. I gasped from the change in sensations. He pulled back the slightest bit and liquid escaped in a gush to the point that it felt like I had pissed myself.

He’d come inside me. Panic squeezed my throat like a vise.

“What if you got me pregnant?” I gasped.

A chortling sound left his mouth, causing his body to make mine vibrate, enflaming the ache. The sensation rippled pleasure through my senses, and I curled my fingers into the feathers near his shoulder, my spine arching to slide back onto his shaft.

This shouldn’t feel this good.

“A god cannot impregnate a human,” he said, humor in his tone.

His words stunned me to stillness. If only they’d also taken away my lust. His hips pumped, and he slid his slick cock back into me, the textured surface ripping another aftershock to life within me. I moaned, my eyes fluttering shut.

He was a deity.

He pumped inside me again.

“I do not want to leave.”

He sounded stunned. A guttural groan left him, flaring my lust, and coaxing a whimper from deep in my soul. His wings fluttered outward and lowered until they surrounded us. The edges of the feathers grazed my arms, as silky and soft as the rest. A shiver crested down my spine, and he spread my legs wider until he was flush to my sex. His arms curled under me, and he lifted me with ease, turning to drop onto his back with me on his chest. Not one movement removed him from his place inside me. My legs fell wide around his hips, and my cheek ended up smashed against the cold, smooth skin of his chest. He pulled his wings in tighter around me, nestling me into a comfortable cocoon of warmth.

I struggled to keep my eyes open.

I shot upright with a gasp. That was one fucked-up dream . . . the stone walls came into focus.

The Lord of Shadows wasn't my imagination. He was very real and very fucking scary. I scooted to the edge of the bed, and the soreness between my legs took my breath away.

And he'd fucked me. I closed my eyes, smoothing my skirt down until it fluttered near my ankles. Not only had he fucked me, I'd enjoyed it—too much.

I dropped my head back and dragged in a ragged breath. The creature seemed to think it had some weird claim on me, but why me?

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

I swiped the back of my hand across my cheeks. There was no use in crying. I sucked in a breath. The stickiness had dried between my legs, so my first goal was to find somewhere to clean up. Maybe a bathroom, too? I had to pee.

Getting to my feet, I walked over to the window to look out at the barren land. A deep blueish-purple tinted the sky. I shivered and inched back to the only door. Once I popped out of the room, I made sure to leave the door open. They all looked the same, and I didn't want to waste too much time looking on the way back.

This place was too big for there not to be somewhere to clean up. Fortunately, the torches never seemed to be extinguished, so that was a perk.

All I could hear was my breathing as I shuffled across the stone floor. I came to a stop at the intersection of a four-way hall, debating which way to go. The place was a labyrinth. I scratched my neck to rid myself of the crawling sensation. The same one that had haunted me since I turned eighteen. I'd always believed they were normal until I started talking to them. The first person I'd talked about them to was Aunt Vee, who'd dragged me right to a therapist, thinking it was a manifestation of my parents not being around. Other than a few other small hiccups, I'd learned to mask my peculiarities.

The feeling of uneasiness wouldn't leave. I whipped around, but I couldn't make anything out through the shadows. I chose the left path. Something cold grazed my arm and I whirled, my heart thundering.

"Hello?" I whispered. The flames flickered so violently that they cast shadows everywhere and . . . wait—shadows.

“You,” I whispered. I licked my lips, feeling silly at addressing the inky tendrils, but at this point, I’d officially lost it. “Is there somewhere I can bathe?”

Absolutely no reaction. I’d probably gone mad a long time ago. Before I could take a step, the ticklish touch returned. Gasping, I focused on the darkness twisting around my wrist.

“Can you understand me?” What was I doing talking to a shadow? The tendril lifted and pulsed, and like a finger, the darkness wiggled up and down as if in a nod.

It understood me.

“Is there a place I can bathe?” The tendril grew and became thicker. It nodded again.

The shadow wrapped around my wrist and tugged. I staggered after the black pulsating mass, picking up speed as it dragged me down a hall, back the way we’d come. Shadows whipped around me, touching and caressing my skin, leaving goose bumps in their wake.

It took me with it so fast that the walls blurred in my peripheral. It took a sudden right, and a wall rushed toward my face. I tried to fight the pull, struggling and yanking to get free, but it was clear: I wouldn’t get free. I squinted, waiting for impact, but the wall undulated, and I went through it. It spat me out into the empty throne room. He wasn’t here? The shadows guided me diagonally and to the corner behind the throne.

This passage led to a different hallway and down to a second entryway where it opened up to a room that was built of granite from top to bottom. Every inch was covered in smooth opalescent stone, and in the farthest half of the ballroom-sized room was a huge oval granite pool filled with water. It stretched from one end of the wall to the other. Hesitantly approaching in case something jumped out at me, I

peeked inside. On one side of the pool was a thin fissure that glinted like metal, running from one edge to the other. To the far right of the pool was an iron spout where water came out. The thin sliver on the left must be a drain. It had some sort of filtration system.

On the drain side was a rounded exit to a terrace. As soon as I stepped out into the open air, the trickle of water reached my ears. I shuffled to the side, taking care not to fall off the porch. I poked my head over the railing and immediately backed up. If I didn't die on impact, it would be an excruciatingly painful death. I returned to the safety of the side of the pool and looked at the shroud hovering behind me.

“Is there a bathroom or rather, a toilet?” Unlike the last few times, the shadows didn't wrap around my wrists. It faded and then thickened, clouding at the exit, pulsating like it was waiting for me.

I walked toward it, and it grew. Once I stepped into it, they curled around my arms and led me to the spot across from the terrace, through a slim path that turned dramatically to the right.

A toilet sat at the end, illuminated by the opening overhead. I swatted the cobwebs blocking my way, and they tangled with my hand. I didn't want to see what had created them. I shivered, but didn't stop my progress to the porcelain seat. It looked just like a toilet, with water and everything. But where was the plumbing?

As embarrassing as it might end up being, I didn't have the luxury of waiting. I bunched my skirt to my waist, then dropped and peed. Immediate relief relaxed my shoulders. I waited a bit to dry off since there was no paper. I popped to my feet and hunted for the lever . . . but there wasn't one.

I peeked into the toilet, and the water remained clear. It looked like it hadn't been touched. So weird. It had to be some sort of magic, which had been proven to exist.

I'd been dragged through shadows by some monstrous winged creature; nothing about this screamed normal.

I wasn't going to debate the blessing of the magical toilet, and headed back to the pool. I pulled my clothing off and gently laid it on the ledge. My cross settled on my chest in a comforting weight. I dipped my toe into the pool, which was surprisingly warm. Moaning, I stepped into the shallow end, walking deeper and deeper until it reached my shins. Then I got to washing, cupping my hands to scoop water as quickly as possible to clean every inch.

Moisture trickled down my body, and I flicked the droplets from my fingertips. Only the tips of my hair were wet and slicked against my shoulders, but I didn't want to risk going deeper into the pool when I couldn't see the bottom. I could swim, but what if there was something invisible in there, ready to drag me under.

I shivered. No thanks.

Once I pulled myself up on the ledge, I hovered near my clothes.

"A towel would be so good right now." I sighed, shivering and flicking yet more droplets from my fingertips.

The shadows undulated and began to vibrate. Something white shot at me. My scream was muffled when it smacked into my face. Just as quickly as it landed, I yanked it off, dangling the face towel in my hand. The shadows had gotten me what I'd asked for.

"Thank you," I breathed. If the shadows could bring me things, what else could it do? I dried myself off quickly and slipped on my clothes. "Can you take me home?"

The smoky cloud pulsed and then seemed to thin. It was disappearing!

“Wait,” I gasped, scurrying after it, the towel still in hand. I slowed midway down the dark hall. I’d scared the shadows away.

Keeping hold of the towel, I wrung it in my hands as I entered the throne room. There was still no sign of the Lord. Movement at the corner of my eye whipped me around, but upon turning, there was nothing to see.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

“I shouldn’t have asked that,” I said. “Please come back.” Nothing moved or made a sound. I sighed and spun back around, intending to find my way back to my room, but found myself facing the inky cloud formation. I swallowed my gasp and squeezed the cloth in my hand.

“Can you take me to him?” I waited, holding my breath to see if the question was too much and the dark cloudiness disappeared again. “Please.”

Tendrils whipped around, sliding against my skin, and dragged me after it. “You’re very pushy.”

I settled into a quick pace, as it brought me through another hall and another hidden sliver, cutting the wall in half.

A bellow bounced off the wall. Deep, violent, and terrifying. I stumbled, dropping my towel as I tried to stop the shadows from dragging me toward the evil sound, but it wouldn’t halt. They stopped at a huge wooden door. I licked my lips nervously.

“Is he in there?” I whispered. A tendril thickened and expanded from the mass, then it bent in a nod. I breathed out slowly and cautiously entered.

A similar rug to the one in the throne room, and in similar shades, spread across almost the entirety of the room. There were wispy black shadows along the edge of the deep russet of the rug. In the middle of the room was a large circular bed on a thick wooden platform with wispy carvings keeping the mattress off the ground. He was making all those noises. I shuffled closer and saw the mattress wasn’t like anything I was used to; it was some sort of pad. A wrinkle formed at the base of

his nose and between his closed eyes. He didn't have eyebrows in the human sense, but the small feathering trailing up the sides of his chiseled face spread above his eyes. His feather-textured hair slid back, allowing me a clear view of his pointy ears, which also had tiny feathers along the surface. I reached for the earring lying against his cheek, the gold surface glinting under the firelight from the torches along the four corners of the room.

He bellowed again, his torso jerking up so sharply that it was obvious he was in pain. I yanked back from touching him and pressed my hand to my stomach. Watching any creature hurting was never a strong suit of mine.

"Hey," I murmured. I tried to lean close to him but the base of the bed hovered around my torso.

His body stopped straining, but he panted. A small, agonized whimper left him. I couldn't continue to watch this. I reached up to grip his arm and shook it.

"Wake up," I shouted.

He hissed, still deep in the throes of the agony. I let his arm go and eyed the tall wooden frame. I bunched the pad he lay on and propped my foot on the edge of the base. Straining, I huffed and threw myself onto it, landing on my side. It was taller than necessary. I panted, climbing to my knees. I crawled forward until I was kneeling next to his hip.

His wings were outspread in both directions, twitching. I set my hand on his chest and shook again.

"Wake up!"

In a movement too quick for me to follow, he sprang up and pinned me on my back. I

gasped.

His onyx eyes settled on me, and his shadows whipped around him, his large wings stretching out. A frightening creature of nightmares stared down at me. I screamed, and he hissed in my face. His eyes were wild and maddened. Shadows whipped around both of us in a flurry; they seemed a part of him, no longer the single entity that had led me here while he'd been unconscious.

He tossed me onto my stomach, gripping my legs with a harsh hold, my skirt bunching around my waist. With a sudden twist of his hips, he buried himself inside me. The sudden invasion ripped a scream from my throat. He pulled back, and I felt every inch of his shaft, the stretch pressing into my clit. My gasp turned into a moan. I arched my spine and shoved myself back to get more of his length. He slammed into me again and his body curved over me, so the length of his torso pressed against my back. His claws dug into my skin, the slight pinch heightening the intensity.

My channel flexed around his cock, and I whimpered, needing more.

I rammed into her tight, hot channel.

I had fucked many Novian women, but none had caused this pulsating in my gut. A burn licked up my body, and I could not stop myself.

I hungered for her slick sex.

No female had taken me so sweetly. I withdrew my length and propped her waist higher to watch her pussy stretch around me.

I did not want this to end.

My third orgasm wracked my senses, and my arms gave out; they no longer had the

strength to hold me up. One cheek squashed against the bed. I whimpered, my legs twitching so much it was embarrassing. He drew back and thrust inside again, hitting my cervix this time. Pleasure and pain mingled, the very sensation I was becoming addicted to.

He snarled and seated himself against me, grinding so I felt every inch of him. The base of his cock throbbed, and the sharp sting was gone in the blink of an eye, becoming a pleasure so intense I couldn't breathe.

My body jerked of its own accord, and instead of overwhelming pain, it shot me into another level of orgasm. I screamed, twitching and writhing under him. He roared, and his wings moved so much the draft they kicked up wafted against my skin. I jerked on his cock, savoring his needy grinding against me.

I experimentally wiggled but couldn't move an inch. He'd hooked inside me again.

His hand lifted from my left hip, and he grazed his claws against the swell of my ass.

"I have never thought of humans as beautiful."

His deep voice reached inside me, and my channel squeezed him. He groaned, and his face nuzzled into my throat. Then his long tongue flicked out, dragging up the side of my neck. The rough sensation rippled pleasure through my senses. Feathers grazed the sides of my arms and shot tingles down my limbs.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

Tears trickled out from the corners of my eyes. Guilt swirled with utter bliss. How could I want more? I bunched the bedsheets under my cheek.

His cold palm slid down my back, raising the shirt over my breasts as he petted my spine. One arm slipped under my waist, and he pulled me flush to his torso, keeping me mounted on him. I reclined back, and the tip of his wings stretched out and fluttered as he cuddled me against his front. Settling into the comfort of his embrace, I exhaled, shivering.

His large thighs corralled my legs. He wasn't wearing anything, so I had a clear view of his skin. Feathers covered the sides of his thighs, leading all the way down to what I could see of his legs.

I ran my fingers along the top of his thigh. The flesh looked so smooth it could have been fake. As it felt every time I touched his skin, it was cold, and the more I rested my skin against his, the more it warmed, like it sucked heat from me.

"Relax, Little Mortal." He rubbed the back of his hand down my arm. With each swipe of his hand, I gave in to the lull. He nuzzled my temple. My eyes became droopy as I settled against him. The pressure in my sex loosened, and the release of his barbs inside me caused a euphoric sensation. I moaned, sinking back into him. His tongue slid across my temple.

"Did you just lick me?"

A vibration began to shake his midsection, and in effect, me. The coaxing rumble soothed my shock, and I drooped, wiggling my hips, reveling in the pulse of his shaft

inside me. His hips gyrated up, and he groaned.

“Your soul has been worth the wait,” he murmured. “How it hums.”

“My soul hums?” I rolled my head against his chest to peek up at him. He continued to pet me, and the sensation calmed me.

“Mysoul.”

My thoughts struggled to make sense of what that truly meant.

“No,mysoul,” I retorted, hoping it’d incite anger from him.

“Mine.” His arms banded around my torso. “It was given to me.”

“Given? No one can give away my soul,” I scoffed.

“A bargain was struck. Your soul was mine before the day you were birthed.”

Finally,answers.

“Who gave you my soul?”

“Shh, shh,” he murmured, rubbing my side. “Do not worry, you will not be around much longer.”

The woman’s words floated to the forefront. She’d made a comment about something called Novareth.

I licked my lips.

“Because Novareth is coming?” I asked.

His body jerked like he’d been electrocuted. So suddenly, he shoved me onto the bed, pinning me. The quick motion made the room spin, and I tried to catch my breath from being abruptly pushed onto my back. He loomed overhead, his eyes wide and so frighteningly black.

“Who has said this to you?” he hissed. “Speak!”

“What happens on Novareth?” I whispered.

My throat closed up, and I could only blink up at him as I trembled. His head twisted. He stared so long that it began to freak me out.

“Please,” I croaked. “Answer me.”

He didn’t even twitch. Finally, after what felt like hours, he stretched his wings behind him.

“Novareth marks your death.”

With those ominous words, an unnatural calm settled over my heart. I was going to die. My bottom lip trembled.

“I will have you until the time comes, Little Mortal.” His palm smoothed down the side of my head, frantically petting me like that would do anything to calm me.

I gripped the sheets under my hands.

I was going to die.

Unlike when I'd initially found him, he was so still, it was frightening. Since he was here, he must not be worried about me trying to kill him, probably because there was no way I'd be able to puncture his granite-like flesh. An inky shroud hovered beside him, no longer seeming a part of him as it did when he was awake.

I inched away from his massive body. He didn't even twitch. His body stayed incredibly still, but it allowed me to finally get a good look at him. Where the feathering at the sides of his legs started near his knee, it trailed down until the little feathers covered the entirety of his flesh below the shin. Around mid-femur, his leg bent at an angle and stretched into a wide, elongated hoof instead of a foot.

I scanned the rest of his body, and he wasn't as relaxed as I'd assumed. His limbs strained, almost to a point of pain, and his wings twitched with tremors. It reminded me of an injured bird, incapable of flying but desperately trying to do so.

A smudge of sympathy infected my heart, and I clenched my hand, digging my nails into my palm. I scooted to the end of the bed and slid off, landing with a huff and a pinch in my ankle. I sympathized with the creature's obvious pain, but I needed to find a way out of here. I slowly crept away from the ostentatious chamber, guided by the flickering flames atop the torches that never dimmed. A tug at my wrist made me hesitate for a beat, but I continued walking. The shadows flicked around me, whipping around my hair frantically, but I continued, ignoring the pulls and tugs.

“Stop.” I swatted at it.

I went left, down the hall, all the way to the end where darkness coated the hall so deeply that it seemed to be a part of the wall, but it was because there were no torches here.

The terrace in his room was much too high, and the one near the pool was on the same level. Maybe there was a way out on the lower level, in the room he’d originally left me in. I kept going, past the hall to enter the pool area, searching for the stairs.

I wasn’t sure how long I was running around for, but the path eventually spat me out at an inclined hall.

Light filtered in at the end, guiding my frantic steps. My heart pounded with violent pumps.

Sprinting toward the light was the exact opposite of what I’d heard my entire life. I huffed out a small laugh; I was going crazy. I clasped my crucifix to stop it from flopping around.

Reaching the light, I squinted and crossed the entryway to it, putting me at a different terrace. Shadows remained at the threshold, away from the light, writhing and pulsating like crazy.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. The shadows had helped me so much, and it was clear it—they, whatever it was, understood me. Once I reached the edge of the overhang, I looked down at the steep fall. It was still high up, but nowhere near what the other drops were like. If I had any chance of escaping, this was my shot.

I licked my lips, nerves hollowing out my stomach. I squeezed the iron railing, and considered catapulting myself over the edge. There were some bushes against the side

of the castle; if I angled toward them, they could break my fall . . . or my neck. I sighed and backed up, my foot snagging on a vine. I kicked it away and exposed the board it had covered.

I dropped to my knees, swiping my palm across the floor, nudging vines and weeds aside. Something creaked, and suddenly, the ground gave out from underneath me. I screamed, flailing.

Wood splintered with such suddenness that I didn't have a moment to brace myself, and I held onto the edge of the board for dear life. My hair whipped around my face, making tears sting my eyes. I couldn't think through the free-fall. In the next beat, I thumped onto a surface with a grunt, but the wood slid across brick.

I was going down a slant of the castle while on top of a slab of wood. The bumps and jostles wracked my body, making my stomach a mess of nerves. Squeezing my eyes tightly shut, I sucked in a final breath. This was it, I was going to die. I abruptly thumped to a sudden stop.

Wheezing breaths exploded from my throat, and I blinked to get rid of the tears blurring my sight. Raising my head, I scanned the ground, which was littered with dried leaves and debris. I let go of the plank and rolled onto my back. That was a close one; thank God I was okay. I panted, staring at the slope against the side of the castle leading all the way up to where I'd fallen from. It was so high up, how had I not gotten hurt?

The ground suddenly undulated as if it were breathing. I scrambled to my feet to stare at the dirt moving and shifting. A hand suddenly exploded from the depths, and like from a cheesy horror flick, it started to claw at the ground, skin flaking off its limbs to the point that I could see bone and the rotted leftovers of its flesh. My stomach dropped to the floor, and I took off running. Leaves and dried, curved vines littered the ground.

My breaths sawed from exertion, and I slowed to a stop, placing my hand against a trunk. The icy surface was almost too much to handle, but I was running hot enough that I sucked it up. My breath plumed in front of my mouth.

Craning my neck, I could see the spot I'd run from wasn't too far away. Are you fucking kidding me? It felt like I'd sprinted mile after mile.

I clasped my chest, heaving. Now, at this second, I regretted not being used to exercise.

A loud screech ripped my attention back to the rotted thing stumbling in my direction. It moved too fast. I gasped, pushing off the tree.

I had always judged how the people in those horror movies turned to look behind them, but my God, it was so hard not to. A hand wrapped around my elbow, and I gasped, fighting against it.

"Stop, thrashing," a male voice ordered. It wasn't the animated husk thing. I peeked backwards to see the body on the floor, beheaded. Another tall male swung a weapon and sliced the husk's arms off. He looked normal from the back. I turned away to look at the man holding me.

He was tall, and his skin was a peachy hue, humanoid. Even his nose and, for all intents and purposes, he seemed like a normal, extra-tall human male . . . until you got to the pointed ears and his canine teeth that were sharp and elongated—like the woman I'd found when the Lord first brought me here.

"What do we have here?" The one who had hacked up the husk straightened, wielding a large machete.

"Looks like a human," the one holding me sneered with a shake of my arm. I winced

at the pinch. “Where is the Lord of Shadows?”

He shook me again.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

“Let me catch my breath,” I heaved.

He let me go, and I drooped against a tree, watching more of them come through the trees. There were at least fifteen of these males. All different shades and sizes, but all intimidating and holding weapons.

“What are you?”

“We ask the questions.” The one with the machete pressed the blade under my chin, making me lift my face. They were dressed in clothes similar to the Lord’s. Loose linen shirts and old-fashioned trousers.

“She’s a human. Stupid and unknowing,” the one to initially grab me said, peering into my eyes. When he faced me, I saw he had a gash running across his forehead. “We are Novians. We want to kill the monster in there.” He exaggeratedly pointed to where the castle peeked through the tree tops.

They knew about humans, and they knew about him.

“How do I get back home?” I blurted. Machete boomed a laugh and slid his blade into the scabbard at his side. He was suddenly in my space, the front of his body pressing against me. He gripped my thigh harshly and yanked my leg up. A tear ripped down my skirt, and he ground against my bare sex, his trousers rough.

I gasped, shoving at his chest.

“As stupid as humans are, they’re still good to fuck,” Machete said.

“Let me go!” The cloying stench of rot clung to him.

Disgust curled through my stomach.

“She may know a way inside, brother,” the nicer one drawled. Machete gyrated again, and his hard length shoved against me.

I squeezed my eyes tight, trying to breathe through the nausea. With all the violence the Lord directed at me, at least he didn’t stink.

“Kill the human and let’s destroy the creature,” a male voice bellowed from the direction of the others.

“Use her as a lure,” a different voice called.

A thundering roar echoed so loudly that the trees shook. The Lord of Shadows, who was completely naked, landed on the ground with an explosion of leaves. Shadows whipped around him madly.

“Mortal, come here,” he ordered. The guy gyrating against me banded a hand around my throat and turned, yanking his blade out of its scabbard as he did so.

“You need this?” Machete shook me, pressing the blade to my throat. My eyes flicked around at the Novians, all aiming weapons at the Lord, yet he didn’t look . . . anything. Not concerned, not angry, just blank.

“Release her,” was all he said, his head cocked.

“We have had enough, Corvus Zypher. You will not steal any others,” the male with the scar said.

“You were warned.” An inky tendril wrapped around Machete’s throat, and it squeezed so fast, I didn’t even have time to process it, because with my next breath, the shadows beheaded him. Blood splattered across my cheek.

“Run,” he stared directly at me, and his shadow tugged me. That was all I needed to hear to take off.

My split skirt parted to allow me more freedom to escape. I dug deep and ran as hard and as fast as humanly possible. Battle cries broke out behind me, and I looked over my shoulder to see shadows creeping across the ground, engulfing it and expanding like a living creature.

Screams and squelches erupted, and I whipped my head in front of me, focusing on getting away.

I swatted the thickening foliage, trying not to pay attention to how different it looked compared to how a human forest would look. There was a break in the trees a few more feet ahead. I narrowed in on it and broke through, only to stumble to a stop. The ground cut off abruptly, dropping into a deep canyon where a river rushed at the bottom. The inky color of the water reflected the overcast gray lighting of this world.

I turned around to face the way I’d come. The screaming hadn’t tapered off yet, maybe I should just wait here?—

A decaying hand exploded from the ground and grabbed my ankle, squeezing so hard that something popped. I screeched and jerked my other foot back to stomp on it. More rotted hands clawed at the dirt with such fervor that it wouldn’t take long for them to emerge. Time ticked, and with each breath, I ran out of options. An animated husk managed to free itself and clambered to its feet.

I turned back around. I’d rather splat than be eaten and torn apart by these things.

Gripping my cross, I catapulted myself over the edge.

With my shadowscoating the various Novians, I fed on them all, devouring their souls. I took every single atom making up their essence until they were nothing but dust.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

The remnant agony of my slumber rippled over my body, but the sudden influx of feeding allowed me enough strength to keep me awake.

The Little Mortal had left my castle—how dare she?

Shadows whipped around my arm; violent, angry, and insistent.

I silenced them, and they calmed and curled around my arms.

“Where is the human?”

I swept a shadow out to find her so I could see her through them. A scream ripped through the air. Hers.

I plunged myself into the forest to find her.

My hair whipped around me with such a flurry that it stung. I couldn't help the scream that escaped me as I fell. The dark depths of the rushing river approached at a frightfully alarming rate. Rocks framed both sides. There would be no way I'd survive this. I closed my eyes.

Please let my death be fast.

A mass slammed into my side from the opposite direction I expected. The falling sensation, making my feet tingle, moved up to my stomach.

I pried my eyes open to see the Lord sneering down at me.

He'd plucked me out of the air. His wings spread out, wide and magnificent. Light glinted off them, making them seem a deep midnight blue.

"Mortal," he spat, his wings beating with violent whooshes. "You do not obey." He bared his teeth, and the angle of his dive turned upward with the beat of his wings. The whipping wind pushed my hair out of my face. He kept flying, following the path up the jagged mountainside.

"Where are you going?" My words were swallowed by the wind. I gripped the front of his shirt with both fists, holding on for dear life even though he kept an arm braced under my ass. Angling my face to the side, I peered around. The ground was so far below that my stomach rose to my throat, and my fingertips stung. I held onto him tighter, squeezing so hard my hands went numb.

Corvus Zypher slowed his ascent and swooped over a dip embedded in the side of the mountain. Those people—creatures—Novians in the valley had shouted his name like they could command him based on his name. My mind was in survival mode, and even now, I struggled to make sense of the fact that I wasn't going to die by splattering or drowning.

Corvus's angle dipped, swooping into the side of the mountain. He slammed me against a straw-covered floor, wrenching a groan from my gut upon impact. His arms propped his body over me so he was no longer grabbing onto my butt, and he hovered over me, his teeth bared.

"What are you doing?" I panted, scrabbling to back away. I dug my heels into the floor and only managed to scoot back an inch. He yanked my legs open, snarling.

"You smell of another male," he spat and lunged for my throat. His clawed hand wrapped around my neck, and he pinned me to the floor, stopping my frantic retreat. I gawked up at him, shoving and digging my fingers into his cold arm, but I couldn't

budge him in the slightest.

His engorged shaft bobbed, thick and dripping precum.

“Corvus—” He rammed into me, his frightening, inhuman face hovering over mine, his body curved so his cock was seated deep inside. He pulled back, dragging his length out, then he slammed back in, making my teeth rattle with the thud of our skin meeting.

I gasped, flames licking up my spine and spiraling me into fiery need. The ridges of his cock pressed against my clit, and he fit the flared base of himself inside me. The small nodules at the base must be where his hooks extended from. He grunted, animalistic and wild. So much so, it channeled this visceral reaction through my veins. Overwhelming lust wracked my sex, making my channel clench around him greedily.

His clawed hand ripped the fabric near my belly button, leaving tatters in its wake. He pressed his palm to my stomach.

“Feel me inside you, Little Mortal. You are mine. You belong to me and no other.” His words were guttural and chilling. The threat somehow fanned my need. I arched my spine to meet his next rut, my head rolling back on the straw.

His speed picked up, and every time he seated himself fully inside me, his cold thighs slapped against my more sensitive skin. The hyper-sexual sounds of fucking fired through me, driving me wild.

“More,” I moaned, running my fingers over the cold flesh of his chest.

His thrust hesitated, and I could only writhe on his cock, trying to chase the sensation that drove me crazy.

A small furrow at the base of his nose deepened with his grunt. Bliss flickered over his odd features, and he trembled.

He was so fucking hot,there I admitted it. His top lip curled up in pleasure, showing me every one of his sharp upper fangs. My channel flexed around him, and an orgasm rippled through my walls, gripping on to him tightly. He hissed, but his thrusting didn't stop.

Shadows licked up the sides of my skin, their caresses just as delicious as the cock inside me.

His hand on my belly enhanced the fullness. I whimpered, clawing at his chest. A thin, black line opened up on his chest, and the liquid oozed out. His next thrust rubbed my thumb through the liquid and stained his cold flesh, leaving the skin clear as if there had never been a cut.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

An aftershock wracked my body, and I stiffened.

“Look at my cock inside you,” he snarled. I was too weak to move, too supine. He gripped my hair stiffly and forced my head up. “Now.”

I groaned and tucked my chin closer to my chest. He held me higher, my midsection raised up. A visible bulge expanded below my belly button.

He withdrew and slammed back into me, making me watch the retreat of his cock. All without releasing the punishing hold in my hair. Why did that make me so excruciatingly wet? His commanding fucking fired through every nerve ending. I couldn't get enough.

The sight of his retreating shaft shot me into another release, and I squeezed my eyes shut, fireworks exploding behind them. I whimpered, my hands falling limp as he released my hair, the tips of his claws grazing against my scalp.

He pulled out of my sex, so suddenly that I gasped, my eyes peeling wide. He gripped his shaft, the long member jutted, and warmth spread across my sex. The clawed hand slid down his wet shaft, and he groaned, more release spraying over my stomach. The seed was milky and hot.

He bowed his head forward, and a guttural groan ripped through the cavern.

“I will coat you in my seed.” His wings fluttering behind him. “Mine,” he snarled. Another jet of cum spurted across my flesh.

The magnificent monster hovering over me had fucked my brain up. I wanted this. I needed this. I rolled onto my knees, the tattered skirt falling around my thighs. I crawled forward, wrapping my lips around the tip of his cock.

His head fell forward, his long, feathery hair shrouding his face. I curved my tongue around the tip and gripped his shaft with one hand, fingertips not meeting.

He hissed out a low breath.

I ran my palm up the dip of the ring-like ridges and flicked my tongue against his narrow tip.

He pitched forward, his hand landing on my head, the tips of his sharp claws sliding along my scalp. The slight scratches lifted goose bumps along my body. I gasped, shivering.

He pushed my head down, cutting off my breath, and his hips thrust, shoving the tip of him against the back of my throat. I gagged, and his claws flexed in my hair. Cum exploded against the back of my throat, and I worked to swallow, my eyes watering. But I didn't care, I wanted his grunts and hisses. They woke something deep and needy in my soul.

His release overflowed my mouth and trickled from the corner of my lips. I swallowed what hadn't escaped, the earthy taste of him warming my stomach. I withdrew my lips from around him and released the bottom half of his shaft, which was too long to put in my mouth.

Corvus dropped to his hands and knees. Even on all fours, it was frightening how large he was. He leaned forward and ran his long, pointed tongue against the side of my lips. The rough texture collected the cum painting my chin, and then, just as easily as he lowered, he stood to his full height, flaring his wings outward.

Shadows wound around my arms and pulled me to my feet. As soon as I put weight on it, pain assaulted my leg. I lifted that foot to my toes and bent down to move my skirt aside. A gash had dripped down my ankle and pooled in the edge of my sneaker. At least, the line of blood had dried, and the wound was no longer dripping. Now that I wasn't enveloped in a lusty haze, the sting was obvious.

Corvus suddenly plucked my foot from the floor, stretching my leg up so high I lost my balance. I gasped, my arms windmilling in my fall backward. He seemed so invested in my wound that he wasn't paying attention. I clenched my eyelids shut and braced for impact, but before I smacked on the straw-covered floor, tendrils caught me.

"What did this?" he hissed.

I stopped thrashing against his stiff grip. He loomed, holding my ankle, while I panted, a few feet off the ground. The shadows had caught me. I experimentally tugged at my foot.

"The husk who grabbed me before I jumped must have cut me."

"Who is 'husk'?" he bellowed. It echoed off the walls of the cave. "I will make their death long and painful. Where is the creature?" He seemed visibly ticked off, and it was shocking to say the least.

"Why are you angry? You've hurt me."

His head cocked, those onyx eyes focused on me so intensely it made my stomach whirl with a mix of nerves and excitement.

"No one harms you but me."

The silence after his announcement was deafening.

“That’s so comforting,” I mumbled, glaring. He didn’t give me a heads-up before he swept me into his arms, and with a wide stride, plunged us off the face of the cliff. I screamed, and my hair was sucked into my mouth. I sputtered, struggling to catch my breath. Just as suddenly, his wings arched wide and his arms dug into my belly with the abrupt swoop.

I had a clear view of the top of the trees as he flew toward the castle.

“There’s no sun.” I stared up at the gray sky. There was no specific origin of the light; it was just a blanket of gray. His cold arm pressed against my stomach, enhancing the hollow sensation of hunger as I suddenly realized I was starving. When we got back, I’d need to raid those pantries again.

I beat my wings, angling for the perch near my sleeping chamber, and pulled the fragile Little Mortal closer. As much as I did not want to extinguish her, I would not stop myself from feeding on her brilliant, pure soul on Novareth.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

I tried to tug my foot out of his grip, yanking the cloth his bed was made from. It felt like a similar texture to his shirt, but the insides moved a little more than a mattress from Earth, as if it was filled with feathers or wool.

“Stay still,” he ordered, pulling my leg until I was once again on my back, flicking aside my ripped skirt. It parted to the middle of my thigh, and I tugged it under me to keep it from riding up and exposing my still-sensitive sex. He lowered his head and ran his tongue along the cut.

I propped myself up on my elbows, watching him clean away the dried blood, taking care to collect every speck of it. The slow glide of his rough tongue spawned butterflies to life. He swirled his tongue along the top of my foot.

Was he . . . ‘bathing’ me?

This was turning me on when it really shouldn’t. I licked my lips and dropped my shoulders from their tight position near my ears. He swiped his long tongue up my leg, lulling me until energy leaked out of my limbs, and I fell back.

“Corvus?” He stilled, head slowly lifting to peer at me. “Corvus Zypher?”

He grunted and continued running his tongue across my ankle.

“If you weren’t born, who named you?”

“I spawned knowing my name.” He cocked his head. So, when he . . . spawned. That was so strange.

“I like it.” He blinked at me. In a swift movement, he let go of my foot and crawled up my body. I tipped my chin higher to keep my eyes on his. He watched me with such intensity, it made me nervous. “Why did those Novians try to kill you?”

“How do you know about Novians?” There was no inflection in his tone.

“One of them said that’s what they were.”

He made a sound similar to a disapproving tsk.

“There are many realms, but you fragile humans are blind to them.” Realms sounded crazy and mind-boggling. I’d always believed in more than Earth and humans being out there, but not realms. The confirmation stunned me.

“Why did they say your name like they could make you obey?”

“Villagers tell tales. They weave and twist stories of the beast living in his castle. A creature of darkness.” That must have been where the title of Lord came from.

“I remember the days when they used to provide sacrifices and tie them to podiums.” He bared his teeth in a macabre smile, dropping to his side and leaving one leg sprawled over me, which was much heavier than he could have understood. I wiggled to lessen the pressure on my femur. “They served as nothing more than lovely snacks. They go from worshipping to hatred.” His tongue flashed across his lip. “Novians are as fickle and pathetic as humans.”

I huffed, offended. The feather-like hair framing his forehead fluttered.

“You know, we’re not all like that, and stuffing all humans in one box?—”

His hand curled around my mouth, cutting me off. My words turned muffled, and I

sank my teeth into his palm.

He yanked back, hand raised, gaping at it and then at me, mouth slightly parted to show fangs.

“That’s what you get,” I grumbled.

He blinked once, and a coughing chortle left him. He wound his arm around my waist until I was tucked against his body. His wing fell over me, enveloping me in warmth and darkness.

“You will rest.”

I grumbled again, but couldn’t deny my exhaustion as it dragged me into a peaceful sleep.

I swam close to the deep end of the water, kicking my feet as I reveled in being clean. Corvus leaned against the furthest point in the granite pool, head tilted back and eyes closed, his face turned toward the sky.

“I wish I had soap,” I mumbled, dog-paddling across the deep end.

“Soap,” Corvus murmured, peering at me. “I will get you soap.” He held his hand out, and his shadows pulsated and expanded before evaporating, leaving behind a bar on his palm.

I gasped and swam to him, exerting more effort. The water felt denser here, and the coloring wasn’t a trick of the light; it was a deep, startling blue.

“How did you do that?” I sputtered as water fell from my mouth. Once I reached him, I lunged for it, clinging to his arm to give myself a rest.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

“My feeding allows me to bring things across the realms.”

Feeding.

“You fed on the Novians?”

“Devoured their souls,” he grunted.

“And that’s why they became husks,” I breathed, understanding how his shadows had been able to bring my bed now. He’d fed on the woman’s soul, the one I’d been in the cell with, and after that, he brought my bed over. I scrubbed the soap between my palms, the fragrant scent pluming to my nose, a mix of bergamot and . . . lavender? I sniffed again. It was kind of like lavender, but there was an undertone that I couldn’t match.

“And you can bring anything over?”

“Larger items require a larger sacrifice.”

“Oh,” I whispered, scrubbing the suds over my arms and keeping my eyes lowered.

“Then why do you need me if you can feed on souls?”

Silence to the point that all I could hear was the suds.

I peeked up through wet eyelashes.

He studied me with those black fathomless eyes, so dark I could see my reflection.

“I must feed on a pure soul spawned from greed.” My heart dropped into the water, along with the bar of soap. I scrambled to grab it and dunked under the water, flailing for it. Holding my breath, I swam under, the water pressure making my movements slower. His words resonated in my head. How could I be ‘spawned from greed’?

He wrapped his hand around the back of my neck, and I breached the surface of the water with a gasp. I swiped my palms across my face.

“Do not do that,” he bellowed, his chest jerking violently, his fangs showing with the curling of his lip.

“What are you talking about?” I heaved a breath in.

“Humans cannot breathe under water,” he shouted.

As I caught my breath, I studied the stiff line of his face, the sneer, the furrow at the bridge of his nose.

He was worried.

“I’m okay,” I said, winded. His hand on the back of my neck softened its grip, and his features smoothed out. A thick, dark cloud spanned the surface of the water.

He didn’t let me go; instead, he toted me out of the pool. I scrambled onto my tiptoes, grabbing at his side to keep myself balanced.

“What are you doing? We aren’t done talking.” I wasn’t done getting answers was more accurate. “What do you mean ‘spawned from greed’?”

His nostrils flared the slightest bit.

“Mina Garcia.”

The name struck me across the face.

“My mom . . .” I whispered.

“Bargained your soul before your birth.”

“No, that doesn’t make sense.” I shook my head so hard it made me dizzy. “She didn’t give my soul away. She died giving birth to me.”

“No, she did not.”

My mind raced.

“You’re saying she abandoned me?” I croaked in disbelief.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

“Abandoned?” His eyelids narrowed as if he was mulling over the meaning of the word. “Being deserted or cast off . . .” he said lower. “Yes.” He cocked his head, onyx gaze settling on my face. “You were ‘abandoned.’ I heard her pleas for help during a Blood Moon. I assisted for a price. Your pure soul was mine, she agreed.”

“Do you know where she is? Did you kill her?” My breath hiccupped on a gasp, and my nose burned with restrained tears. I wouldn’t be able to hold them back much longer. There was no love lost toward the woman who birthed me, but the discovery hurt. He strode toward the edge of the bathing area like he hadn’t rocked my world with his revelation.

“She is dead.”

“You killed her,” I choked out.

“No. She did it herself.” He dragged me forward.

“Wait, my stuff,” I gasped, trying to turn around to where I’d laid my clothes and shoes out under the sky. I’d been hoping it could help them dry faster, but honestly, it wasn’t going to make a difference; it wasn’t like there was a sun.

His arm curled under my knees, and he lifted me against his hard chest, the side of my soft body pressing into his cold surface. The shock of being lifted undid the barrier I’d erected around me.

Tears trickled down my face, and I sucked in a breath, trying to cut myself off from the emotions bubbling through the cracks. Aunt Vee had been all I needed, but the

discovery that my birth mom killed herself still sucked.

“You are.” He paused. “Crying?” His tone tilted upward at the end, almost like he was confused. He seemed to know things, but in the most basic sense, there appeared to be a disconnect with understanding, as if from an observer who has never felt these emotions on a personal basis.

“Little Mortal.”

He leaned down, and his rough, long tongue glided up my cheek. It stunned me so much that it dried my eyes. He continued to stride down the long hallway, but I wasn't paying attention to my surroundings. All I could focus on was the sway of his wide gait and his side profile.

My stomach continued to flip and roil, the same way it did when I was excited. I couldn't stop the bubbling emotion expanding in my chest. I already knew I was attracted to this odd beast, but I shouldn't be feeling anything for him.

With a suddenness that took my breath away, he plopped me down on a bed of accumulated shadows. My body hovered feet off the ground, and I gasped, reaching out for him, but he was already sprawling on his throne. I wobbled unsteadily, sure I would fall, but the inky tendril wrapped around my waist, keeping me upright.

They slowly floated me over to him, and I couldn't focus because all I could see was the long, tapered torso leading to his stiff, unusual cock. As soon as I was within his arm's distance, he plucked me to him, gripping onto my hips. His shadows wound around my knees and spread me in the same motion that he impaled me on his cock. A breath stalled in my throat. My channel fluttered around his shaft as if trying to pull him deeper. Ohhhh, that felt so good.

His claws dug into my hips, and he seated me all the way to the base of his cock,

wrenching free my gasp.

“Yes,” he hissed. “No crying.” He thrust with a grunt, my channel clamping down on him as my knees widened, bracing against the divot near his hips. The simmering heat blossomed into full-on lust, and I writhed, moving my hips in a circular motion. My head fell back, making my hair tickle my lower spine.

Sensation rasped across my nipple, and I tucked my chin to my chest to study the soft graze of his claw against the tip of my breast. The dark, onyx claw rubbed the sensitive brown point, and all I could do was pant and wiggle atop him. The careful touches seemed exploratory.

“I have observed humanity for ages and have never witnessed beauty close to yours.” The purred words made my sex clamp around him, and he made a sound that had no human equivalent. It was something between a purr and a groan.

I placed my hands against the tuft of feathers above his cock and below the spot where there should have been a belly button. The plane of his strong torso dipped with hints of muscle. I glided my hands upward until I reached the small feathers along his neck.

There was something so viscerally appealing to his face when he came—a viciousness that rocked through me. I bunched the feathers along his shoulders and leaned forward, pressing my knees into the dip against his throne, and lifted until I rose over him.

With me propped like this, we were at eye level. Although he didn’t have pupils, I could tell he was staring at my face. Maybe it was the sense I’d developed with the years upon years that he’d watched me with his shadows.

I kept my gaze glued on his features and slammed down.

“Corvus,” I moaned, the name escaping with pants.

He snarled, head falling against the back of the throne, and the bridge of his nose scrunched. His hips lifted, driving his cock into my sex. I gasped again, and his cold hands slid down my bare sides, following the curve of my body until his claws dug into my lower back.

I fell over the edge and into an orgasm that rocked my entire frame, but I didn’t stop moving. My thighs trembled from pleasure and exertion, but I refused to stop, it felt too good.

Within the whirl of need, the glaring truth sank into my reality. I felt comforted . . . by him.

I squeezed my eyes shut, losing myself in the pleasure of riding his cock.

She slumbered on my nest, curled against my side for a rotation.

I shook off the encroaching drag into unconsciousness, struggling to remain aware and awake. I would not be able to fight it much longer.

Soon, unconsciousness would suck me into a fathomless void where lashes licked across my flesh.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

My Little Mortal gasped, her head moving side to side—was she unhappy? Even in my short travels to the mortal realm, it had been a concept many humans moaned and whined over. I did not understand it, and I had no interest in it—until now.

Tears had dripped from her eyes; it caused this visceral throb to travel through my torso.

She was not in pain when I pleased her. I stretched my wings out of my path to crawl down until I hovered over her succulent pussy.

I pried her knees apart, exposing her. My seed had filled her to the brim, claiming her.

Her scent, sweet, earthy—and wholly mine—lured me forward, and I ran my tongue along the slit.

I focused on the little throbbing bud and tongued her again. She moaned, her hips lifting with a groan. I did not think it possible for a mortal female to taste so decadent. Nor did I expect to enjoy feasting on the nectar between her legs. No mortal or Novian had ever caused in me this feral urge to claim. I slid my tongue into her tight sheath.

Her sex clamped around my tongue, clenching as if it never wanted to release me. I rubbed against her inner walls, pumping with each lick.

It did not take her long to reach her climax, her channel flexing as sighs left her lips. Such sweet sounds from my Little Mortal. She wriggled onto her side and curled her

arm under her cheek, settling into sleep.

Her soul glowed brilliantly, ready to be devoured on the quickly approaching Novareth when I would feed on her soul and extinguish her being.

I walked along the hallway, working on memorizing the small shifts in the wall in order to learn my way around the castle. The crack in the wall, the torch that was a few inches lower than the rest—they were all methods for me to remember my way back.

After bathing, the shadows had expanded to bring me another face towel, and it currently trailed behind me, almost not seeming to have energy. I could understand that, considering I was famished and on my way to get food from those pantries in the room he'd brought me to the first time. I was glad I'd eaten when he dumped me in the room, because it'd held me off until now.

Even as hunger pains twisted my stomach, I couldn't get rid of the panic of not being able to wake Corvus. I'd left him in his bed, sleeping, and he'd not even twitched after the time I'd spent trying to shake him awake.

Shadows wrapped around my wrist and jerked me to the side, and now I faced a door. A very familiar one. I shoved through to a descending staircase with those same slim, pizza slice steps. With my palm pressed against the wall, I inched my way down as slowly and safely as possible. One misstep would send me on a painful tumble. It took me a while to get to the base that opened to the endless hallway, but I made it.

Once in the small room, the first thing my eyes snagged on was the husk on the floor. It was drained, as if she'd been put into a food dehydrator.

I shivered and yanked my gaze away, shuffling over to the pantries lining the furthest wall from the door. I quickly found water bottles and chugged them, then took a fresh

one, tucked it under my arm, and closed the pantry to look at the next section containing food. There was nothing new. I grabbed a packet of the jerky and saltine crackers, trying not to think about the dead body in the room as I stuffed my face.

“Don’t judge me,” I muttered at the pulsating black fog clinging to the side of the wall.

I hadn’t realized how hungry I was. I finished up the entire packet and held the trash. There was nowhere to put it, so I placed it in a neat pile on the surface in the pantry and closed it, planning to ask him where he disposed of things later.

Here I was thinking I’d be staying with him, as if we were in a relationship. I scoffed and thumped the water back down in the pantry.

I wasn’t living after Novareth—he’d made that clear.

Clean, fed, and hesitant, I left the chamber to return to try and wake Corvus. As soon as I took a few steps, a low sob echoed to me. I whirled, but it sounded like it was coming from multiple locations. It was the damn acoustics of this place, noise bounced off everything because there was nothing to muffle it. The haunting cry came again, and I squinted to the left. It had to come through the wall. I inched closer.

Were the shadows trying to hide a passage? Approaching, I held out my hand, and it went into the accumulated shadows. I stepped through the hole that cut into a corner and spat me out on the other side into another hall with torches lighting up the way. I whirled and eyed the surface I’d walked past. It almost seemed an illusion with how the torch light flickered.

Making my way toward the murmurs, I passed empty cells, the heavy smell of rust permeating the air. Movement caught my eye, and I rushed to the cell with hands poking out of the bars. As I neared, I saw the male leaning against the iron, his arm

through the bars. His attention fell on me, eyes peeling wide.

“Let us out,” he snarled, flashing fangs—a Novian. At his words, more people crowded the bars, grabbing and slipping hands through them. There were humans in there, too. There had to be a minimum of fifteen people crammed into the small space like some sick farm.

The cell across the way held a smaller group behind the rusted bars.

I went to the latch of the cell nearest to me, which had the most people. I yanked at the heavy latch securing the door closed, struggling to lift it.

“Hurry,” a human man next to the Novian hissed.

“I’m trying,” I snapped, miffed, angling myself to the side and bending my knees. Propping my shoulder under the latch, I braced and used my leg muscles to push.

A high-pitched squeal ripped through the cell, and finally, it popped free, and the latch thudded open. Immediately, they shoved, and the hinge of the door screeched, assaulting my ears. In a scramble so fast I struggled to grasp, they swarmed out, crowding me and getting in my face.

“Show us the way out,” he snarled, holding a jagged rock toward me. I put my hands up and backed away.

“What have you done?” Corvus’s silky voice caressed my ears. Every single Novian and human recoiled, backing away as a collective.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

“Release us, Lord of Shadows,” the Novian snapped, his hand squeezing the stone.

Corvus didn’t even look at him, and I saw it because I anxiously watched him approach me. I craned my neck to keep my eyes on him. Shadows whipped around him, and his wings twitched with irritation.

“What is this?” I croaked, jabbing a finger at the crowd.

Corvus cocked his head. He looked evil and frightening—like death.

“Meals,” he responded succinctly.

My mouth dropped, and I didn’t know why I was so fucking shocked. The prisoner’s shouts and sobs ripped me out of my paralysis. “Let them go.”

“No.” He said nothing else.

“I’ll kill you?—”

Corvus lifted his hand, and shadows enveloped the Novian, whirring until he was hidden within the shroud. Once it pulled away, it left behind a husk. Cries exploded from the rest of the observers.

“Corvus,” I snapped, feeling like I was going crazy. Guilt writhed in my gut because I’d been enjoying him while people were suffering down here.

“Yes, my Little Mortal?” he rumbled, his voice silky and dangerous. A swell of

chatter wove across the onlookers. Pieces of conversation reached my ears.

One of the women detached from the huddle.

“I will offer myself to you, Lord of Shadows.” Her expression was set with determination.

“What are you doing?” I spat, shaking my head.

She raised an eyebrow at me and turned away. “I am a much better option than this woman, Lord.”

I couldn’t see the color of her eyes with the shadows playing along her features. “I will please you,” she purred, her voice taking on a seductive tone.

I gasped, my eyes widening, but worse was the jealousy thickening in my throat. She took another step forward, and shadows descended upon her. It happened within the span of moments, then they lifted, also leaving a husk that began to disintegrate. She’d pissed him off.

He hadn’t even allowed me a moment of jealousy. I studied the people gawking at the dust on the floor. One of the men shook with rage, and his eyes settled on me.

“Don’t—” He charged at me. I backed up as another and then another person joined, converging on me. The flames of the torches fluttered with the whip of darkness, and screams erupted through the shadows. They suddenly cut off, and the shadows dissipated, leaving me staring at piles of husks, some disintegrating more than others.

Corvus shivered and flared out his wings. He groaned with pleasure.

“I will bring you anything you please, Little Mortal, they have fed me.”

My mouth closed and opened.

“Why,” I croaked.

“None threaten what is mine. They deserved death.”

He snarled, pacing from one end of the chamber to the other. I tried so hard not to look at him, fixing my gaze on the terrace in his bedroom. The platform was blocked by a see-through door, but I could see the columns propping up the awning over it. He made me feel things, and I knew it was wrong, but I still wanted to touch him, fuck him, be with him—I couldn’t handle this guilt.

“Speak,” he hissed.

I pressed my lips into an even tighter line, crossing my arms. I’d given him the silent treatment for the last however much time had passed, and he seemed increasingly erratic.

While I’d been sitting on the edge of his bed, I’d taken in the items in the room. The intricate designs carved on the oversized chest to the edge of his bedroom were similar to the ones on the frame of the bed. He’d pulled out a black linen shirt and trousers the same color from the chest.

“Enough.” The word ripped through my dazed thoughts, and he suddenly gripped the back of my neck, dragging me toward the terrace. Shadows whipped open the glass double doors and bent me over the balustrade. The air was sucked right out of my lungs as I gaped at the deep fall to the ground. I’d hit the protruding bits, and if I managed not to get impaled on them, then the stones at the bottom would finish the job.

My fingertips and toes immediately began to tingle. Anger and frustration bubbled to

the surface.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

“Do it,” I muttered. He stiffened, teeth audibly grinding together. “Hurry up and do it.”

There was silence from him as that vibration in his chest turned up another notch. I exhaled in a gust. He needed me alive for Novareth, so this was posturing. “You won’t, so let me go.”

“I would not,” he grumbled tightly, but he didn’t loosen his grip. My hair swayed around my cheeks. There was movement behind me as tendrils widened my thighs, and he tugged my skirt aside. It all happened so fast, I couldn’t speak.

He slid into my channel. The textured surface of his shaft thrusting in, rubbing against my inner walls.

There was no resistance with adrenaline pumping through my veins.

I gasped, my hands grasping at the edge of the stone rail, which dug into my stomach. He pumped his hips with harsh, punishing slams, the slap of his cold, inhuman skinthwapping against my thighs. His next thrust shoved me forward and wrung a moan from my throat.

So much pleasure sizzled in me. At least before he killed me, I’d had the chance to experience good fucking.

With each rut, I pushed back against him until his grip moved to my hips, poising them higher. His cock slammed in at an angle, touching a sensitive point deep inside. An orgasm ripped through my nerve endings, turning my hearing fuzzy. He didn’t

ease his pace, and another release throbbed through my channel.

My scream echoed off the valley below. The sound of my pleasure only inflamed him, and he groaned, the sound deep, guttural, and maddening.

I wasn't sure how many orgasms later, but my brain processed movement far off in the distance. Corvus continued gliding into me with gentle pumps; he stopped every time I felt his base throb as it did right before release, slowing the glide as if savoring the moment.

Unlike the other days, the sky was beginning to change, and I knew I didn't have much time left.

"What's over there?" I panted, weakly pointing at the collection of lights in the distance.

The illumination glistened on the horizon through the milky haze of the atmosphere. It seemed to have thickened.

"I will take you." He smoothed his palm down my skirt. "Once I am done with you." He picked up his pace, chasing me toward another orgasm.

With a pump of his wings, gusts caused my hair to whip wildly around my head. He descended with a smooth glide, and his flying turned into a brisk walk. I bounced around in his embrace. It was a clear indication of how careful he'd been every time he'd touched me that he wasn't gouging into my skin.

He put me on my feet, and my knees gave out, but he caught me before I could drop to the ground.

"Careful," he ordered. Tendrils had wound around my arms, keeping me upright

while I tried to regain sensation in my feet.

“I didn’t do it on purpose,” I huffed and rolled my ankle to chase the tingles away.

Laughter permeated the clearing we’d landed in, and then two Novian kids burst through a stout shrub. They immediately slowed, eyes wide with horror.

“Lord of Shadows,” the taller one in the back said. A damp spot grew in the front of the shorter boy’s pants.

I peered at Corvus. I didn’t doubt he knew they were present, but he wasn’t looking at them; he was angled to the left, eyelids narrowed, and shadows lingering around him. He was such an ethereal creature.

So frightening, so violent . . . so alone.

If everything that laid eyes on me ran or attacked me out of fear, it’d make me grumpy too.

“Run, before he sees you,” I whispered dramatically toward the kids. Gasping, they peeked at each other from the corner of their eyes and took off sprinting.

I turned toward him, scanning the sharp planes of his face. He didn’t seem bothered by it, nor did he seem to have even processed it, but seeing him so alone, so rejected—it kind of hurt. I pursed my lips and stepped in front of him.

“I’ve seen enough, let’s go back,” I said.

“No.” With the abrupt denial, he strode ahead. Mid-step, he vanished into thin air. My stomach dropped to my feet, and I lunged like I could somehow catch him.

“Corvus?” I shouted, throwing myself forward. My momentum didn’t allow me to steady myself before my face smacked into a large featherything. “Argh!”

I clasped my cheek, and he was suddenly visible. It’d been his fucking wing.

He hurtled forward and cupped my jaw. I squinted up at him from one eye.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

“You must take care.” His growl reached my stomach and spawned flutters.

“Well, you disappeared,” I snapped, trying to mask my pleasure at seeing him concerned about me. “A heads-up would have been nice.”

“Why would you desire a head? If this is a necessity, I will get?—”

“No!” I gasped, gripping his wing before he went on a killing spree. “It’s an expression.”

He continued to stare at me, head cocked.

A loud, rumbling horn echoed from nearby, and I whirled toward it.

“What is that?” It sounded like a tornado warning but with a deeper vibration.

“The villagers are testing the horns for Novareth.”

I walked toward the sound, pushing through the thick foliage. Leaves crunched underfoot, and I avoided tripping over a vine.

After trekking a few more yards, I stopped at the break in the trees, peering out at the people shuffling to and fro. There were stations of sorts, and some had set up items on surfaces.

This was like a ‘swap meet’ back home.

“Why are there sirens?”

“The energy the day exudes is of rebirth, strength, and fertility, but to channel it, Novians need to know it is beginning. That is what the signal is for.”

“So, there is no specific day or time to indicate Novareth?” My heart jumped at that because this entire time I’d believed it was a particular time we headed toward, not something that could happen with a moment’s notice.

“The day changes every thirty years.” He curved his wings close to his back. “I will glamour myself; otherwise, they scurry like ants.” He was gone with his last word.

“Do you do this often?”

“Here and there.” The murmur was very close to my ear, wringing a shiver from my body. I stepped out of the break in the tree line and no one turned to look. My shoulders relaxed at the lack of reaction. Novians continued setting up their stations, and my eyes snagged on a human. That was why my presence wasn’t attention-grabbing; humans lived here, too.

I strode down the straw-covered path that branched in two directions with tables being set up on either side.

The familiar sensation of being watched settled over my shoulders. I’d become used to his presence—just another aspect to cause alarm.

“I could never understand the allure of what you humans feed on,” he murmured, wringing a shiver from me. I eyed the meat slices neatly organized on the raised plates on one of the stands as I walked past. His earlier comment about the people here echoed in my memory.

Had he spent countless times observing from the outskirts?

“Fruit, get your fruit,” a female Novian called from the station diagonally from me. Their surface was full of different, odd-looking fruits. Nothing close to what I’d seen in my human world, but there was one that looked like a banana, except it had growths all over the surface like a dragon fruit. Crossing a few other stands, my gaze snagged on a spread of pastries, and I hesitated in front of it.

A slim human woman stood beside a male Novian with hair that fell to his waist. I scanned the sweets. Everything was different from what I was used to, and in various colors, strange to my human eyes.

“All freshly baked this morning,” she chirped, her bright blue eyes settling on me. She rubbed her pregnant stomach. The male hovered over her, and from the quick glance, I could see he was incredibly protective. He seemed ready to pounce at a moment’s notice.

“No, thank you,” I replied. She just smiled, turning her attention to the Novians stopping at her stall.

The crowd was beginning to grow, and it was neat to see all the different features. A larger building stretched past a few more stalls, and people lounged in front of it in different states of undress.

“Lovely human, enter here, we will make it worth your while,” a Novian male murmured from where he leaned against the brick wall. “The Pleasure Den is here to serve you.” His grin showed extra teeth.

“No thanks,” I mumbled, but he reached toward me. I didn’t have time to react, my entire essence froze, and I widened my eyes, knowing this wouldn’t be good.

His hand stopped inches from grabbing me. I sighed and clicked my tongue.

“Do not touch,” Corvus hissed, appearing beside me. Everything turned into chaos; screams and shouts rent the air, and then the thundering sound of running.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

“Lord of Shadows,” he breathed, horrified. He yanked and tugged uselessly as his face crumpled with pain. I threw myself into Corvus’s arms, putting my entire weight behind it. My stomach landed on his arm, and I would have flopped to the floor if he hadn’t grabbed me. It had the desired effect, he released the sex worker, but his wrist was crushed and he held his arm to his chest as he scampered away—as did every single living soul in the swap meet.

All that was missing was tumbleweed and the soundtrack clip.

“You know how to clear an area,” I muttered.

He didn’t comment or react to me, and his wings spread out behind him, the heavywhoosh sending a nearby stand tumbling to the side. He lifted me higher in his arms until my butt was nestled in the crook of his arm. I grabbed the top of his curved ram horn to balance myself.

He didn’t react, so I took advantage and felt the rough, dipped surface. He slowed his wide stride, hesitating next to the pastry spread, and plucked up the one I’d been eyeing.

“What are you doing?” I hissed.

“You wanted this.” He held it up, flat on his palm, the tips of his claw curled upward. The stuffed sweet sitting in his palm and looking so innocent was at the opposite end of the spectrum to his monstrous hand.

I carefully took it, and he watched me expectantly.

It occurred to me that maybe my stomach wouldn't be able to handle Novian food.

But I had nothing to lose, so I bit into it. Flavors exploded on my tongue. It was as if a cupcake and achurro had a baby, but the texture was perfect and spongy and somehow crispy, too.

"It's-so-good," I mumbled, taking another bite.

He watched my mouth with intense focus. To the point that I wondered how he wasn't tripping over the uneven terrain. I swiped my tongue across my lip, and he exhaled. I held the last bite toward his mouth.

"I do not eat."

Right, he fed on souls. My stomach swirled with nerves. A few more long strides later and I mustered the courage to ask what I'd been wondering.

"How many sacrifices have you had?"

"I do not know." His eyelids thinned, looking into the distance. "Too many to count."

That sickness in my stomach turned up a notch. It wasn't nerves, it was jealousy.

"Oh," I said on an exhale.

He beat his wings, and the last bite of pastry slipped out of my fingers. I huddled closer to him, grabbing onto his horn for dear life. He jostled me as he took off into the air and cradled me against him like I was a child.

I squinted against the wind. Novareth was coming, and I wouldn't have a timeline toward my end. I wasn't sure if that was worse.

Before my death, I'd go to his cells to see if there was anyone left to help; my little rebellion toward the hand fate dealt me.

I just had to wait until he fell asleep again.

He'd been flying for a while when a reflection caught the light, and I squinted at the spot a few yards ahead. I pointed at it insistently.

"What's that?" People-shaped figures surrounded a huge statue with wings. "Are those people dressed in black robes?"

Corvus didn't answer.

I jerked my elbow back, and he growled, nipping my ear.

"That hurt," I hissed. "Fine, if you don't take me, I'll go while you're distracted or when you're in one of those deep sleeps I can't wake you from."

He growled and angled as he descended, touching down with a loud thump. The stone statue washed him.

The people surrounding it turned at the noise of his landing. Gasps echoed across the clearing, and as if snipping a string holding them upright, they dropped to their knees. There had to be close to thirty people.

"Lord," a woman moaned and bowed. "Bless us with your presence."

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

Similar phrases echoed all around us like a macabre cult scene from a movie. He didn't say anything to me.

The base of his statue had different gifts, from breads, to pastries . . . to dead bodies?

“Who are they?”

“Worshippers.”

The Novian woman who had first spoken jumped to her feet with a gasp, her eyes focused on me.

“How dare you question a god?” she spat at me. Rage sparked in her eyes, and she bared her sharp teeth.

The shadows whipped out, converging on her, and left behind a husk.

“She has been sacrificed,” a few scattered voices announced from different points in the crowd.

“Take me next, Lord of Shadows,” a soft feminine voice cried, staggering forward and falling to the ground at his hooved feet. She shrugged off her robe, leaving her naked. “I am yours!”

“This has gotten too weird,” I muttered. “Can we go?” I didn't want to spend my last moments watching people fawn over him.

Corvus spread his wings, ignoring the gasps and pleas from the people prostrated across the foliage.

Some seemed to want things from him, others feared him, rightfully so, and I . . . I was attracted to him.

I groaned and closed my eyes. I guessed, since I was going to die, there was no use agonizing myself over it.

It didn't take him long to get us up to the terrace of his bedroom, the same spot he'd fucked me. Upon landing, he placed me down, and I gripped the balustrade for balance. "How many people are trapped in your prison?"

"Prison," he chuckled, "those were souls that attacked my home, they deserved a drawn-out punishment. And." He stretched his wings out. "Human souls are much tastier," he purred. "For the same energy I receive from one human, it would take five Novians." The last part of his sentence tapered off, and he stretched an arm out, palm settling against the column framing the entrance. Corvus shook his head and leaned heavily on his side. In a sudden movement, he collapsed to the ground.

"Corvus?" I shouted, running to him. His head thumped against the column, and his eyelids dropped. "Shit." I gripped his arm, tugging to raise it, but my God, he was heavy.

"Wake up, Corvus." I yanked at his arm and managed to lift the dead weight. "You are so damn heavy," I panted.

He groaned, his head rolling on the column. "Come on, get your shadows to help me." Tendrils slid out of the pulsating cloud clinging to him and wrapped around his waist, assisting me in my effort. "Just a few feet," I grunted, exerting and pulling until the shadows had him lying out on the bed.

Corvus peered at me through thin eyes before they finally shuttered the rest of the way. His body stiffened, and pain flitted over his features.

I sighed, settling next to him. It'd been a long day, so I'd take a little rest before heading down to those cells again. I nestled against his side . . .

A throbbthrough my channel woke me from sleep. I groggily opened my eyes, peering down to find Corvus's head between my legs. The tips of his hair tickled the inside of my thighs.

He swiped his long, rough tongue up my slit and I groaned, my lips parting with a gasp.

"Your body reacts so well, Little Mortal," he murmured and shoved his tongue inside my channel. The front of his sharp teeth pushed against my sex. The dangerous weapon being so close to my sensitive flesh should have tempered my desire, but it had the opposite effect.

I gripped his horns, holding on for dear life as he ate me out with his rough tongue spearing into me.

"Corvus," I whimpered, and his movement became more insistent. My legs began to tremble, and heat expanded in my gut until it was so searing, I couldn't handle it.

Cries and mumbled nonsense spilled from my mouth.

My sex grew so sensitive, I tried to back away, but he didn't allow my retreat. I gripped his horns like bars, using them as a perch as I ground upward against his mouth.

I went supine, strength leaking out of my limbs until I was goo. Panting, I stared at

the textured ceiling, reveling in the rocking release.

Corvus moaned against my folds, and his tongue continued to lap against me despite my sensitivity.

“Yesss,” he hissed. “Give me more of your delightful taste.”

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

My core flexed in answer, and I throbbed with need. His tongue slid back into my channel, gliding with deep, long licks. The careful coaxing swelled another release. I bunched the fabric I lay on, my body straining from the command of his tongue.

Legs twitching from the overstimulation, I rolled my head from side to side, panting.

“Corvus.”

He purred against my sex and, with a final lick, rose on his arms. The defined dips of his arms bulged, and I reveled in the drastic differences in his body. Where his arm bent, the bone seemed larger and to have a wider range of motion, giving him the agility to crawl up my body.

He moved with feline grace until he hovered over me.

I tucked my chin against my chest, watching him near until he was over my breasts. He lowered smoothly, his wings shaking outward, and he flicked his tongue out to caress my nipple. I gasped, jerking from the overload of sensation.

His deep, resonating purr tickled my skin, and he inched up the rest of the way, spreading my thighs and sinking into my core.

My lips parted on a ragged exhale. He nudged harder against me until he was flush to my hips, seated as deep as he could be. My God, he was so good at this. He'd mentioned he'd had multiple sacrifices . . .

“Did you wake your last sacrifices like this?” I said, hoarse. My sex clasped him, and

I couldn't help flexing to grind harder against him. I moaned, so excruciatingly turned on.

“Like this?” He cocked his head. He rose to his hands, head arched to look at me, and I had to angle my chin up to keep his onyx gaze. He pumped his hips, bringing fire to life. “Fucking?”

“Yes,” I moaned, “did you fuck them?”

A noise left him, it sounded like stones rubbing together, rough, abrasive, and booming. Was he laughing?

I peered up at him from drooping eyelids. The corners of his mouth were spread wider than humanly possible—frighteningly—and showed too many sharp teeth. The white, glinting surfaces could rip me to shreds; having the weapons so close to my sensitive folds shouldn't turn me on.

“Jealousy. The human fallacy.” He seemed too pleased.

He pumped his hips, feeding the thicker base of his cock into me, halting my retort. I gasped, my hips arching to meet him.

“Answer my question.” I pressed my palms onto the hard surface of his smooth chest. He didn't have nipples, but his body was tapered with lean, cold muscle.

“I did not fuck any of them. One human attempted—and failed—to tempt me. They all simply sniveled and cried until their death.”

Him saying that made me glad for some weird reason, and that was when I knew there was no turning back. He'd altered my brain, because why was I so fucking happy he had only forced it with me?

The pump of his hips quickened, and the nude girl from earlier came to mind.

“What about your worshippers?” He stopped moving and bared his teeth with that terrifying smile. I scowled and reached up to grab his ram’s horn. “Tell me.”

Another rough chuckle left his lips.

“They have offered to pleasure me. I have accepted,” Corvus said. “I never allowed a lover to live after pleasing me. Count yourself fortunate.”

So he’d killed everyone he’d fucked. That should be my primary focus, but the sick jealousy in my gut wouldn’t let me. He ground against me, causing my channel to flutter around him and wring a moan from deep in my gut.

“But you . . . I could eat and fuck you without end,” he purred in my ear.

I bunched the feathers on his shoulders.

“Flip us over,” I ordered. His shoulders rippled, and he gripped my hips, lifting me while keeping me speared on his shaft. I scrambled to grab onto his shoulder. In a smooth sprawl, he lay on his back, keeping me seated on him. The angle change sent a shiver through my core, and my channel clasped his cock.

His mouth curved into a snarl.

“Was this what they would do to please you?” I murmured, gyrating my hips and taking every inch of his cock. He exhaled sharply. I leaned forward, placing my hands on the tuft of feathers above his cock, and rolled my hips.

I couldn’t tear my gaze away from the slackened features of his face. It caused some violent need in my gut that wanted to make him fall apart. I was lost, and it was his

fault because I didn't fucking care.

Having minimal experience, I hadn't felt pleasure that came close to this, even with my vibrator. My moans echoed and bounced off the walls, blazing my lust to painful extents.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

His claw curled under the cross swinging from my necklace.

“This symbol, I have seen it before.”

“A crucifix.”

His eye peeled wide open. His claw curled on it, and I gasped, gripping his second digit to stop him from tearing it.

“No,” I breathed. “My Aunt gave it to me. I swear, if you do anything to it, I’ll off myself before you can take my soul.”

He hissed and rolled me onto my back.

“You will not worship any but me,” he snarled, lifting me and propping my hips higher. His claws sank into me. I gasped as blood surfaced from the pinpricks. Madness and a lack of control reflected in his eyes. He pounded into me, rocking the bed, and then continued to fuck me without releasing my bleeding thighs.

My cross remained intact, the movement of the chain tickling my skin with each of his ruts.

My encroaching death was undeniable, but before my life was extinguished, I had to be sure there were no other people trapped in the castle.

I smoothed my hands down the linen dress that had been placed across the end of the bed when I woke up. It was the same material as his shirt. It’d been one I’d seen

when we went to the swap meet.

I wonder when he grabbed it.

I bunched the fabric of the dress, and the hem brushed across my shin. My steps echoed down the long, ominous hall.

Coming down here could be a useless endeavor, but it was something I had to do. Maybe it was some crap way of me making up for caring about the monster that had hurt so many. Fortunately, I wouldn't live with the guilt about it for long.

I slipped through the final hidden section in the wall and slowed to peer into every cell I passed. Dust piles were still spread across the floor, and the door I'd managed to open was latched again. The torches propped between each of the cells highlighted the floating dust particles.

I gave up holding my breath, even though it felt like I was inhaling the dead's remains. This time around, I walked down the corridor, making sure to check every single cell, but there was no sign of life . . . until a whimper reached my ear.

"Hello?" I called out hesitantly, creeping forward and trying my best to avoid the dust piles on the floor. "I'm here to help."

Another whimper that was almost too low to hear. I headed deeper into the passageway and stopped where the last torch lit my way. There was a pitch-black section, but past it, in the distance, light flickered from around a corner.

I carefully stuck my foot out and pressed my hand into the side of the wall, making it without falling into an abyss. Once I was safely away from the dark section, I exhaled in relief and turned the corner. I stopped at the wide entrance opening to a long, rectangular chamber. At the end of the straw-covered floor was a slumped form

dressed in tattered rags. I hurried forward, my steps thunderous.

The closer I got, the easier it was to see why the floor was coated in straw. Dried blood spread across the ground toward the dirty bundle huddled near a pole in the middle. From what I could see, the form was male.

A torch lined each of the four corners of the room.

He slumped against the post, his thin, frail body covered in dirty rags. An iron cuff around his ankle led to the jutting branch from the metal pillar embedded into the floor with large screws. His skin around the cuffs was raw and bloody, as if he'd tried to pull free.

He lay in a starfish position, head turned away and arms sprawled outward, but where there should have been hands was gruesomely burned flesh. Like his hands were chopped off and then a flame held to the wound.

This was meant to be a slow, painful death.

“Hello?” I whispered, waiting with bated breath to see if he was still alive. He twitched and rolled his head to the side. Human nose and ears . . . a beard grown out, but what I could see of his features was enough.

I went ice cold.

No way, no way.

Andrew.

His blue eyes flared, and he grunted, scrambling to get away from me.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” I said, breathing unsteadily. I fell to the floor, unable to keep upright. He was emaciated, practically one foot in the grave. I clasped my neck, gasping.

My mind raced with explanations and reasoning. When Corvus came to my room, before dragging me into his realm, he’d mentioned me fucking this man. He’d wanted to punish me for sleeping with him. That wasn’t a coincidence, and I was starting to believe nothing in my life had occurred by chance.

Page 32

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

He weakly groaned, and it ripped me into action. This was my fault; I had to get him out of here.

I ignored his flinch and crawled next to the ankle cuff attached to the metal pike.

I reached out toward him.

“Do. Not. Touch,” Corvus bellowed.

I yanked my hand back as if I’d been electrocuted, startling upright. I shoved to my feet and whirled.

“What have you done?” I accused through gritted teeth. He moved so fast, and suddenly, he was leaning down, his face an inch from mine.

“You should have obeyed.” The same words he’d said when he first came for me.

A ball throbbed in my throat, and I struggled to heave in another breath.

“Why would you do this?” I shook my head, unable to move.

“He is lucky to be alive. I snapped the necks of the two before him. The ones you brought to release with your mouth.”

My knees gave out, and I slumped to the ground with a whimper. So much guilt . . .

“I fucked him three years ago, Corvus,” I whispered. “He’s been here that long?” I

shook my head, not really asking; it was obvious Andrew had been suffering for a while. “How is he even alive?”

“I had an attendant assigned to keep him alive. She begged you for death.”

The pieces were connecting.

“The Novian who tried to kill herself.”

“Pitiful female deserved death.”

Andrew groaned, shifting to his side to watch us. His eyes flicked from side to side, like a wild, pained animal.

“Let him go.”

“No.” Corvus peered at his claws, rubbing something off the surface.

“You said jealousy is a human fallacy, but this is worse!”

“You are mine. He touched what is mine.” His dark eyes seemed scarier with the shadows whipping around him. “He filmedmysacrifice. He touchedmyLittle Mortal.”

His words gave me pause, and I shook my head, taking a moment to make sense of the situation.

“What?” I croaked. “He filmed me?” I whirled on Andrew, my eyes wide.

My body jolted from impact, and I fell to my knees, just barely catching myself before I face-planted.

“Do not look at him,” Corvus hissed in my ear. Shadows caressed my thigh, and cold air sent a chill through me. His grip on my hips stiffened, and he seated himself inside me. His sudden possession scrambled my thoughts, and my channel flexed. With the rub of his divot against my clit, my shock disappeared.

My body felt too attuned to him, as if he’d trained it to his liking. Shadows tickled my skin, brushing against my arms and caressing, igniting the lust.

He wrapped his hand around the back of my neck, pinning my cheek to the floor. The smell of blood and the earthiness of straw filled my nose.

Corvus thrust, ripping a grunt free.

He fucked me hard, demanding, greedily.

The blood-stained straw bunched under my hands. I couldn’t help pushing back against him until my skin slapped against his thighs.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

“Mine. My Mortal,” he snarled, and his shadows expanded, falling over Andrew. All the while, Corvus didn’t stop pumping into me. The sexual sound of our flesh smacking together was rivaled by my moans.

The shadows retreated, and his grip on my neck lifted me and forced me to look at the husk.

He thrust upward, seating himself deep.

“Look at what happens to whoever thinks of touching you.”

I panted, on the precipice of an orgasm. I wiggled, but he didn’t move, drawing out the ache.

“That is jealousy, Corvus,” I spat, grinding back to feel every inch of his thick, textured cock. “Not just a human fallacy, huh?”

His body began to shake behind me.

The low hum of horns rent the chamber. Multiple horns that had to be ridiculously loud, if the noise spilled into the room.

He snarled, his grip turning agonizing.

“It is Novareth,” he bit out and let me go so suddenly, I had to catch myself before falling on my face. His announcement left me with no confusion. I knew what had been coming since the beginning.

Rumbling and hisses exploded from Corvus. I scrambled to my feet and ended up with my back to the wall, several feet away from the large pole. I would never make it around him.

Corvus's wings were spread out wide, and shadows whipped around him violently. He lowered his head, and the trembling stopped, making him so still it was frightening.

I tried not to move, to hold off breathing, but my pounding heart didn't allow it. I sucked in a ragged inhale.

He was suddenly in my face, shoving me against the wall, gripping my wrists to pin them to the brick. His teeth pressed against my throat, his tongue flicking up the side of my neck.

I moaned, my hips twisting to press against his hard abdomen. If I were just a bit taller, I would be able to rub my aching core against his thigh.

Corvus pulled back, his sweet breath fanning against my neck and making my hair flutter at my temples.

"You are my sacrifice," he snarled as if trying to convince himself. Tendrils wound up my arms.

"Goodbye, Corvus," I panted. Resolve settled over my thoughts, and they calmed with acceptance. The more peaceful and still I became, he became the opposite.

His body began to shake again, and he bared his sharp teeth. Was he holding back?

"No," he hissed out, his head shaking from side to side, his wings flexing. Hewasholding back.

“Don’t act like you’re good now,” I breathed. “Do it.”

“I cannot contain—” Shadows whipped outward and extinguished the nearby torches. They plumed, and my vision was overtaken by darkness.

I gasped, a painful tugging originating in my chest and spreading throughout my body, as if he’d taken hold of my veins and yanked at them.

Tears welled in my eyes, but I couldn’t move; my body was growing painfully cold. I whimpered, and suddenly, it all stopped, and my vision returned.

The torches were still lit even if the room was unfocused.

In a sudden motion, he yanked back with a roar, his body vibrating. The shadows wound around his wrists and slowly pried him away from me. He’d been grabbing onto me so hard that, upon being pulled away, deep cuts opened along my arms.

I screamed from the stinging agony as red lines split my skin. I could only watch in shock as the shadows writhing from him wrapped around the iron pole, bending it at a right angle.

Corvus shoved himself backward, and the tip of the pole where Andrew had been chained to went through his torso. Black liquid oozed from where he’d impaled himself; the split flesh was a gruesome sight.

“Leave.” He shook his head, his claws digging into his torn chest like he was trying to rip himself open. “Get away from me until I am no longer conscious.”

I couldn’t look away from the oozing black blood.

“Run,” he bellowed.

So I ran.

My heartbeat's thuds matched the rhythm of my footsteps. Thank God I'd memorized the way back to his room and the way to the bathing area. It was near the spot I'd first managed to get out of this maze-like castle.

Adrenaline and panic surged through my veins. He told me to avoid him until he passed out. He was giving me a chance to live, even after he'd been dead set on ending my life.

I pumped my arms, speeding through the corridor. I was so close to the terrace where I'd fallen through the hole, the only way 'out' I could think about escaping through.

The archway was the same as the last time, except once I stepped onto the platform, the sky was no longer lit up, it had turned a deep, blood red, and begun to darken to the void-like color of Corvus's eyes. Pitch black and seemingly endless.

The hair on my arms lifted like there was an electrical charge, and I panted, shuffling over the dark ground. My eyes had adjusted to allow me to make out shapes, but there had been so many vines to trip on, so I took my time shuffling over to the hole in the same spot as last time. Flames licked the sides of the castle from the flickering torches lodged into the side of the brick.

I peered down the sharp incline, and from this vantage, I could see how I had managed to not splat; the side of the castle served as a sort of slide.

I needed a board to sit on, so my skin wouldn't tear on the rough, brick surface. Chewing on my lip, I scanned the platform and scrambled around, patting my hands against the crunch of foliage. The side of my hand banged into the lip of something, and I squinted, wiggling my fingers under the flat surface. A discolored piece of wood peeked through the dried foliage.

Hastily, I pulled at the board, managing to wiggle it. Getting to my knees, I scrambled to shove away the vines growing around the wood. With one side swipe of my palm, I exposed more of the board.

Yessss, this would work if I managed to untangle it from the vine embedded into the edge.

A frightening roar echoed from inside the castle.

My pulse jumped, but it wasn't from fear; I felt for him. He sounded agonized.

He'd been so frantic . . . I closed my eyes and let out a gust of air, trying to calm my pounding heart.

The violent image of the sharp bar slicing through his body wouldn't leave my thoughts, nor would the pain rippling over his features.

The reality was: he was a lonely, pained creature who would spend eternity in agony.

What was I doing? Once I escaped, I could run to the village we'd been to, but how would I survive? The pregnant human I saw had been with a Novian, but would anyone take me in?

I stopped shoving at the dried foliage and stood to face the entrance of the archway, lifting my chin. Swiping my damp palms against the linen dress, I gripped the cross

hanging from my neck and waited for him to arrive.

Even if I managed to get back to my world, nothing was waiting for me. Unlike before, the thought of returning didn't fill me with anything but dread.

I'd gone and screwed myself over—I'd fallen in love with a monster.

I exhaled slowly, acknowledging the truth. Corvus wasn't misunderstood—he was a cruel, evil creature—who I loved.

And the fact was, if he did become unconscious, he'd succumb to eternal sleep. If it was a restful one, that was something I could perhaps live with, but I'd seen him writhe in agony. If he was trapped like that for eternity . . .

I breathed out slowly, squaring my shoulders.

At least my pain would be fleeting.

It didn't take him much longer to appear. He heaved at the entrance, eyelids lowered to show a sliver of his pitch-black eyes. Black liquid dripped from the wound on his chest that was already beginning to knit together.

"I said, run," he hissed.

A knot throbbed in my throat—painful, aching, and resolved. He'd impaled himself for me; the least I could do was go peacefully.

He moved so fast it was difficult for my eyes to track, and he took my arms in a stiff hold, snarling in my face.

He ripped my dress, pinning me against the rough surface of the wall.

From the pump of his wings, the wind whipped my hair around my face. Corvus forced my legs apart and seated himself deep inside me. He ground himself against me as if trying to meld me to him.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

I whimpered, writhing in pleasure, yanking and pulling at feathers on his shoulders. My sex clasped him with just as much desperation as he ground against me. His head dipped and shadows whirled around with a flurry, covering both of us as he lowered his mouth.

I could see my death in his bottomless eyes.

“Corvus.” My whisper cut off with the next twist of his hips.

“No,” Corvus bellowed and doubled over, his claws flexing into my injured arms.

His shadows whipped around him with such violence that it made my hair swirl around my jaw.

Why was he hesitating?

His knees hit the ground with a resounding thud, his cock slipping out of me, and his wings flinching closer to his body. Why had he stopped devouring my soul? I hadn’t had any misunderstandings about where this would lead, but now he was extending the inevitable.

Corvus curled his top lip, and his features crumpled to the point that the bridge of his nose wrinkled.

His hand wound around my throat and squeezed once. I closed my eyes.

“My end is worth you living.” The grip slid to my shoulder and turned painful.

Suddenly, I was thrown backward, and my body twisted midair.

A chill crested through my veins, turning me into an icicle.

I screamed, landing on a hard floor. Shadows whipped along the wall of my bedroom. They writhed and pulsed. I got to my feet so quickly that it made the bedroom spin and the tattered bits of the linen dress fluttered around me.

There was no sign of him, and I turned in a circle, taking in the walls of my bedroom.

He was gone, and I was back home. “Corvus!” I ran at the surface I’d come through and pounded my fist into it.

“Lord of Shadows,” I whispered, flattening my palm against the familiar wall.

Nothing answered, and I feared nothing ever would again.

I thumped my head on the surface of the book I’d been rifling through. I’d been combing through the archives in the National Library for the last few days, and I was worried it was another bust. They had tons of scriptures and documents, but nothing concrete.

It’d only been a few months, and I was getting desperate. And losing hope. I’d come close to having drained my inheritance by flying from country to country. I’d researched every culture and religion for any inkling of what he was, but I didn’t find anything.

I didn’t realize how comforting the voices—no, voice—had been. Now that I was without it, their absence was glaring. I often found myself turning so suddenly, as if Corvus would appear out of thin air, but it never happened.

I'd never felt so alone.

I also never thought I'd miss him this much, either. As cruel as he was, he'd worked those claws deep into my heart. I'd had time to wrap my head around his nature and everything he'd done to help me escape. He'd given himself over, and I was a weak bitch because it had worked. All of his past evils didn't hold a candle to what he'd given up for me.

Many women have said they could change a man, and they never could, but he wasn't a man. He was a monster, and he did grow to care for me.

A girl sat in the seat across from me, and her eyebrows furrowed as she watched me.

I probably looked odd, sitting here smiling like a crazy person as I caressed the scars on my arms.

I'd wallowed for days, and then it occurred to me, if magic was real, and it very much had proven itself to exist, then there had to be a way to get back to him. After he'd mentioned the Blood Moon, I'd had hopes that I'd see an inkling of the shadows on the last one, but there was nothing.

I lifted my head and leaned back with a sigh. The rickety wooden chair squeaked with my lean. I gripped my cross.

Please, God, let me get back to him.

I rubbed my thumb against the smooth surface.

My new discoveries about different faiths and the realization that magic existed didn't take away from my belief. I chose to hope and have faith that I would find a way back to him. Even if the whispers were completely gone, as if they'd never

existed.

My only hope was Samhain. From everything I'd read, there was a certain energy to that time of year—a thinning between worlds.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

But that was months away.

I wasn't sure what I'd do once I was with him, but I refused to leave him alone in his torment.

MONTHS LATER

I swiped the ball pen across the square of the calendar hanging on my fridge. I'd waited for Samhain to arrive, literally ticking the days off in preparation. In the times I'd sought answers, I'd gotten my paperwork and such on the house figured out. I'd prepared for every possible outcome.

Samhain had to be the way to get back to him, because if it wasn't, I had no other recourse. I tucked the pen into the drawer and used my hip to shove it closed, then left the kitchen.

I sat in front of my fireplace, letting the flames warm my skin. I stared into the blaze, studying the sway of the flare devouring the wood.

"Lord of Shadows," I whispered. "Corvus, please . . ."

I settled in at sunset, waiting. I caught my eyelids growing heavier with each blink.

A chill crept over my arms, raising the hair. It jolted me awake. I gasped, alert and with adrenaline pumping.

How long had I dozed?

The fire I'd been in front of had been completely extinguished, leaving me in the dark with only the moonlight spilling through my wall-to-wall window.

Something moved at the corner of my eye. I gasped, turning so fast it made me dizzy. My smile grew.

"Corvus?" I whispered. A cloud seemed to detach from the wall, and it pulsed. The tendril stretched toward me and touched my wrist, as if in greeting.

"Take me to him." They curled higher, winding around my arm and against my back. Their cool touch incited a familiar chill through me. It jerked me forward and I flopped onto my stomach with a grunt. It curled under me and began to drag me toward the fog painting the linoleum floor.

I closed my eyes, bracing myself for the iciness. Shadows squeezed my arms and pinched my skin, then the familiar burn passed through my nerve endings. I landed on the floor with a hard thump. I groaned, curling on my side, trying to breathe through the agony stinging my flesh. It hurt more than the other times. Liquid dampened under my nose, and I touched the tips of my fingers against the slickness. I lifted it to see blood. I swiped my hand across my T-shirt and scanned my surroundings.

It had spat me out in the throne room.

A thick fog pulsed next to me. Then it curled upward, and it pressed against my lips. . . almost like it was asking for entrance.

I hesitantly opened my mouth, and in a sudden rush, the shadows shoved past my lips. I choked on my breaths, writhing on my back as the sensation settled inside me.

I did not mean to harm you.

The voice echoed in my head, and I gasped, looking around. It sounded similar to Corvus, so, so similar.

“Who’s there?” I gasped, shivering. “Corvus?”

No, I am Corvus Zypher’s soul.

My mind raced to grasp the words as a painful chill slid through my veins.

I cannot stay inside you for long without it harming you. Listen well, you can only wake him by splintering your soul.

“Do it,” I choked out, not exactly sure what I was agreeing to.

You must reunite the soul with the body at his most vulnerable moment.

“What does that even mean?”

Claim him.

“Can you be more descriptive?” I mumbled.

As you humans say—fuck him.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

My shivers wracked my body. Violent, teeth-clacking chills.

I scoffed.

Reunite soul with body.

My stomach heaved, and I turned on my side, and thick, inky clouds spilled from my mouth like some horror flick. Once on my knees, I vomited out more black wisps, hacking and struggling to breathe.

The soul gathered an arm's length from me, dancing in place like it was laughing at my misfortune.

“Even his soul is cruel,” I muttered, staggering to my feet. “Take me to him.”

It pulsed and disappeared. I turned in a circle until I caught sight of a tendril clinging to the side of the wall and followed it. This entire time, it had been his soul haunting me while he lay unconscious.

I hurried after it, passing the archway and the torches that were still lit with a low glow, nothing close to the flames they'd had before. I rounded into his bedroom.

He lay on the intricate, carved bed, his body prostrate.

The Soul prodded me forward, and it was the nudge I needed to run to him. I climbed up the edge of the bed until I perched over him to clasp his face. His head was heavy, which I was sure had to do with the ram horns. I slid my fingertips along the side of

his face where his feathers gathered. They were as soft as I'd remembered.

I sniffled and looked up at The Soul.

“Returning you to him will wake him?”

They pulsed and shoved me at him. I licked my lips nervously. He lay nude, with his clawed hands across his stomach, deep in slumber. But I wasn't fooled, his mind must be pained. The harsh breathing told me everything I needed to know.

His cock lay limp against his stomach, and even then, it was large.

I licked my lips and peeked up at the shadows. A tendril stretched outward and curled around my wrist, guiding me to the length.

Even though no one watched me, I couldn't help but feel like I was doing something wrong. I gripped him, and with only a single squeeze, the shaft stirred.

The shadows were part of him, and I was the vessel to help his soul return to him.

“You have permission to kill me if this crosses some line.” The Soul squeezed my wrist. The shaft was semi-hard in my hand, and I lowered to wrap my lips around the tip. Liquid beaded, and with a quick swipe, I collected it with my tongue.

It thickened and stretched in my hand, and I slipped my grip lower until I touched his thicker base. I could feel the slightest nodules. This was what expanded barbs into me when he came, hooking him inside my sex.

The Soul jerked my wrist again, almost angrily.

“I'm going.” I quickly shucked my pants and climbed over him, throwing my leg to

straddle him. Another bead of liquid gathered at his tip. I sat back, studying the length. The ridges seemed to pulse, and moisture trickled down the side of his cock.

The Soul slid up my neck and gently caressed, like it was petting me. I lifted onto my knees and gripped his cock, poising myself over him. His face was slack, chin tipped away from me, allowing me a view of his profile. Lean, slim, and oddly, supernaturally beautiful.

I lowered until he pressed against my core. The shaft pulsated in my hand, and I dragged the tip along the slit of my sex, slicking his precum across my clit. Each graze flared my lust even higher. I fed him inside me, taking it terribly slowly. His facial features didn't twitch.

This entire encounter was turning me on. I'd ached for him for so long, craving not only him, but his body. I'd become used to him, and the idea of taking another lover didn't sit well. I felt like I was betraying him.

I slid down his hard shaft. The ridges rubbed against the walls of my channel, and I lowered until he filled me to the brim. Corvus grunted, the sound mixed with pain and pleasure. A tendril crept up my neck and wound around my throat, the cool sensation settling against my skin. He filled my sex, so large that I could feel him deep in my belly.

"Corvus," I moaned, hiking up on my knees to glide back down, savoring every inch of his cock. Pleasure licked up my spine, and I ground down until my sex settled flush against his pelvis. I ran my fingers along the tufts of feathers above his cock and caressed the silkiness.

My channel clasped him, and with every movement, I could hear how wet I was. The Soul slid up my neck and pressed against my lips. They parted with a groan, and the coolness slipping down my throat inflamed my desire.

Always mine, it whispered in my head. Then, with a sudden yank in my belly, it pulsed me over the edge. I cried out with soft pants, so deeply enveloped by his presence and vibrating energy. The hair on my arms lifted, and weakness dropped my shoulders.

Slowly, the shadows wrapped around his wrists and wound upward, curving around his torso. An opalescent glowing energy pulsed, interwoven within the darkness. I couldn't stop bouncing on his reactive cock, chasing another orgasm.

The Soul crawled upward until it found its way to his mouth. It slipped through his lips.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

I was so close . . .

Stars burst behind my clenched eyelids, and with the next pulsation of his shaft, his cock juttet warmth in me. My legs shook madly, and I rode the lulling wave, the weight of exhaustion falling over me.

He groaned, and his hips lifted, shoving deeper into my sex. His cock throbbed and the pinch of those glorious hooks sank into me, ripping me into another wracking orgasm.

His eyes sprang open, and he heaved in a deep gasp, his chest lifting off the bed so suddenly, his cock pulsed inside me, further extending my release.

He lifted his hand, and the shadows wound around his wrist, but there was the slightest bright vein within the darkness. He watched the shadows curve around his limbs with his eyes wide.

I was searingly cold, to the point of pain. He took my jaw, his large hands enveloping my whole face. With his touch, the cold settled into a comforting sensation in my chest.

“You’ve shared your soul,” he murmured, awed. “You have anchored me.”

A single pinpoint glowed in the middle of his eyes—a pupil.

“You have saved me.”

He lifted upright, his wings kicking up a wind. He pinned me on my back, hovering over me. His face lowered, and he carefully placed his mouth against mine, mimicking how I'd kissed him.

My heart exploded. I reached a trembling hand to his jaw, rifling my fingers through the feather-like hair.

"I missed you," I whispered.

He pressed his mouth against mine more insistently, and his long, pointed tongue slipped past the cage of my lips to lick mine. I met the roughness with all my pent-up passion.

I dragged my fingertips down the column of his neck. I'd even missed how cold he was.

He buried his face in my neck with a groan.

"You belong to me, Little Mortal," he purred.

I set the plant toward the corner of the balustrade, the blooms bobbing with each gust of the wind.

The drooping bell-shaped flowers were a nice pop of color against the clouded sky that never changed, except on Novareth. They looked like billbergia, but instead of the rounded aspect of the petals, they had an outward curve like a rose. Overhauling the terrace was my first order of business, and I was glad for it, because every time I woke up, it was one of my first views.

The lilting sound of voices singing echoed from the base of the castle. I craned my neck, leaning to see around one of the towers toward the spot where his statue sat.

People gathered there daily, to bring offerings to the base of his statue, and to ‘worship.’

But what my eyes caught wasn’t as tame as what I’d seen them do before. A handful of women flounced around the statue, naked and singing.

“Too far,” I muttered and pushed away from the railing, marching out of our bedroom. I followed the clear path I’d marked into the ground with blue paint. It would fade in a while, but I’d been using it to memorize the corridors leading outside, because they were so confusing.

Weaving through a different entrance, I reached the crank to open the portcullis. With both hands, I heaved and pushed until the iron chains attached to the door swung it up enough for me to slip underneath. Corvus hated it when I opened the gates without him, probably because the thing looked like it could squash me.

Hurrying onto the stone path, I aimed myself for his statue. The stones deteriorated the deeper I went into the forest until it was only foliage underfoot.

His worshippers were always trying new things to get his attention, but I’d had enough.

I finally burst into the clearing. The group of five women turned toward me.

“You are his pet,” one of the dark-haired Novian women with fair skin hurried over to me and took my hand.

I swatted the worshipper’s hand away.

She frowned exaggeratedly, and her exhale made her boobs bounce.

“We are here to offer the Lord of Shadows pleasure.” She waved her arms behind her. “We offer ourselves to him.” The four other women flounced over, breasts also bobbing.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

I clenched my teeth so hard my molars ground together.

“If you don’t stop offering yourselves, I won’t stop him from killing you.”

I’d already been generous with them, but they didn’t get the clue.

“We would be blessed to be killed by Lord Zypher,” the buxom blonde purred.

A tendril crept up my leg, and I gasped, whipping my head from side to side.

They had only been around when he was, because the shadows now clung to him at all times, like an extension of him.

“You best get out of here?—”

“Beatrix!” His bellow shook the trees, and I sighed, crossing my arms. The women’s eyes all widened with excitement. A gust of wind later and he slammed onto the ground with a thump.

“You are not to leave without me.” He stormed forward, shadows whipping around him like a storm cloud.

From behind him, the Novian women watched, chests jutting toward him. Even if he didn’t spare them a look, it pissed me off.

“Not right now, Corvus,” I grumbled.

“You are the Lord’s pet. Many can harm you. He’s obviously worried about you,” the red-haired woman tittered and curled her finger around her hair.

“Pet?” I screeched, and snapped, lunging for her. In my fit of rage, my toe snagged on a vine and I went flying forward. Screaming, I squeezed my eyes shut.

I was suddenly jolted, my dress banding around my torso. I squinted to see the ground a foot from my nose. Corvus lifted me with care until I was back on my feet, and I found the clearing empty.

“I will kill them all?—”

“No,” I blurted and scrubbed my face. He would do it in a heartbeat, and that was wrong, even if I kind of wanted him to.

“Jealousy,” he rumbled, his mouth widening. He sprang at me, bringing me to the ground with ease. The cool graze of his shadows pillowed my landing on the foliage, serving as a thin layer of protection. He lifted his pointer claw and, keeping his eyes on mine, he punctured the linen between my legs and dragged it down to open a slice in the skirt.

I stayed frozen, watching. A tendril slid up my thigh, and the cold sensation spread in my channel, ripping a gasp from my throat. “How I revel in your jealousy.”

The shadow thrust and expanded, stretching my sex. It prodded some deep, hidden button inside me, and my chest jerked up, arching my back. I whimpered, and the shadows pulsed, rubbing harder against that spot.

An orgasm crashed into me like a freight train, and I screamed, floating on a cloud of pleasure, my body pulsating from the sudden release.

Sharing my soul had anchored my life to him. It was still a difficult concept for me to wrap my head around.

Slowly, I lifted my eyelids, peeking through my lashes. A purr rumbled in his chest, seething with satisfaction. Not moving his pinpoint pupils off me, he licked the scars marking my arms. He rested my hand on his chest and crawled up until he blocked the sky.

“I need nothing but you,” he grunted and slid inside me, taking my breath away with a single pump.

We claimed each other in front of his statue, rejoicing in the feeling of each other.

I perched on the edge of the bench near my front door in my human-side home, donning my shoes.

“How long do we have this time?” I asked, shoving my feet into some boots.

“The same as the first time. The Blood Moon allows for a few hours. I will feel the shift in energies. Do not worry, Beatrix, I will ensure we return.”

The corners of his lips twitched. I hadn’t been able to hide my anxiety about going back. I’d made his castle my home. Slowly but surely, we’d begun to plan what we would do with the various spaces.

The only shit part was he couldn’t make his shadows bring anything over until the Blood Moon thinned the veil, because I’d forbidden meaningless killing.

Amazingly, he’d gone along with it—for the most part.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 1:09 pm

There was that one time someone tried to mug me. It was a bad choice on their part, but they couldn't be blamed since they hadn't known I had a giant glamoured beside me. He'd turned the man into a husk, draining him so much his body became dust as soon as the last tendril of the shadow pulled away. And that was only one of the times. I comforted myself with the thought that he wasn't so trigger-happy with me at his side.

"Samhain will give us a longer window to explore if you wish."

"More like, you explore. I love seeing you try things." I laughed, thinking about the time I made him eat ice cream.

He grunted, fluttering his wings out. He always did that when he was feeling something more intensely. I finished tying my boots and hopped to my feet, heading for the garage where I'd parked the car. I didn't have any neighbors right next to me, but I didn't want to risk him being seen. And when he got into a car, it was ascene.

He followed me into the garage, and I went directly to open the back door for him since he needed more room for his wings. He glowered at me from a few feet away.

"You're wasting time," I sang. He sighed and approached to begin the painstaking effort to arrange his oversized body into my little Kia.

"I will never understand your urge to use avehicle," he sneered. I helped him shove his wing in. He winced. "I can fly us," he drawled. Instead of answering, I gently closed the door. He watched me from inside, looking like a sullen child. He had to hunch to accommodate his size. Maybe he had a point, we needed more room, but

that was a future me problem.

“Okay, now you can glamour,” I said and slid into the driver’s side.

There was a small shopping center a few minutes into town. I’d found that going earlier was best because it wasn’t as packed. I pressed the garage button, and it slowly rose, the gears working overtime. Once the path was clear, I backed up and headed onto the road.

“I was thinking we could get a few things for the bedroom.”

“Mmm, whatever you please, my Little Mortal.” My heart throbbed at his endearment—even though I was technically no longer ‘mortal.’

“Also, I need to grab some soap and shampoo. You know what we should do? Take a washing machine with us, that would make everything so much easier.”

“One of those devices humans clean clothes with, correct?”

“Yes,” I answered and settled into describing where we could put it. I navigated into a lot, and the car jostled over a few speed bumps. Once in a parking spot, I shut the engine off.

I hopped out of the car and opened the back. “Let’s go,” I chirped.

A lady approaching her vehicle peered at me and then did a double-take. She gave me a strange look, but I shrugged off her judgment. I didn’t care how I was perceived. Feathers grazed my arm, and he brushed past me. I reached for my bag on the floor of the back seat.

We passed the coffee shop I’d hung out in when I’d been terrified of going home, and entered the wide glass doors with the electronic swinging doors. He was an ancient

monster and had seen much because of it, but he'd only been able to watch, never experience—until me.

I peeked around and, not seeing anyone, reached out a hand. The back of it rubbed against feathers, and I slowly patted until I found my way to his arm. I grabbed the large hand, slipping my fingers between his.

A soft purr echoed from his chest, and I pressed my lips together to hide my smile.