

DARK VERSE • BOOK ONE



THE PREDATOR

She'll never escape him

RUNYX

New York Times bestselling author

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RuNyx is a *New York Times*, *USA Today* and international bestselling author of romance. Her stories range across subgenres from dark contemporary to gothic to historical to fantasy and more, and are currently being translated into over 10 languages.

Her pen name has a very special meaning to her. When she's not writing, she's reading, traveling, meditating, daydreaming, and most of all, procrastinating.

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Published in Penguin Books 2025
001

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Set in 9.92/14.06pt Adobe Caslon Pro
Typeset by Six Red Marbles UK, Thetford, Norfolk

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-911-74639-3

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To the fandom.
To the readers who have been with me through the years.
I am here because of you.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is the first book of the *Dark Verse* series. Everything about this world is going to be dark, brutal and raw. The characters, their behaviors, and circumstances are all a direct result of their world. Morality is gray and humanity is questionable. With each book, I will be exploring more of the darkness and the good that can still exist in it. However, if you are not comfortable with that, I sincerely urge you to pause. There are adult situations, explicit content, brutal imagery, and questionable actions. I hope you enjoy diving into this verse with me.

Please note: Since the protagonist has an extremely high IQ, there are certain repetitive patterns to her thought. Things she finds fascinating, she repeats to herself over and over. That is why you will note certain phrases mentioned repeatedly through the book.

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When you gaze into the abyss, the abyss also gazes into you.

—Friedrich Nietzsche

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PREFACE

THE ALLIANCE

Tenebrae City, 1985

On a cold, dark night in winter, with the wind howling and the skies crying in sleet, two men from the Tenebrae Outfit met the two men from Shadow Port in the middle of nowhere. Though the two families had been rivals for over a decade, it was becoming bad for business. Theirs was a small world and they could not keep biting each other's heads off when there were bigger, more lucrative ventures that could benefit them both. It was time to end the rivalry of a decade and begin a partnership for the future.

The leader of Shadow Port shivered under his heavy coat, not used to the freezing temperatures in his city in the west. The leader of the Tenebrae Outfit laughed. They saw the sun even less than he saw his wife. Jovial conversation was exchanged. The man with each leader stayed a silent observant.

And then, the business was discussed. Weapons and alcohol - they

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were the face of the operation. It was time to begin a new venture, a first with the family. The leader of Tenebrae suggested the idea. It was a new trade, not common in the world yet, but had a great future and more money than they had dreamed of. The leader of Shadow agreed. The men vowed to keep it quiet, keep it a hidden trade, to let everyone think of arms and booze as their main business.

The Tenebrae leader opened up the trunk of his car. Two young girls, not more than eight years of age, lay there unconscious, unaware of what awaited them.

The leaders exchanged a small smile and shook hands.

“To the future,” one said.

“To the future”, the other echoed.

And thus, began the Alliance.

CHAPTER 1

SCENTING

Present Day

T

he knife was digging into her thigh.

She was not supposed to be here.

The thought kept ringing through Morana's head on repeat, her nerves stretched taut even as she tried to appear aloof. Holding her full champagne glass aloft, she pretended to sip from it, her eyes constantly scanning the crowd. While she knew taking a few sips of the bubbly would do wonders to calm her frazzled nerves, Morana refrained. She needed a clear head more than liquid courage for tonight. Maybe. *Hopefully.*

The party was in full swing, hosted in the sprawling lawns of the home of someone in the Maroni family. Damn Outfit. It was a good thing she had done as much research as she could in the last few days.

Morana glanced around the well-lit garden from the shadows, seeing the faces she had seen in the news over the years. A few she had seen in her own house growing up. She saw the soldiers of the

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Outfit, milling around with stoic faces. She saw the women, mostly decorating the arms of the men they were there with. She saw the enemies.

Ignoring the itch from her wig, Morana just observed. She had taken great care to look like someone else tonight. The long black gown she wore hid the knives on her thighs, one of which had somehow twisted and was trying to dig into her. The bracelet on her hand had been a purchase from the dark web, with a hidden slot for an aerosol poison that wasn't available in the market. And she'd tied her dark hair tightly to her head, donning a silky wig of strawberry blonde hair, her lips siren red. It wasn't her. But it was necessary. She'd been planning this night for days. She'd been relying on this plan to work for days. She couldn't screw it up. Not after being so close.

She looked at the mansion, looming behind the crowd. It was a beast. There was no other way to describe it. Like an ancient castle buried in the hills of Scotland, the house — an odd hybrid of modern mansion and primeval castle - was a beast. A beast with something of hers in its belly.

The cool air fragrant with the night blooms, Morana surreptitiously shook off the chills trying to lick at her skin.

The sound of a man's boisterous laughter drew her attention. Eyes lingering on the built, gray-haired man laughing with other men in the north corner of the property, Morana studied him. His face was wrinkled with age, hands clean from where she could see.

Oh, how he had blood on those hands. So, so much blood. Not that anyone in their world didn't. But he had carved a niche for himself as the bloodiest of them all, including her father.

Lorenzo 'Bloodhound' Maroni was the boss of the Tenebrae Outfit, his career longer than four decades, his rap sheet longer than her arm, his cold-blooded attitude a thing of admiration in their

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world. Morana had been around people like him long enough to not let that shake her. Or rather, not let it show.

Beside Lorenzo stood his older son Dante 'The Wall' Maroni. While his pretty face could fool some, Morana had done enough research not to underestimate him. Built like a wall, the man towered over almost everyone, his physique solid. If rumors were to be believed, he had taken up a key role in the organization almost a decade ago.

Morana pretended to sip her champagne. Exchanging a polite smile with a woman who glanced her way, she finally let her eyes wander to the man who stood silently beside Dante.

Tristan Caine.

He was an anomaly. The only non-blood member to have taken the oath with blood in the family. The only non-blood member to be that high up in the Outfit. No one knew exactly where he was placed in the hierarchy, but people knew he was very high up. Everyone had theories as to why, but no one really knew for sure.

Morana took him in. He stood tall, just an inch or so shorter than Dante, in a casual three-piece black suit sans the tie. His dark blonde hair was almost a dark brown, sheared close to his head, his eyes a light color from the distance.

Morana knew they were blue. A striking blue. She'd seen pictures of him, always candid shots in which he looked surprisingly blank. Morana was used to expressionless faces in their world, but he took it up a notch.

While his muscular frame was attractive, it wasn't the reason Morana couldn't look away. It was because of the stories she'd heard about him in the last few years, mostly by eavesdropping on conversations, especially her father's.

As the stories went, Tristan Caine had been the son of Lorenzo Maroni's personal bodyguard, who had died while protecting the

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boss almost twenty years ago. Tristan had been young, with a mother who had taken off after her husband's death.

Lorenzo, for reasons unknown, had taken the young boy under his wing and personally trained him in skills of the trade. And today, Mr. Caine was a son to Bloodhound Maroni. Some said Maroni favored him more over his own blood. In fact, word was, after Maroni's retirement, Tristan would be the boss of the Outfit, not Dante.

Tristan 'The Predator' Caine.

They called him the predator. His reputation preceded him. He rarely went on the hunt but when he did, it was over. When he did, he went straight for the jugular. No distractions. No playing around. For all his unruffled attitude, the man was more lethal than the knife cutting into her thigh.

He was also the reason she had come to the party.

She was going to kill Tristan Caine.



Life as the daughter of the boss of the Shadow Port family had prepared her for a lot of things. Not this. Despite growing up surrounded by crime, Morana had been surprisingly sheltered from the ugliness of their world. She had been home-schooled, gone to university, and now freelanced as a developer. All very plain.

That was exactly why she was so *not* equipped to handle this. She'd not been prepared to infiltrate the house of her father's enemies and by extension hers. And she'd definitely not been prepared to murder that said enemy.

Maybe she didn't really have to kill him. Perhaps, kidnapping would work just as well.

As if.

For over an hour, Morana watched Tristan Caine carefully without

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being too obvious, waiting for him to just move. Finally, after staying glued to Maroni's side with a dark scowl on his handsome face, he detached himself and moved to the bar.

Morana debated whether to approach him out in the open or wait for him to head into the house. After a split second of indecision, she decided on the latter. The first option was way too dangerous and was she exposed, it would not only mean her death sentence but a war between the two families. A mob war. She shuddered, just thinking of all the morbid tales she'd heard over the years.

She also wondered if she was being logical in wanting to kill the man.

Maybe not, but she did need to get into the house and find where he was hiding her codes.

It has all started as a dare from her ex-boyfriend (not that anyone knew about him). Being a developer himself, he had challenged her to create the most complex set of codes she could. Being a sucker for dares that she was, she had succumbed.

Those codes were her Frankenstein. A powerful monster that went wrong, out of her control. They could digitally deface anyone, extract out every dirty secret from the deepest parts of the web, and destroy entire governments, entire mobs if it were to fall into the wrong hands.

They had fallen into the worst hands possible. Her asshole of an ex — Jackson — had stolen the codes when she was done three weeks ago, and disappeared.

It was when she'd started to track him that she'd discovered Jackson had actually been sent to get close to her by the Outfit. More specifically, Mr. Caine. How he'd learned about her skills and the codes, she didn't know.

She was screwed. So, so screwed.

There was no way she could tell her father. *None*. The offenses

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against her were too high. Dating an outsider, writing a time bomb of codes without any protection, but worst of all, knowing where the codes had ended up — her father would kill her without batting an eye. She knew it, and frankly, she didn't care. But innocent people and bystanders didn't deserve to have their lives destroyed by her mistakes.

So, after weeks of researching and stalking, she'd finally faked herself an invitation to the party in Tenebrae. Her father thought she was there meeting her non-existent friends from college. Her protective detail thought she was drunk and sleeping in her locked hotel suite.

She'd escaped. Come this deep into the den. She had to get those codes and get the hell out of there. And she had to do all that while silencing The Predator. The only way to do that was to kill him.

Thinking of how he'd masterminded everything with Jackson, her blood boiled.

Oh yes, killing him won't be a problem. The urge intensified every time she thought of the sick bastard. Morana grit her teeth.

Finally, after throwing back a shot of scotch, Tristan Caine moved towards the mansion.

Showtime.

Nodding to herself, Morana put her glass on a tray of one of the many waiters and quietly made her way towards the secluded path he was taking. Sticking to the shadows, her dark dress ascertained she wouldn't stand out. A few steps on the path, she saw the party disappearing behind her, as the bushes that shrouded the way grew thicker around her.

Up ahead, she saw Caine's tall, broad figure striding agilely towards the steps of the house. He climbed them two at a time, and she rushed on her heels, trying to keep him in her line of vision.

Her eyes darting around the area, she bent low and climbed the steps. Over to her left, she could see the party and the guards stationed around the lawns.

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Frowning at the lack of security around the house itself, Morana entered the house through the space between the huge double doors.

And saw a guard heading straight in her direction through the lobby.

Adrenaline hitting hard, she ducked behind the first pillar she saw, her eyes darting around the huge entrance with an over-the-top chandelier. Her gaze tracked Caine taking a corridor to the left of the lobby, his back disappearing from view at the end.

She suddenly felt a hand pull on her arm.

The large guard frowned down at her.

“Are you lost, miss?” he asked, his eyes suspicious, and before she could rethink, Morana picked up the vase beside her and smashed it over his head. The guard’s eyes widened before he crumpled down and Morana escaped, berating herself.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

That had been sloppier than she would have liked.

Taking a deep breath, focusing on the task at hand, Morana crouched low, heading towards the hallway. Once inside, she made a run for it, stopping to pick her heels up in her hands to avoid making any noise. Within seconds, she was at the turn somewhere in the back of the house, looking at a set of stairs leading up to a single door.

Swallowing, her heart pounding, she climbed up.

Reaching the landing, she tiptoed her way to the door. Taking in a deep, quick breath, she pulled the knife out of its sheath from her thigh, aware of the little bruise it had left there. She reached for the knob, donning her heels, and turned it open.

Leaning her neck inside, she looked around the semi-dark guest room of sorts.

It was empty.

Frowning, she stepped inside, shutting the door behind her quietly.

The door on the other side of the large room opened before she

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even had a chance to take in her surroundings. Heart hammering, she crouched in the corner, seeing the man step back out of the bathroom, throwing his suit jacket on the bed. Morana observed the suspenders stark against his white shirt, the crisp fabric unbuttoned at the collar, stretched taut across the broad expanse of his chest. A very muscular chest. She bet he had abs too.

Although she hated herself for noticing, she couldn't deny the man was very, very attractive. Too bad he was a bastard to match.

She saw him take his phone out from the pocket of his slacks, scrolling through the screen, his concentration entirely on whatever he was seeing. Watching his muscular back towards her, she straightened from her crouch in the shadows.

It was now or never.

Walking behind him, her hand slightly trembling with the knife gripped in her paling knuckles, she inched forward, not even daring to breathe lest she alert him. Almost two steps behind him, she placed the knife on his back, right above where his heart was supposed to be, and uttered as coldly as she could.

"You twitch and you die."

She saw the muscles in his back stiffen, one by one, even before she had spoken. It would have fascinated her had she not been so shit scared and raving mad.

"Interesting," he remarked evenly, as though his life wasn't two inches of flesh away in her trembling hands. She steadied her grip.

"Drop the phone and raise your hands," she ordered, watching him comply without hesitation.

His voice broke the tense silence. "Since I'm not already dead, I assume you want something."

The completely unruffled tone of voice did nothing to soothe her nerves. Why wasn't he even slightly bothered by this? She could carve him open. Was she missing something?

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Sweat broke out over her back, her wig itching on her scalp, but she focused on his back. Pulling out a second knife from her other thigh, she shoved it against his side, right against his kidney. His back tensed slightly more but his hands didn't waver, staying completely upright.

"What do you want?" he asked, the tone unwavering like his hands.

Morana inhaled deeply, gulped, and spoke. "The thumb drive Jackson gave you." "Jackson, who?"

Morana dug her blades a fraction deeper in warning. "Don't pretend you don't know shit, Mr. Caine. I know everything about your dealings with Jackson Miller."

His back stayed rigid, her knives a second away from breaking skin. "Now, where is the drive?"

There was silence for a few beats before he tilted his head towards the left. "My jacket. Inner pocket."

Morana blinked in surprise. She hadn't expected him to give it up so easily. Maybe he was actually a wuss under all that macho crap. Maybe the rumors and stories were all fabricated.

She looked at the black jacket, and it happened in the split second of her distraction.

Her back slammed into the wall beside the door, her right hand holding the knife up the wall, restrained by a tight grip. Her left hand with the knife came against her own throat, controlled by a much stronger, and much angrier Tristan Caine.

Morana blinked up into his eyes — his very blue, very pissed off eyes — stunned at the turn of events. She wasn't prepared for this. Shit, she was *so not* prepared for this.

Morana gulped. The blade of her own knife clutched in her own hand was gripped by his, right against her neck. She felt the cool metal threaten her tan skin. His second hand, large, rough, held her other hand above her head, his fingers wrapped like manacles around

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her wrist. She felt his much larger, muscular body press into hers, his chest warm against her heaving breasts, the musky scent of his cologne invading her senses, his legs restraining hers, rendering her completely immobile.

Swallowing, she looked up into his eyes, straightening her spine. If she had to die, she wasn't going to die like a coward, especially not at the hands of someone like him.

He leaned closer, his face just inches from hers, his eyes cold and voice brutal as he spoke. "This spot, right here," he spoke quietly, pressing the tip of the knife against a spot right under her jaw on her tilted neck. "It's an easy spot. I nick you here, and you die before you can blink."

Her stomach churned but she grit her teeth, refusing to show fear, silently listening as he moved the knife to her fluttering pulse near the center of her neck. "This spot. You die but it won't be clean."

Her heart thundered with vengeance in her chest, her palms sweating at the look in his eyes. He moved the knife again to a spot near the base of her neck. "And this . . . You know what happens if I cut you here?"

Morana stayed silent, just watching him, his voice taunting, almost seductive with the temptation of death.

"You'll feel pain," he continued, undaunted. "Bleeding to death. You will feel every drop of blood that leaves your body." His voice rolled over her skin. "Death will come, but much, much later. And the pain will be excruciating."

He held the knife steady to the spot, his voice suddenly chilling. "Now, if you don't want that, tell me who sent you and what drive you are talking about."

Morana blinked at him in confusion, before realization dawned. He didn't recognize her. Of course, he didn't. They had never really met, and as first meetings went, this one left a lot to be desired. He'd probably just seen her pictures in passing like she had his.

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Wetting her dry lips, Morana whispered. "The drive is mine."

She saw his eyes narrow slightly. "Is it?"

Her own narrowed as well, the anger that had fled in the face of fear returning with a vengeance. "Yes, it is, you bastard. I worked my ass off on those codes and I'll be damned if I'll let you use it. Jackson stole it from me and I've traveled all the way from Shadow Port because I need it back."

There was a beat of silence, his eyes hovering over her features before surprise flared in them. "Morana Vitalio?"

Morana gave a sharp nod, careful of the blade at her throat. He looked her up and down, his eyes lingering on her wig and her lips, taking in every inch of her that he could before his gaze returned to hers.

"Well, well, well," he murmured, almost to himself as he pulled the blade away an inch, his scruffy jaw loosening now that he knew her identity.

She opened her mouth to ask him to take the knife away just as the door beside them banged loudly. Morana yelped a little in surprise and he let go of the hand above her head, putting his free hand over her mouth.

Seriously? What did he think she was going to do? Scream for help in the Outfit household?

"Tristan, have you seen anyone in the house? Someone knocked out Matteo downstairs," a heavy voice spoke from the other side, a slight accent deep in it.

Morana felt lead settle in her gut, her eyes widening as his gaze locked with hers, his right eyebrow rising as he answered back.

"No, I haven't." His eyes never moved from hers. "I'll be down in a few minutes."

Morana heard the steps shuffling away and after a few seconds, the hand from her mouth retreated. His body didn't.

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“Would you mind removing the knife?” she asked quietly, her eyes pinning holes into him.

That raised eyebrow notched even higher before he leaned back in, the knife never moving an inch from the place. “You should know not to come into the house of the enemy, all alone, unprotected. And you should know never to sneak up on a predator. Once we catch the scent of your blood, it’s a matter of the hunt.”

Morana clenched her jaw, her palm itching to lay one on him and his patronizing attitude. “I want that drive back.”

He stayed silent for one long second, before stepping back, releasing her arms but swiping the knives from her, checking them.

“Coming here was foolish, Miss Vitalio,” he spoke quietly, looking at her. “Had my people found you, you’d be dead. If your people found out, you’d be dead. Did you want to start a war?”

Hypocrite much? Morana took a step closer to him, inches of space between their frames, glaring. “I’ll be dead anyway, so it doesn’t seem foolish. Do you have any idea what the contents of that drive can do? This hypothetical war you are accusing me of starting — imagine that but ten times worse.” She inhaled deeply, trying to reason with him. “Look, just give me the codes so I’ll destroy them and be on my merry way.”

There was a heavy silence for long minutes, his eyes contemplating her, making her squirm a bit under the scrutiny. Handing her the knife after minutes that seemed to stretch, he spoke. “Under the stairs, there is a door. It’ll lead you to the gates. Get out of here before someone sees you and chaos breaks. I’m having a quiet night after months and the last thing I want to do is clean up your blood.”

Morana inhaled deeply, taking the knives from him. “Please.”

For the first time, Morana saw something else flicker in his eyes. He just crossed his arms over his chest, tilting his head to look at her.

“Take the door.”

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Sighing, she knew she was beaten. There was nothing else she could do. And going back home meant telling her father. Which meant either death or exile. *Fuck.*

Nodding, accepting the sour taste in her mouth, she turned on her heel, hand going to the knob on the door, feeling his eyes on her back.

“Miss Vitalio?”

She turned her neck to look back at him, to see his eyes glittering with something that made her heart skip and stomach flutter. He pinned her with the look for a long moment, before speaking.

“You owe me.”

Morana blinked in surprise, not understanding. “Excuse me?”

His gaze got even more intense, his blue eyes searing her. “You owe me,” he repeated.

Her lips twisted. “What the hell for?”

“For your life,” he stated. “Anyone but me and you would not have been breathing.”

Morana frowned in confusion and saw his lips twitch at that, even as his eyes stared at her with that look she couldn’t explain.

“I’m no gentleman to give you a free pass,” he spoke quietly. “You are in my debt.”

And then, he closed the space between them. Morana swallowed, her hand tightening on the doorknob even as her heart pounded, and she tilted her head back to keep their eyes locked. He stared down at her for long moments, before leaning in, their gazes never moving, and whispered, his breath ghosting over her face, his musky scent acute in her nose.

“And I will collect it one day.”

Morana felt her breath hitch.

And then she ran out of the room.

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CHAPTER 2

COLLIDING

God, she was seriously not supposed to be here. It could be the title of her autobiography, given how she kept finding herself in these situations. If she ever were to write one, she was pretty sure a lot of people would be interested in reading it. After all, how many genius mob daughters lay their lives out in print for mass public consumption? It could even be a bestseller if she actually lived long enough to write it. With the way things were going through, she doubted she was even going to make it back home safely.

Dread was settling in the pit of her stomach like a heavy weight, threatening to buckle her knees as she walked on shaky legs towards the abandoned building. She was a genius but god, she was an *idiot*. A world-class, stupid idiot. An idiot who didn't block her cheating exboyfriend's number from her phone. An idiot who had let the said

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jackass ex-boyfriend leave a message for her. An idiot who, for some stupid reason, had listened to it.

She had been sitting in her room, working on her laptop, trying to undo the disastrous effects of her code when Jackson had left a message for her.

She could still hear the panic in his voice, as he'd whispered the words out in a rush. She could still feel the whispered words making her skin claw. She could still recall the entire message, word for word because she had listened to it ten times. No, not out of any lost love whatsoever, but because she had been debating her course of action.

She was an idiot.

His frantic voice was stamped on her brain.

"Morana! Morana, please you have to listen to me. I need your help. It's life or death. The codes . . . the codes are . . . I'm so sorry. Please meet me at Huntington and the 8th. There is a construction site there. 6 PM. I'll be hiding in the building, waiting for you. I promise I'll explain everything, just come alone. Please. I swear they'll kill me. Please, I beg you. The codes are . . ."

And the message had gone blank.

Morana had sat for an hour, staring at her phone, debating the possibilities. The possibilities being very simple.

Possibility One — It was a trap.

Possibility Two — It wasn't a trap.

Simple, yet utterly confounding. Jackson was a snake of the highest order, she knew. There was a possibility that he had been paid to make the call, just as he had been paid to spy on her. He had faked his affection for her for weeks. What was a panicked phone call of mere seconds in the light of that? He had fooled her once. But was he trying to fool her again? Could this be a trap?

But that was what trumped her. Who would lay a trap for her? The Outfit? She had just been in their lair last week. She had gone into

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the den of the lion, had a face-to-face with the notorious *Predator*, and come out unscathed. She knew they didn't want to start a mob war at all, or Tristan Caine would have exposed her little stunt that night itself. But he hadn't. He'd let her go. It didn't make sense for them to lay any trap for her.

But if not the Outfit, then who would want to have Jackson fake a frantic phone call to her? Was it even a trap? Could it be possible that she was being overcautious? Was he really scared or faking it?

Morana, unfortunately, didn't have the luxury of not taking a chance. Because if he was scared, and if he really knew something about the codes, then she had to meet him. She had to let him talk. She had to get the codes back, by hook or by crook.

Not that the last time she'd taken that approach had worked out so well.

It still stunned her that she had been at his mercy. *The* Tristan Caine. The man notorious for his ruthlessness. He'd had her pinned against the wall with her own knives at her throat. And he had let her go. In fact, he had directed her to the door to her freedom, her undiscovered escape from the beast of the Maroni house, smack in the middle of a party.

She remembered the disbelief she had felt hitching a ride back to the hotel. Disbelief at her own guts. Disbelief at her failed attempt. Disbelief at how close she'd come. Disbelief at him.

The meeting, though fleeting, had been pulsating with something that had left Tenebrae with her. It had been a week since her return home, a week since she'd infiltrated the Maroni premises, a week since her failure of retrieving the drive. A week of keeping the truth from her father. If he found out, when he found out, there'd be hell to pay . . .

Shaking off the distracting thoughts, Morana squared her shoulders, feeling the reassuring cool of the metal against her waistband

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where she'd tucked in her small Beretta and covered it with a simple yellow top. Besides the keys to her red convertible Mustang, she carried nothing, keeping her hands free and her phone in the pocket of her loose black trousers.

After the last week, she'd dyed her previously blonde hair to chestnut, trying to shake off the grim remnants of the meeting. She did that often — change her hair color. With so much in her life she couldn't seem to control, she liked calling the shots when it came to her appearance. Her new dark locks were bound in a high ponytail and her glasses were perched on her nose. She'd even worn ballet flats in case she needed to run.

Having told her father she was going to the city to shop, she'd left before her father's goons could catch up with her. She'd done it enough times in the past to garner nothing but admonishing looks from him.

With her father, it was less about her safety and more about his control. His control of his men, of her movements, of controlling the enemy's bargaining chip. They both had stopped pretending like they didn't know the truth a long time ago. She'd stopped feeling the disappointment a long time ago. It had left her somewhere between fearless and reckless.

Coming here was smack in the middle of that territory.

Stepping onto the construction site, inside the wrought iron gates that manned the single, incomplete building from the abandoned street, Morana looked around, taking the area in. The sun hung low in the sky, ready to jump below the horizon at a moment's notice, throwing just enough light to let the building cast long, creepy shadows on the ground, the sky slowly burnishing itself from purple to a cold gray as the moon waited to come out.

Morana could feel the wind cooling against her skin, making a small shiver travel down her bare arms in the chill, goosebumps

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erupting across her skin like small soldiers readying themselves for battle. But it was something else that truly creeped her out.

Eagles. Dozens of them. Circling the building, again and again, calling to each other, the cacophony of their voices lost in the flap of their wings against the wind.

Dusk was setting in, and they kept circling the tall building, telling Morana one thing about the structure. It was no ordinary construction site. Somewhere on the premises was a corpse — she looked up at the birds, at their number — more than one corpse.

She should so not be here.

Tamping down the sudden attack of nerves, Morana looked down at her watch.

6 P.M. It was time.

Where the hell was Jackson?

The sudden buzzing of her phone in her pocket startled her. Exhaling to calm her racing heart, she quickly pulled it out and looked down at the number. Jackson. Putting it to her ear, she accepted the call.

“Morana?” she heard Jackson’s familiar voice whisper into the phone and frowned. Why was he whispering?

“Where are you?” she asked quietly, glancing around, looking for anything unusual. Anything unusual except the damn eagles, that is.

“Did you come alone?” Jackson asked.

Morana scowled, her senses on alert. “Yes. Now, will you tell me what’s going on?”

She saw Jackson’s head peek out from behind the building’s door. He waved her forward. “Come inside quickly,” she heard on the phone.

Morana’s eyes wandered to the unfinished building, rising high up in the sky like a dilapidated monster surrounded by birds of death. She would have been laughing her ass off at the clichéd obviousness

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of the setting had this been a movie she'd been watching. The last thing she felt like doing now was laugh. This was some really creepy shit. And something was totally off.

"I'm not moving an inch till you tell me what this is about," Morana stated firmly, standing her ground outside the building, watching Jackson peek around the door again.

"Damn it, Morana!" Jackson cursed loudly for the first time, agitation evident in his tone. "She won't come in!"

Morana stilled, hearing Jackson shout to someone behind him, and the certainty of his second betrayal settled itself in her gut. The fucking asshole! He'd set a trap for her.

Without waiting for another second, she crouched down on the ground behind some rubble and pulled the gun out from her waistband. Readying it, straightening her arms, she got ready to aim and fire at the drop of a hat. Her heart thundered in her chest, her breathing laborious as adrenaline surged through her bloodstream, everything but the sound of her own breathing too quiet. Except for the eagles. They kept making their own noises, right above her head in the sky, surrounding the building that reeked of death.

She had to get back to her car.

Eyes darting to the gate, she gauged the distance between the stack of rubble and realized it was a few hundred feet away. Damn. There was no way she could run through the open space without being shot if someone was aiming for her already.

Think. She had to think.

"Morana!"

She stayed down, listening to Jackson calling out her name, his voice coming from the direction of the building.

"We won't hurt you! We just want to talk!"

Yeah, and she was a monkey's uncle.

She grit her teeth, anger filling her, the urge to punch his teeth

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hard enough to make him bleed surging through her. Oh, how she'd love punching him.

"I know you like playing games, babe, but this isn't one!"

She hated, absolutely detested, when he called her 'babe'. It made her feel like one of those floozies who surrounded men in their world. She should have knocked him down.

"Look, I know," Jackson continued talking, his voice inching closer to where she hid. "I know you hate me for taking the codes but it was all money, babe. I did like you. We can help you if you help us."

Was he high?

Her grip tightened on the gun.

A shot fired. The eagles went wild.

Morana flinched at the noise, her gaze sliding upwards to see the eagles flying haphazardly in chaos, completely frantic, and felt her heart beat in tandem with their wings. She waited for Jackson to speak again, but he didn't. The dread in her stomach tightened.

"I prefer you blonde."

Her breath seized in her throat at the voice coming from behind her. The voice she hadn't been able to forget for a week. The voice that had whispered the ways of murder into her skin like a lover's caress. The voice of hard whiskey and sin.

She swung her gaze up, her eyes leveling with the barrel of a Glock pointed right at her head. She slowly let her gaze travel up to the sure, steady fingers, up the forearms exposed under folded sleeves of a black shirt, roped with muscles, up the shoulders she knew possessed the strength to pin her useless against a wall, up that scruff littering his square jaw, and finally to his eyes. His blue, *blue* eyes. His blue, wiped-clean-of-every-expression eyes.

It was just a second of these observations, a second of feminine appreciation before she let herself remember who he was.

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And swung her arm up, pointing her gun right at his heart with his own pointed at her head, in a silent standoff.

Standing up, her eyes not wavering from his, her arm not wavering in her hold, Morana tilted her head.

“I prefer you gone.”

His face retained the stoic expression, his eyes narrowing slightly. They stood silently for a few minutes, just with their guns pointed at each other, and Morana realized it was rather pointless. She knew he wasn’t going to kill her. He had ample opportunity just last week and he hadn’t. He wouldn’t do so again.

“We both know you won’t shoot me, so let’s remove the guns, shall we?” she suggested conversationally, never blinking once to give him any opportunity.

His lips curled but the amusement never reached his eyes. He raised his arm, pulling it back, waving the white flag, and she dropped her own, keeping him in his sights. The moment her gun was down, he stepped into her personal space, placing his gun right between her breasts, his face inches from her own, the scent of his sweat and cologne mingling in the air around her, every fleck of blue in his eyes somehow highlighted even in the darkness that had descended around them.

He leaned in slowly, speaking softly, his eyes hard, never moving from hers, his words making her breath hitch a little in her chest. “There are places on your body that I know,” he spoke, his free hand wrapping around the back of her neck, his grip strong, just on the periphery of threatening, as the gun stayed right above her racing heart. “Places that you don’t know. Places where I can shoot and harm and you won’t die.”

He leaned even closer, his whisper just a ghost across her skin as her neck craned to keep their gazes locked, his hand cradling her nape, his height looming above her, his eyes never moving from hers. “Death isn’t the main course, sweetheart. It’s the dessert.”

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His eyes hardened even more, his tone frigid, his fingers flexing on her neck in warning. "Never make the mistake of thinking you know me. It might just prove to be your last."

Her heart beat in her chest like a wild animal running for life. Even though her chest heaved with something she so did not want to look at, Morana grit her teeth at the sheer audacity of the man, the sheer arrogance of him. Why did all men around her behave like nominees for Asshole of the Year?

Steeling her spine, she flashed her arm out before she could stop it, her leg hooking around his knee, classic self-defense training overtaking her senses for a moment. She tugged with her leg just as she pushed his weight with her arm, knocking him down on the hard ground, her triumph flaring at watching the brief surprise cross his face. Within a heartbeat, he was back on his feet again, in a lithe movement that would have awed her had he been anyone else. But she wasn't done.

Morana stepped into his personal space this time, her finger going to his hard pecs under the open collar black shirt, poking him once as she spoke, her head tilted back to keep their eyes locked, her voice colder than his had been.

"Never make the mistake of thinking you scare me. It will be your last."

His jaw clenched, his eyes trained on hers, the tension so thick between them she could have cut it with a butter knife. His stance remained icy. She felt fire flooding her veins as her chest heaved.

Another voice interrupted their tense moment.

"I must say, it is rare to find a person, let alone a woman, fearless of Tristan."

Morana turned on the spot, her eyes finding Dante Maroni standing a few feet away, his huge frame encased in a suit that was completely out of place at this construction site and rather belonged

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to the party she'd seen him in last week. His dark hair was perfectly styled, slicked back on his head, exposing high cheekbones models around the world would weep for. His jaw was shaven clean, two big silver rings adorning his right index finger and left middle finger. With a smooth smile on his face that Morana didn't trust one bit, she observed the Mediterranean heritage obvious in the bronze of his skin, and could not deny that Dante Maroni was one beautiful man.

He came forward, extending his hand, flashing an easy smile Morana would bet her degree on was paid for every month.

"Dante Maroni," he spoke in a soft, polite tone by the way of introduction, taking her hand in his big, smooth ones, clasping it. His brown eyes betrayed his smile though. "It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Ms. Vitalio. I rather wish it were under different circumstances."

"I rather wish it weren't at all," Morana shot back before she could help herself, years of enmity boiling in her blood, along with the knowledge that this man possibly had the drive and the power to destroy her. And that he'd possibly shot Jackson. She was pretty certain he was dead.

Dante Maroni flashed another smile, even as his dark eyes regarded her. "Fearless, as I said. It can be a dangerous thing."

She should get that tattooed on her forehead. Maybe she'd pay heed to it then.

Running out of patience, she looked around the area, noticing no other living soul in the vicinity. Okay. So, she was at an abandoned construction site with two reputed, super reputed, men of a mob family, who happened to be her family's enemies and who had lured her out here for a reason. Not the safest place but they hadn't killed her. Yet. Had to count, right?

"Why am I here, Mr. Maroni?" she asked, exasperated and really wanting to make sense of everything. "And where is Jackson?"

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"Dante, please," he corrected her with another smile. Tristan Caine stepped out from behind her and joined his blood brother at his side, his muscular arms crossed across his muscular chest, no hint of a smile anywhere on his face. A tattoo peeked out from under his sleeves.

She looked at the two men, both reputed, both ruthless, and saw the stark contrast between them. It wasn't anything she could pinpoint, except this intensity around Mr. Caine that the other man did not possess. The intensity with which he was watching her, with a handsome face devoid of all expression.

She broke away from the intensity, looking back at Dante. She could feel the intensity searing itself upon her skin where Tristan Caine's eyes touched her. Dante's gaze was tame in comparison.

Focusing, she grit her teeth. "Dante."

The man sighed, her hand still clasped in his. "Jackson is dead."

Morana felt a twinge in her gut, but nothing more. She didn't know what that said about her as a person. She wanted to feel bad. But for some reason, she didn't.

She just nodded, not saying anything, not knowing what to say without exposing her own lack of reaction to the death of her ex-boyfriend.

Dante nodded, speaking, squeezing her hand while Mr. Caine stayed silent beside him, and simply watched them like a hawk.

"We needed to meet you without setting off any alarms," Dante began. "And the only way to do that was to have Jackson bring you out here."

"Why did you need to meet me?" Morana asked, studiously avoiding looking at the other, silent man.

Dante hesitated for a moment, and for the first time since the appearance of his blood brother, Mr. Caine spoke, in that rough, low tone.

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