

DARK VERSE
BOOK ONE

THE PREDATOR

R U N Y X

The Predator
Dark Verse #1



RuNyx

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

Author's Note

This is the first book of the *Dark Verse* series. As the name suggests, 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 grey and humanity is questionable. This is not a world of rainbows and butterflies. With each book, I will be exploring more of the darkness and the good that can still exist in it. However, if you have certain expectations of how a character ought to behave, certain ideas that are cemented about the good and bad, or if you aren't fully ready to immerse yourself into this verse, this book might not be for you. It is dark and it is ugly. If you are not going to be comfortable with that, I sincerely urge you to pause. There are adult situations, explicit content, brutal imagery, and questionable actions. I have written this verse with a lot of love, and if you are taking this ride with me, I hope you enjoy diving into it.

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

- Friedrich Nietzsche



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 Ten 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 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.



Present Day

The 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 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, grey-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 coldblooded attitude a thing of admiration in their 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 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, Tristan 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 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 suck 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,

Tristan 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 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 Tristan Caine. 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 to 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.

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 even had a chance to take in her surroundings. Heart hammering, she crouched in the corner, seeing Tristan Caine 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.