



Carnal Heart

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Cor Night is upon us.

Zaiah Ruca:

Tonight is the one night a year when even the school encourages the Black Harts to act out on their vices, but I'm not here to participate in some primal ritual or be some rich boy's plaything. That's until I feel someone watching from the shadows, taunting me.

Tempting me.

Devyn Shio:

My father thinks he can handpick my prey for me, but I have no interest in participating in the hunt. That's until I see him. My pretty little obsession. I thought Zaiah left Sacred Cor University, but he's here tonight, and he's even more alluring.

I wanted him then, but I want him even more now.

When obsession toes the line between passion and addiction, I'm willing to push my pretty doll just to see exactly how carnal our desires are.

There's only one rule for Cor Night.

Be vicious with your vices.

This book is set in Chani Lynn Feeners universe with permission from the author.

Trigger: This is a stand-alone dark romance novella which means there are many themes that some might find disturbing. Some of these include but are not limited to, dub-con, stalking, a seriously obsessed male lead, a male lead with a secret, and explicit sexual content not suitable for all readers. Please be sure to read the Authors Note for a complete list of warnings! HEA guarantee!

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Devyn Shio

Some people believe traditions possess a certain type of magic. They have this ability to bring people together. As individuals and as a culture, they shape us. Take this planet, Usum, for example. Unlike certain planets in the Seastea galaxy, Usum values and preserves ancestral traditions and rituals.

Fuck traditions. For all I care, traditions can all burn in a raging fire somewhere until there's nothing left but ember and ash.

A sharp slap stings my cheeks, its echo ringing in my ears as my gaze meets my father's. Dark crimson pupils stare back, not an ounce of fear in them. Demon eyes that mirror my own. A Shio family trait that has been passed down through generations.

His nostrils flare when I don't react. "Are you even paying attention to me?"

Conor Shio is a man who lives by traditions; our bloodline as a founding family demands it. If you ask me, all the power and wealth has gone to his head. Pathetic.

After a moment of silence, I flex my jaw. "Yes, father," I reply, keeping my tone calm and measured, unlike his own. It's what he taught me, after all. Never show weakness, especially to cowards.

I prop a hip against my dresser and wait to see what else he's going to do.

My father walks over to my desk, picks up the obsidian heart-shaped pin, and pockets

it before making his way back to me. Every Black Hart is required to wear the black pin with a glowing light in the middle. Meanwhile, the rest of the people on campus wear red hearts that shine just a little brighter.

As he adjusts my dark red blazer, my father's hands reach out steadily. This time, he makes slow, even movements. First, by unnecessarily popping my collar, then folding it back with purpose. It's all a show. A move to rile me up. To get up in my personal space and intimidate me.

News flash, father. I've been playing your games since I was seven. I know how your predictable little brain works.

If it weren't for the threat he poses to both my mother and sister or the fact he has all their money tied up in illegal accounts, I would have killed him years ago after the night he tied me to a chair and beat me just to prove that Shios learn how to tolerate pain.

"Don't forget, just because tonight is Cor Night and the rest of Sacrum Cor University will be attending this party to celebrate love and friendship doesn't mean you need to go all soft as well. You're a Black Hart, and this year you need to act like one. It's tradition for you to participate in Praeda."

I grit my teeth. Praeda is just a fucked-up rite of passage the previous Black Harts and founding fathers created to get their dicks wet without any consequences. As Black Harts, we're free to select anyone at the party as our prey, and ultimately, we can force them to comply with our wishes. It's all about the hunt. Choosing one person amongst thousands and stalking them throughout the night. That animalistic, fucked-up side of me loves the idea, but I refuse to do it on my father's terms.

"Your refusal to participate in last year's hunt was an embarrassment to our family name. You made a fool of me," he continues, violently tugging my gray shirt and

smoothing out some imaginary wrinkle. He pulls the obsidian heart out of his pocket and pins it to my blazer.

I don't bother pointing out that Illya didn't participate in Praeda last year either. But of course, Illya Carmine can do no wrong in my father's eyes; none of the other Black Harts can.

"Devyn, I expect you to follow traditions and respect our family name. Since you can't seem to find one single person amongst the hordes of people who worship the ground you walk on, I made things easy for you."

My stomach flips with nausea. "What are you talking about?" I snap.

"I went ahead and selected your Praeda for you." He holds up a folded piece of paper before tucking it into the front pocket of my black silk pants. "Marco Lombardi. I'm planning on doing business with his family this month. His son is a fan of yours, and he can use that extra little social boost he'll get by being your chosen Praeda."

Father pats my chest and takes a step back. There's a small smile on his face, as if the conversation is done, and he's proud that I'll be a good little pet and listen. He begins to turn away.

Lombardi. The name sounds familiar, but I'm too pissed to think about that now.

"And what if I don't?" I ask, unable to help my curiosity.

Father spins back around, that smile no longer in place. "What if you don't what?" He says, slowly.

"If I don't choose the Lombardi kid as my Praeda?"

“For fuck’s sake, Devyn,” he hisses. “You’re twenty-one years old. A fucking adult in the eyes of Ustun. If you don’t select the prey I’ve chosen for you, then you better pick someone of value. I don’t need you embarrassing me two years in a row.”

I shove my balled-up fist into my pants pocket as I tremble with rage. “Ah. Yes, because it isn’t embarrassing to take someone against their will and force them to do your bidding.”

Father rolls his eyes. “Good Light, it’s not like everyone on campus won’t be willing to bend over for you at the drop of a hat. You can pick someone else any time of the year. Tonight, you’ll pick the Lombardi kid. I don’t care what you do with him. If you don’t know who he is, check your multi-slate. I sent you a photo along with a link to his tracking device.”

My father spins on his heel. Just as he reaches the door, he looks at me from over his shoulder. “Your mother and sister say hi, by the way.” He smirks, and, with that, storms out of my bedroom.

Bastard.

He thinks he can use the ones I love as leverage. He currently has them tucked away in his heavily guarded mansion, and I have no fucking way of getting them out. Not unless my father is alive and rotting in a prison somewhere.

My reflection stares back at me in my full-length mirror; the same crimson eyes are a stark reminder that I am my father’s son. A flickering light catches my eye, and I spot his heart-shaped pin on my blazer. My father’s pin. I rip the thing off my jacket and toss it in the trash. I have my own. I don’t need to wear my father’s old university pin as he smiles and reminisces about the good ol’ days when he was a Black Hart.

Seriously, fuck traditions.

Snowflakes drift lazily to the ground, adding to the layers of snow that had already gathered overnight. I inhale the crisp air as I clench and unclench my fists. Something about talking to my father always riles me up, and I can't walk into the party ready for a fight.

Up ahead, a few couples walk into the building, fingers laced, their giggles echoing in the night. Cor Night is an annual celebration. Sacrum Cor University claims it's a celebration of love, but the real draw is the anticipation of a Black Hart participating in Praeda and selecting their prey. The whole thing is ridiculous. It's a way for us to flaunt our power and keep the masses hopeful. I never really understood it. This year there are only eight Black Harts. Why would anyone expect to be selected out of thousands?

I deliberately slow my steps, wanting to avoid the fawning groupies. Some of my fellow Black Harts thrive on the attention, but I hate it. Originating from a founding family doesn't grant gold diggers the right to pursue us constantly. I prefer to get attention in other ways.

Pulling up my multi-slate, I send a message over to the Black Harts group chat.

Devyn: Please tell me I'm not the only one here.

Camren is the first one to start typing. His name pops up and disappears multiple times before finally disappearing for good. Frustrated, I blow out a deep breath and decide to just get this night started by walking through the open double doors.

Several heads turn my way as students mingle in the foyer. A sea of faces, and yet no one stands out, not with everyone in attendance wearing the same mandatory dark red blazers. The only hope for individuality is by selecting some gaudy jewelry or a

different-colored shirt under our jackets. That or an obsidian pin.

Illya: Look up, asshole.

My lips twitch when I peer up to see Ryker leaning against the railing while Illya scowls down at the crowd of partygoers.

Reaching the top of the stairs, I notice several Black Harts chatting, but choose to join Illya at the railing. More people shuffle through the doors, their gazes immediately bouncing up to ours. Some people smile, while others give us flirty waves. A familiar faculty member enters, greeting us with a polite tilt of her head. Even the fucking professors hope we might choose them.

“What a joke,” I grunt.

“Just pick someone and get it over with,” Ryker says from Illya’s other side.

The scrap of paper my father slipped into my pants weighs heavily in my pocket. Still itching for a fight, I lean over the banister and bait my friend. “Easy for you to say, Golden Boy. Not all of our daddies were nice enough to welcome a fuck toy into our homes.”

As predicted, Ryker is on me in a flash. There’s nothing like mentioning Ryker’s new stepbrother to get his fucking panties in a bunch.

The first blow to my stomach is a welcome pain. Usually, I’m the calm and collected Black Hart. The one known for blending in with the shadows. The observer. But my friend must have known I was desperate for a fight because the next blow that lands on my jaw skates over my lip, and suddenly, there’s blood in my mouth.

I smirk, bracing myself for more. Unfortunately, Ares and Zar are suddenly there,

pulling us apart. But before Ryker gets too far, he opts for a verbal blow instead.

“At least my fuck toys are real.”

I bark out a laugh. “Touché, brother.” The fuck toy Ryker is referring to is my secret silicone doll I like to show off during my webcam sessions. Like I said, I like getting my attention in other ways. A secret porn channel with thousands of paying subscribers is the best silent ‘fuck you’ to my father. If he knew his precious prodigy was fucking on camera, he’d have a damn heart attack. Not to mention, the pay is fantastic. Once I have a comfortable sum saved up, I’m getting my mother and sister off this planet and away from my abusive father.

“I’m fine,” I say, shrugging Zar off of me and making my way back over to a different spot against the railing. A multitude of people, each adorned with a glowing red heart pin, shuffle through the doors by the dozens. An upbeat song starts playing and bodies sway to the beat. Cor Night has officially started.

I vaguely hear Camren join us as he chats with the others, but my mind wanders back to that damn piece of paper in my pocket. Sliding my fingers against the sharp edge, I pull it out and unfold it.

Lillie. My sister’s handwriting.

Good luck, brother.

Of fucking course, my father would force her hand. Lillie wouldn’t write this shit on her own. She knows what I think of Cor Night and Praeda. Lightly tracing the elegant script with my finger, I refold the piece of paper and place it back in my pocket.

Suddenly, the name Lombardi registers in my brain.

Remy fucking Lombardi.

Good light, I should have recognized the last name. Remy Lombardi. The one who stole my pretty little obsession out from under me before I could even introduce myself. I grit my teeth at the irony. My father expects me to choose Remy? Screw that.

The morning I followed Zaiah into the gardens was the morning I planned on speaking to the beautiful fashionista. I don't know what it was about Zaiah with his colorful outfits and large, innocent doe-like eyes, but I just fucking knew I had to make him mine. Maybe it's because everyone was vying for my attention, unlike Zaiah, who was always completely engrossed in his books, oblivious to my crimson gaze drinking him in.

Right as I was about to step out from the shadows, Remy wrapped his arm around Zaiah. I saw red. That animalistic side of me wanted to rip out his throat and claim Zaiah right there in the school gardens for everyone to see.

It was the last day I saw Zaiah. Figuring my little crush was pathetic and pointless now that he was gone, I stopped stalking the beautiful man and decided it was time to get over him. I missed my chance. He left. End of story.

After most of the Black Harts spot their prey and leave for the party, I make my way downstairs, past the crowded entrance, and over to the next room. The music is louder here. Paired with the writhing bodies and eager eyes, I'm ready to leave.

Instead, I make my way onto the dance floor. At one point, a pretty female flirts with me and hands me a drink. I down it in one shot. And then I down another. As soon as more people see me socializing, the flirty remarks keep coming, and the roaming hands become braver. The wild touches and grinding bodies make me hard, but no one has caught my attention.

Whispers and questions reach my ears. Rumors of certain Black Harts and who they might choose. At one point, a few people ask if it's true that I plan on picking Remy as my Praeda. I growl in frustration. Even here on this fucking dance floor, I can't avoid my father's request. When the next person gets in my face and scoffs, claiming that Praeda is rigged and my prey has already been chosen for me, I shove the taunting asshole away from me.

The stares are nothing new. Being watched is expected. But as I slip into the shadows, leaving a flurry of confused faces behind me, I have to admit, there's something thrilling about being hidden in the shadows, unobserved.

I might not want to do my father's bidding and go after Remy Lombardi, but with my luck, I'd accidentally pick him just because I erased the guy's face from my memory. I pull up my multi-slate and find the email Father sent. Just as the photo loads, movement catches my eye.

My whole body jerks forward in shock before I freeze in place. There's no way.

He's back?

Zaiah Ruca stands there with his best friend, looking even more beautiful than ever with his vibrant red hair and sensual, pouty lips. As usual, he's unaware of my gaze on him. He's wearing a pair of tight-as-sin black pants and a pastel floral crop top under his blazer. I'm pretty sure that shirt goes against our dress code. It's such an innocent little rebellion, but fuck, it makes me hard as steel.

My eyes drop back down to my multi-slate and I sneer. Is this some kind of fucking joke? I half expect my father to be nearby watching or for one of my fellow Black Harts playing a trick.

Right there in front of me, and on the screen, is a photo of Remy Lombardi in the

gardens with his arm wrapped around Zaiah.

I grit my teeth. Just knowing that someone took this photo of Zaiah when I was there, too, fills me with rage.

Although, now that I look at the photo closely, the focus is on Remy. Someone was following Remy.

But what about Zaiah? And how is he here now?

A quick scan on my multi-slate shows me records that Zaiah never actually left Sacrum Cor University; he just changed majors. Fuck. No wonder I never saw him. He was constantly in different buildings.

But he was still here. All this fucking time.

Sticking to the shadows, I creep closer, eager to hear what he's saying to his friend.

A notification beeps on my multi-slate, and I'm momentarily distracted by the photo of the man who took Zaiah away from me. As I stare at Remy Lombardi, my father's words replay in my head . 'I don't care what you do with him, just do something.'

I smirk.

Father wanted me to choose a Praeda this year?

My eyes find Zaiah again. Well, I have chosen.

Father said he didn't care what I did with the Lombardi kid, as long as I did... something .

For the first time tonight, I smile. A genuine, wide smile.

Father is going to be so pissed. I've decided what I want to do to Remy Lombardi, and I want to fuck him over. That cocky little shit thinks he can spread rumors about me and take what's mine. He needs to be put in his place. No one can tell a Black Hart what to do, ever. Especially not during Praeda.

I'm going to take what that prick foolishly thought was his.

I chuckle to myself, unable to keep my heart from racing with adrenaline. "Oh, Father, you should have chosen your words wisely." Let the hunt begin.

Huh. Maybe there's something to this whole tradition bullshit after all.

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Chapter one

Zaiah Ruca

Walking through the open double doors, I pause in the foyer and place the glowing pin on my lapel. Out of curiosity, my eyes trail up the red-carpeted stairs to the railing overlooking the room. A strange mix of relief and disappointment washes over me when I don't see him . In fact, I don't see any of the Black Harts up there.

"We're too late." My best friend, Lana, groans next to me. "Damn. It seems all the Black Harts have already started their hunt."

I roll my eyes, tugging her through the crowded room of writhing bodies and glittering lights. "Of course, you were hoping to catch their attention."

"Isn't that what tonight's all about?"

"No," I grumble. "Tonight is about celebrating love and romance." I'm so fucking sick of everyone bending over backwards to please the Black Harts. Cor Night shouldn't be about them too. Just because they are descendants of the original founding families doesn't make them deities. Although, some might argue that point.

All the Black Harts are as equally beautiful as they are terrifying.

"Love and romance." She scoffs. "Too bad your ex didn't get the memo."

"Yeah, thanks for reminding me. Damn, I could use a drink right about now."

Usually, I wouldn't drink at a big party like this, especially on campus, but I need something to take the edge off. Nerves rattle through me and my gaze scans the room for any Black Hart that might be present. I might hate the elite assholes, but they needed to know what I found out. Fuck. It's either that or I could end up dead.

I let out a deep breath. I'm doing the right thing.

Pushing those thoughts aside, I think about the other reason I need a drink. Rumor has it Remy caught the eye of a Black Hart this year. And that's all I fucking need right now, my conniving ex on the arm of one of the planet's future leaders.

Good Light. Was Remy cheating on me with a Black Hart too? I can't believe this is my life. When they say certain guys can make your whole world tilt on its axis, it's true. Only, ever since I met Remy Lombardi, my world has been spiraling downward.

I met him shortly after both of my parents passed. Suddenly, alone in the world with nowhere to go, Remy swooped in like my own personal savior. He offered me a place to stay and showered me with gifts and attention. Somehow, in a short amount of time, I became completely dependent on him. It started when my studies here at Sacrum Cor University required more of my attention.

Remy convinced me to quit my job, limit my time with my friends, and focus on my studies. Since I was on a scholarship, it was easy for me to agree. He was only looking out for my future, after all. Then, that's when the little digs started. Remy talked about how frivolous my degree was. He drilled it into me that getting a fashion degree at the planet's most prestigious school was not only a waste of time, but an insult. We rarely went out, but occasionally, we attended his father's social gatherings, where I was introduced to influential men. One moment, he'd praise me; the next, he'd belittle my aspirations. He'd swing between compliments and dismissal of my dreams so often that I started to believe him. Eventually, the stress and shame got to me, and I changed majors.

From there, it only took two months for those verbal jabs to become physical. Angry tears fill my eyes, but I don't let them fall. It's so fucking embarrassing how easily manipulated I was back then.

One day after class was dismissed early, I found him in bed with someone else. He told me it was a mistake, and he'd never cheat on me again. Hatred raged inside of me. I didn't believe him, but I had nowhere to go and no money to save me. I was trapped.

If it wasn't for the call that Remy got from his father one night, I almost wonder if I'd still be Remy's brainwashed little puppet. His toy to parade around and show off to all his father's criminal friends. That phone call was the motivation I needed to get the fuck out of there. I messaged Lana and told her everything.

Making our way down the wide hallways of Sacrum Cor Hart, I'm reminded of the first time I stepped foot on this campus two years ago. Back then, I was immediately struck by the impressive archways and gilded portraits adorning the stone walls. When we finally arrive on the third level of the building and into the game room, I sigh in relief when I spot the small bar that's manned by a fellow student.

"Thank Light, it isn't too crowded."

Lana squeezes my arm as we hop in line. "Are you sure you want to be here? If the rumors are true, then the chances are we'll run into Remy tonight."

"We have to be here, you know that." Cor Night might be a massive party, but it's always been mandatory, even for the Black Harts. I wave her words away. "The campus is huge. I'll just find a way to avoid him."

"I know, but you two just broke up, and it didn't take long for Remy to start bragging about tonight. You don't think he's making it up, do you?"

I shake my head. “Remy’s too cautious about his social status; there’s no way he’d lie about this.” He’d be a fool to make up something this crazy. It would be social suicide.

“Who do you think it’ll be?”

“That’s the question of the night, isn’t it? Which Black Hart would be foolish enough to fall for Remy Lombardi?”

Goosebumps cause the hair on the back of my neck to rise. I glance around, trying to spot what suddenly has me on edge.

It’s been a while since I felt that strange sensation of being watched. That hidden, darker side of me eagerly embraces the dangerous feeling like a long-lost friend. Where have you been?

A shout on the other side of the room causes me to jump and whip my head around. Two students shout again, passionately yelling at the video game up on the holo screen. The lights in the room are dim, adding to the eerie feeling rushing through me, and there’s a dark corner near the only exit, but other than that, there aren’t many places for someone to hide. The sounds of chattering people, pool balls striking, and video game pings fill the room. Everyone is preoccupied and having a good time.

Nothing looks out of the ordinary.

Once Lana and I have our drinks in hand, I kerplop on the brown leather couch, my eyes lingering on the holo screen closest to us, but my thoughts are lost in a dark memory. A time before Remy.

“Isn’t Remy obsessed with Devyn Shio?” she asks, twirling her straw in her glass. “It’s probably him.”

My stomach turns. Light. Please don't let it be him. That small, stupid, and hopeful side of my brain prays that Devyn isn't the one. Of all the Black Harts, it would kill me if it was him. And yet, it would make sense, considering all the information I've learned these past few weeks. My mind wanders back to that damn phone call I overheard. Mr. Lombardi only mentioned Devyn's father, nothing about Devyn himself.

Am I really stupid enough to believe that Devyn isn't corrupt like my ex or, fuck, like his own damn father?

Lana has no idea of my little infatuation. When I was a sophomore, I had no idea the guy I crushed on in my chemistry class was a Shio. Having no interest in the Black Harts, I never paid attention to what they looked like. I hated the idea of the school's elite being above us. Just because they were born into wealth didn't make them anything special.

But Devyn was different. Stoic and mysterious, and maybe even a little dangerous with his gorgeous crimson eyes. He had this way of blending into the background with his quiet demeanor. He reminded me of a silent assassin from the stories of old—a warrior who could melt into the shadows and slit your throat before anyone could see it coming.

While some of the other Harts thrived on attention, Devyn was the opposite. When I found out he was a Black Hart, I was shocked and, quite honestly, a little disappointed. The thought of some scholarship kid like me capturing the attention of a Black Hart was ridiculous. And yet, I couldn't escape my dreams of being overpowered and dominated by such a dangerous man. A Shio.

After Lana and I finish our drinks, we play a round of pool, where Lana kicks my ass. Several classmates stop by to say hi, and it doesn't take long for the news to reach our ears. Devyn has chosen Remy as his Praeda. The thought of the beautiful, dangerous

Devyn hunting down my ex and having his wicked way with him makes me sick.

Fucking hell. I'm jealous.

Did I actually hope Devyn might notice me out of the thousands of students in attendance tonight? Did I want him to, considering what I know? My mind swirls with indecision. It's been months since I last saw him. I take a swig from my third—or shit, maybe my fourth—drink of the night, letting the burn slide down my throat and the alcohol heat my veins. That stupid sensation of being watched washes over me again, and I take another swig.

Perhaps it's all this talk about Praeda and the hunt that has stirred up old feelings for Devyn. But I still can't forget that night I was convinced Devyn Shio was the man stalking me.

I'd been drunk that night too, but I remember him clearly. Lana and I had snuck into a club where we'd been dancing all night. I needed some air and walked out onto the patio. The sky above was dark and starless, with snow drifting to the ground.

A memory of the man with demon-red eyes emerging from the shadows comes to mind. The way he just stood there, staring, almost as if he wanted me to know it was him. And just like that night on the patio, I grow hard thinking of all the depraved things I want my stalker to do to me. I can't shake the imaginary image of Devyn storming toward me. What if he had closed the distance between us that night?

"There's no way it's true," Lana says, snapping me out of my trance. At least the damn pool table prevents her from noticing my arousal over the thought of being followed. "Why would any of the Black Harts want an abusive groupie on their arm? Why would anyone, for that matter?"

I wince, tugging on my sleeve.

Lana's gaze drops to my fidgeting fingers before she wraps her arms around my shoulders. "Oh, shit. I'm so sorry, Zaiah. I didn't mean you. He tricked you and manipulated you into trusting him."

I squeeze her back, knowing she didn't mean anything by it.

"Just please don't tell me he has a magical dick or something," she jokes, trying to lighten the mood.

The room spins and I laugh, feeling the effects of the alcohol hitting my system. "Oh, hell no! He never really satisfied me in that department. Did I tell you he said the main reason he cheated on me was because I just laid there in bed?" It wasn't true. He made me do all the work.

"No! What an asshole. A good lover will tell you what he wants. He'll guide you and show you what he thinks feels good."

My eyes flicker to the shadows in the corner of the room. "True. Although, I kind of like the thought of just lying there. Being dominated. Maybe handcuffed and helpless. It sounds so fucking hot."

"You naughty thing! Zaiah, I had no idea."

Another prickling sensation slides down my spine and I shiver. Fuck. I'm drunk; imagining shit that isn't really there.

I tug Lana back toward the bar and ask the bartender for water. Unable to resist the strange urge, I take a sip of the cool liquid and look back at the dark corner, only to spot a figure with midnight blue hair leaving the room.

My heart slams in my chest.

What were the fucking odds that Devyn Shio was hidden in that same dark corner?

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Chapter two

Devyn

‘ I kind of like the thought of just lying there.’

Shock and lust reverberate through me at Zaiah’s words.

Zaiah.

He’s left an imprint on my brain since the moment I laid eyes on him. Obsession might not be a strong enough word. He’s perfect; a pretty little doll I want to own. And fuck, the way he desperately looked into the shadows and spilled those filthy words. It took every ounce of control to stop myself from storming over there and forcing him to his knees. Even now, I yearn to grip his fiery red hair, shove my thick cock down his throat, and see those vibrant emerald eyes tear up with wonder.

Would he just stay still and take it like he was hinting, or would he struggle to get away?

I palm my erection and sink further into the shadows as I watch him walk over to the bar with his friend.

Slipping back into that headspace where my world revolves around Zaiah Ruca is frighteningly easy. It’s why I forced myself to stop my obsessive tendencies in the first place. Even back then, there was something about Zaiah that had me captivated. At first, my curiosity led me to read his college transfer file before wanting more.

Needing more.

So, I started following him. When my obsession with him pushed me to do more, I started dropping hints. I made my presence known. I wanted him to know he was being followed. Instead of cowering in fear like most people would do, he seemed to love the attention, constantly seeking me out in the darkness.

His curiosity matched mine.

Zaiah Ruca was my secret little addiction. Or at least he was—until he got himself a boyfriend and I thought he left the school. My pretty doll was like a drug I had to get out of my system. I thought I'd succeeded, but tonight just proves that one never truly gets over an obsession, do they?

I'm so focused on Zaiah's flirtatious smiles and the way he keeps scanning the shadows that I almost miss the ding of my multi-slate, notifying me of an incoming message. I turn down my brightness, hoping Zaiah can't see it from this distance if he glances back my way.

Illya: First one to tell me where he is gets my car.

An image of a handsome blond loads onto the screen, and a wide smile spreads across my face. Images of Zaiah's wrists bound behind his back while he straddles me in Illya's fancy car have me even harder now.

Before I can even reply, a new message comes through.

Illya: First one to touch him gets run over by my car.

Ah, so this pretty blond must be his Praeda. Interesting. I guess Illya and I are both participating this year.

Devyn: Don't threaten me with a good time.

Illya immediately starts typing. I chuckle, sending off another message before he loses his damn mind.

Devyn: I'm joking. You know we all want that sweet ride of yours—and I do mean the car this time.

I scan the room until my eyes land on my current target. Snapping a photo, I hit send.

Devyn: He's in the Game Room. Better hurry. You're not the only one who seems to have taken a liking to him.

Before I can get lost in thoughts of Zaiah again, I push away from the wall and walk out the door.

Just as predicted, a few minutes later, Illya storms around the corner, causing me to smirk. He doesn't even see me standing near the entrance, waiting for him. His sole focus is on getting to his Praeda inside the Game Room.

I throw my arm out in front of Illya just as he's about to pass. "Not so fast, brother. What's your hurry?"

Illya shoves me back a step and growls. "Move."

Tsking, I chuckle and hold my hand out to my fellow Black Hart, palm up. "I think you owe me something?"

His head whips toward me. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Oh, Illya. What's got you on edge? Don't tell me Praeda has you all worked up

too?” I know damn well exactly what has Illya on edge. Illya’s prey is in that room chatting with another man. But I’m not worried. Illya didn’t see what I saw. Only what I wanted him to see.

“Enough games. What do you want?”

“Like I said, I think you owe me something.” I hold my hand out again and realization sparks in his mismatched eyes before he rolls them.

Illya shoves his hand in his pocket. He drops his car keys onto my open palm. “Happy?”

“Very,” I drawl. “Who knows? If I’m feeling generous, maybe I’ll sell it back to you after I take it for a ride.” Illya is one of the few people who know I’m trying to save enough money to get my mother and sister off this fucking planet. Just because I don’t want my father’s dirty money doesn’t mean I’m not willing to get my hands on my friends’ money. Not when they so generously throw it away.

Illya nods, and I’m pretty sure he understands what I’m not saying. “Are we done here?”

I smirk. “Not quite,” I reply, tracing my fingers over Illya’s dark red blazer and straightening his obsidian pin.

“Don’t worry, Hart. Our prey is in there, both eagerly waiting for us to make an appearance. We might as well make ourselves presentable.” With a wicked grin, I produce the hidden cloth mask from my blazer and slide it over my face.

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Chapter three

Zaiah

Lana's winning streak continues as she laughs and pumps her fist into the air after another round of pool. I shake my head and smile when she wiggles her ass and does her usual celebration dance. "Light, I've missed you," I say, propping a hip against the nearest wall. While I do have a specific goal for tonight, I'm still grateful for this time with my best friend. Had she not smuggled me into her dorm and let me sleep in her room these last few weeks, I have this horrible feeling Remy would've kept me from the party.

Unfortunately, I can't live in Lana's dorm room forever, and I'm hoping the information I have for the Black Harts will get me enough money to get me off-planet for a fresh start.

We've been at it for thirty minutes now, and my buzz is starting to fade. Although the night is still young, I'm determined to dance at least once tonight. Cor Night lasts from the moment we enter the school and sign the waivers until the first rays of the morning sunlight.

As if reading my mind, Lana wraps her arms around me. "How do you feel about dancing?"

I grin. "I could be convinced." My eyes trail over to the corner of the room, but something tells me the spot is vacant.

Just then, several murmurs can be heard around the Game Room. Lana and I glance around right as Illya Carmine saunters over to the pool table where two guys are playing. My heart pounds. I take a step forward, wondering if there is any way to go over there and introduce myself.

The blond man, who was looking rather bored before the Black Hart showed up, suddenly stiffens. Illya smirks before making an obvious claim on his Praeda. A few people step in front of me, blocking my view. A hush falls across the room.

Lana taps me on the shoulder, causing me to look back. “Come on, I don’t think we should be here,” she whispers nervously right as the Black Hart lets out a loud shrill whistle.

Annoyance rolls through me. I have important, potentially dangerous information I need to give to the Black Harts, and when I finally spot one of them, the fucker gives the whole damn room a nonverbal cue to leave.

And like the fucking little drones we are, everyone shuffles out of the room, forced to obey Illya’s command. I roll my eyes. “Fucking Black Harts, they think they own the world,” I say, right as we exit the room, the last two to leave.

Movement catches my attention, and my eyes wander over to the dark alcove ahead of us. That same unsettling feeling washes over me; as if someone was lurking in the shadows. Watching.

A shiver runs down my spine, and my cock twitches.

It’s so foolish yet undeniably arousing to think someone might be there, just waiting. There’s something seriously wrong with me.

My gaze is instantly drawn to a flickering red light in the shadows. I gasp. A pin. I

freeze mid-step, studying the dark alcove. It's too dark to see if someone is actually there, and the glowing red light I thought I saw is no longer visible. Was it my imagination, or was someone covering it?

Regardless, I can't shake the feeling that I'm being watched. Followed. Lured into a trap.

Unaware of my inner turmoil, Lana walks right past the alcove. Nothing happens.

I chuckle at my ridiculous thoughts. Lana turns the corner and walks out of sight. Shaking my head, I try to settle my nerves.

No one is there, I tell myself. Maybe no one ever was. Still, my heart flutters as I slowly start to approach the shadows.

A disapproving tsk stops me in my tracks. My lips part.

My heart pounds as I study the darkness. "Hello?" I whisper, my voice trembling.

A hand jerks out of the darkness and strong fingers wrap around my throat. My scream is cut off right along with my breath, and suddenly I'm slammed against the wall, trapped between a muscular body and the cold stone.

The air whooshes out of me, leaving my lungs so fast, I'm momentarily dizzy from it. His large palm presses into the center of my back, holding me in place. I shove against him, trying to get free. Suddenly I'm flipped around and facing him. Before I can even think, my wrists are zip-tied together. He lifts them above my head and loops part of the plastic tie on a hook in the wall. It's then I notice the gilded portrait propped on the floor next to his feet. Even though I have combat boots on, I still have to get up on the tips of my toes so the zip tie doesn't dig further into my skin. Pain shoots through my wrists when I lose my footing. I bare my teeth and struggle against

my binds.

“What the fuck?” I snarl, finally glancing up at my captor. I’m met with a masked stranger. A white cloth mask with black designs that resemble a skull. My breathing picks up and I struggle against my bonds when I see his crimson-red eyes. There’s no way.

“You’ve been teasing me all night, little doll,” the stranger says in a familiar voice. “Just like you did last year.”

My eyes widen. It really is him. The mysterious stranger that’s been stalking me. I didn’t imagine him.

His obsidian pin glows a dim, angry red on his lapel. A Black Hart. Only... it dawns on me then; the mask. His voice. It’s all familiar because I’ve seen his videos. The man in front of me isn’t a Black Hart at all. He’s an imposter. Someone posing as a Black Hart and using their fame to gain subscribers.

“Demon Hart?” I ask, using his stage name.

“Ah,” he purrs. “You’re a fan of mine. Lovely.”

Embarrassment heats my cheeks. Because, well, yeah. I was a fan. A huge fan. Demon’s camboy sessions got me off so many times when Remy couldn’t bother. Demon always did things solo, but my favorite videos were when he pulled out this tiny silicone sex doll, the one he likes to lube up and pound into. Fuck. I’m breathing harder now. How many times had I wished I was that doll, propped up and ready for him?

I jerk against his hold and try to jump so I can unhook my arms. It’s useless. I’m completely trapped and at his mercy. “What are you doing? Why am I tied up?”

“Oh, sweet doll. I tried so hard to hold back, but after all those taunts and pretty little words, I’m giving you exactly what you want,” he whispers in my ear, his hot breath causing me to shudder.

“And what is it do you think I want?” My mind races as I look around desperately for an escape.

“Weren’t you just telling me how you liked the thought of just lying there? You said you wanted to be dominated. Cuffed and helpless.” He pushes my blazer open and slides a possessive hand under my crop top.

My lips part. He really was listening from the shadows.

I shake my head, still in denial. This can’t be real.

“I mean sure,” he continues. “You aren’t lying down for me, but this is the next best thing, am I right?” Demon’s fingers grip my waist hard enough to bruise.

I’m about to tell him to fuck off when footsteps sound in the hall.

“Zaiah?” Lana calls out, searching for me.

I freeze.

Demon presses his muscular, lean body against me, and my senses are invaded by the scent of cinnamon and clove. He’s a solid mass of weight; an odd mixture of terrifying and tempting. He places a large hand over my mouth, using his thumb and index finger to plug my nose and cut off my air.

I thrash against him as I panic. He chuckles low. “Hush, Doll. If I let you breathe, do you promise to be quiet for me?” he whispers directly into my ear.

I nod frantically when speckles dot my vision like a beautiful yet terrifying constellation of stars. He lets go of my nose but keeps his hand on my lips. Lana's steps get closer. A part of me knows I should probably call out for help, but it's probably not a good idea to antagonize this masked stranger. There's no guarantee he won't hurt Lana, too.

Lana hesitates in front of the Game Room, but at the last minute, she turns away, probably not wanting to interrupt whatever the hell Illya is doing to his Praeda. As soon as her footsteps fade away, Demon drops his hand from my mouth.

"Fuck you," I sneer, thrashing against my binds. "I'm not your doll."

"Maybe not yet, but I can change that." He steps back and away from my body.

It's only then do I realize he was partially holding me up. The change of position has me slipping forward and straining my wrists against the zip ties. I yelp in pain.

Demon lifts his mask halfway, so it's no longer covering his mouth.

The sight of his full plush lips has me momentarily paralyzed. There's a small smile on his smooth face, giving him an almost youthful appearance. I don't know why I expected him to be significantly older than me, but if I had to guess, I would have assumed he was somewhere around my age, just based on the lower half of his face.

Even though there's enough light to see the red flare of his eyes at certain angles, I can't quite make out the color of his hair, not unless he turns around. Rumor has it that Demon likes to pretend to be a Black Hart, constantly changing his hair color to blue and wearing contacts to match Devyn Shio. The man's true appearance remains a mystery, hidden beneath his ever-changing masks.

"What do you say, Zaiah? Do you want to be my doll?"

I lurch myself forward and spit on his face. My saliva lands on the corner of his mouth before dripping to the floor. The smile falls from his lips.

“There’s no way I’ll ever want to be yours,” I reply.

Demon presses his body back against mine. He slides his hand down to the button of my pants before he pops it open. My breath comes out in harsh, desperate gasps.

“Hmm. Your body seems to disagree with your statement.” His fingers slip under the waistband of my pants, his fingertips tracing the hard head of my cock. “Oh, yeah. Your body definitely wants me.”

To my horror, my whole body jerks and leans forward. Precum leaks from my cock, and Demon groans when he feels the wetness on his fingers.

“No—I’m not hard for you,” I yell. “That’s not because of you.”

Demon stills. “Is that so? Tell me then, Doll. Who has your cock so damn hard and leaking?”

My face flames, and I can’t stop the image of Devyn from entering my mind. As if betraying my thoughts, my mind drops to his obsidian pin. How did he get his hands on one? Did he steal it? Is it a fake?

“I see.” He purses his lips in displeasure. “And which of my fellow Black Harts has captured your attention?”

“You’re pathetic,” I spit, ignoring his question. “You pretend to be a Black Hart on screen, but you’re nothing more than a poor imitation.”

Demon’s eyes seem to brighten, and a wide grin spreads across his face before he

bursts into laughter. I kick and thrash, pushing against his body. I even kick him in the thigh, but no matter how much I struggle, he just seems amused.

“That’s right, my little doll is a fan of mine. How many of my videos have you watched?”

I snap my mouth shut.

Demon yanks my pants down violently until they are sitting mid-thigh. He rips my briefs down with them, and I watch in utter horror as my cock bobs in the air, fully hard and on display. He wraps his fingers around my thick girth and leans back in, inhaling that spot where my neck meets my shoulder. “Do you wish a certain Black Hart was stroking you instead?”

His plush lips tilt into a wicked smirk. I shut my eyes and shake my head.

“Do you wish Devyn Shio was here stroking your cock, baby?” Demon all but purrs. Damn, even the way he enunciates Devyn’s last name is such a fucking turn-on.

The more I struggle, the more he leans his weight against me, and the harder I get. Fuck. Why is my body reacting like this?

He chuckles, darkly. “I’m right, aren’t I? That’s it, baby. Keep your eyes closed and pretend it’s Devyn jerking you off. Can you feel his fingers wrapped around your cock?”

The beautiful Black Hart fills my mind, and I can’t control my whimpers or physical response.

He’s panting and growling now, hot puffs of air teasing my neck and ear. “Can you see it? Devyn’s losing control, Zaiah. You’re so fucking beautiful, helpless like this.

He can't help but touch you all over, like a demon possessed."

His free hand trails all over my body, under my crop top to tease my nipples, before sliding against my stomach and trailing back up to my chest again.

My eyes squeeze shut even tighter, but I can't stop the pathetic noises tumbling from my mouth now. Still, I force my hips not to move, no matter how much I want to thrust. I won't give him the satisfaction of submitting.

"That's it, Zaiah. You're the perfect little doll. Devyn's little fuck toy."

"Fuck you," I say weakly, angry that I'm so fucking turned on. I shouldn't want this. I should be fighting it more, not silently begging for him to make me come.

Demon grabs a fistful of my hair and yanks. Hard. "Open your fucking eyes and look at me."

When I ignore his request, Demon slams me back against the stone wall and presses his body against mine. His hard length pushes against me, and suddenly I'm scared. He unzips his pants and pulls out his cock. My eyes snap open. He's big. Like really fucking big.

"Don't rush me, Zaiah. It's only a matter of time before I'm sliding inside of you, splitting you open, and claiming you as mine. When I do that, just know there's no backing down. I'll own you. Body and soul. Mine, to do whatever I please."

His gaze is intense, filled with a wicked promise I can't quite understand. When his fingers grip my hard length this time, one pump is all it takes for me to cry out in release, tugging on my restraints and reveling in the mix of pleasure and pain.

Pulling out a blade I never saw coming, Demon cuts the zip tie, and I collapse like a

heap onto the floor. I glance up and watch in awed horror as Demon furiously strokes his cock and thrusts viciously into his hand. His grip is punishing as he works himself over.

I just stay there frozen, on my knees, kneeling in front of him as I try to catch my breath. With a loud click, the door to the Game Room bangs open and light spills into our little hidden alcove. Demon rips off his mask with a snarl but doesn't stop stroking.

Suddenly, I'm staring up into the cold crimson eyes of the last Black Hart I expected to see.

Devyn Shio.

Completely under his spell, my mouth falls open on its own accord as I eagerly stick out my tongue, desperate to taste him.

Devyn's eyes widen with surprise. With a shout, Devyn comes, falling forward, his free hand catching him before bracing himself against the stone wall. Warm cum paints my face and tongue.

He smiles down at me before wiping his cum from my cheeks with two fingers and shoving them into my mouth. It's both filthy and alluring, and strangely, it makes me feel owned. I fucking love it.

"That's it, Zaiah. Take it. You're such a good doll for me."

Shame and lust war within me.

A shrill ring pierces the air, and my eyes snap to his multi-slate. Right there in bold letters is his father calling.

Suddenly, I'm hit with a rush of memories, specifically that damn phone call with Remy and Marco Lombardi, and the information I have on Devyn's father.

Devyn sighs heavily. "Just a minute." He spins on his heel and answers the call. Cold fear snakes up my spine as I realize what I've done and who's on the other end of the line. Before Devyn can turn around and spot me, I slip out of the alcove and silently make my way down the hall.

Chapter four

Devyn

“Where the hell are you?” my father barks as soon as I answer my multi-slate.

I roll my eyes. Of course. Leave it to my father to ruin this lovely moment with my Praeda. Sighing heavily, I make my way down the hall toward the Game Room. “I’m on campus,” I reply in a calm, even tone. He doesn’t need to know my exact location.

“You promised you would participate in Praeda this year,” he grits out.

“Did I?” I say with a sarcastic lilt to my voice. It’s only been a few hours since I saw him.

“Devyn, what did I tell you? I need you to participate this year. Enough of these damn games.”

Need? That’s an interesting word choice.

Annoyance and something else—maybe panic—colors his reply. Fucking pathetic. My father used to be a man worth respecting. Worth fearing. His presence once instilled fear in others. These days, only my poor mother is afraid of him. Not even my sister is scared of him anymore. The old man’s mental state has deteriorated, and everyone around him sees it.

His behavior has become erratic and desperate. I’m pretty sure his business dealings

are illegal, and it's just a matter of time before everything crumbles around him like a house of cards. My father has become more unhinged, and it's about fucking time. As they say, karma is a bitch, and the abusive asshole will get what's coming to him.

My main concern is making sure my mother survives the aftermath.

“Listen, you little shit—”

“How the fuck am I supposed to claim my Praeda if you are calling me with inane questions?” I growl into my multi-slate.

Father pauses before a pleased hum comes across the line. “You're with your Praeda? Good, good,” he replies, sounding suddenly calmer, causing suspicion to weave its way into my brain. “It's about time you held true to our traditions. Remy Lombardi is—”

“Right.” I grit my teeth as I cut him off. “You better let me get back to it, then.” I hang up before he can say another word. Why the hell does my father need me to participate in Praeda so badly? And why the fuck does he need me to choose Remy?

My thoughts stray back to Zaiah. My lovely, pretty Zaiah.

My only regret about what we just shared was the lack of light between us. Fuck. What would my cum look like painted all over his freckles? Although there's something almost romantic about having my wicked way with him in the shadows. After he came so prettily before collapsing to his knees, I couldn't think of anything but my animalistic need to fuck him into the ground. Then, the Game Room door opened, illuminating his face enough for me to notice his striking emerald eyes and vibrant red hair. That damn hair that always reminds me of fire and passion.

Cor Night's barely begun, but it's already shaping up to be one of my all-time

favorites. The moment Zaiah realized it was me? Fucking delicious. How poetic is it that I've spent these past two years stalking my pretty little doll, and in turn, he's been watching me? That mask was a favorite of mine, and I used to wear it when thinking of Zaiah. It's been hidden away since I last saw Zaiah in person. I swear to light, when recognition flashed across his pretty features mixed with lust, I was done for. He knows my secret. Devyn Shio and Demon Hart are one and the same. There's no turning back from that. Only the Black Harts know my secret.

I lied when I said he would be mine after I fucked him. No, it's too late for that. I don't need my cock inside of him to own him. Because if I'm being honest with myself, Zaiah Ruca was mine the moment I saw him.

Making my way back down the hall and toward the alcove, a wicked grin spreads across my face when I notice it's empty. I pick up the gilded portrait and hang it back on its hook, smirking when the frame tilts to the side. A lovely reminder for me to spot every time I walk by. I tap the tiny device on the wall and turn it off before pocketing it. Checking my multi-slate, I smile when the video feed shows me what we just did. The night vision option fills in some details I missed in the dark, and I grow hard watching the lust all over Zaiah's face.

He put up a good fight.

There's something so fucking hot about the way he struggled. Maybe my little doll doesn't want to be as helpless as he claims.

I chuckle darkly. Did I really expect my little fire to stay still?

What's Praeda without a hunt?

Deciding to give my prey a head start, I lean against the stone wall and watch the video from start to finish, letting my cock fill for round two. Right as I finish spilling

onto his face, I'm about to turn the video off when something catches my eye; the moment my father called, and Zaiah focused on my caller ID.

Fear is etched clearly across his face as he stares at my multi-slate in horror before his gaze bounces up to my face. The sight fills me with rage. Not once during our interaction did that level of fear cross his face. Not until my father's name flashed in front of his eyes.

What the fuck did my father do to Zaiah?

I tremble with rage, and the damn temptation to kill my father is strong. If he did anything to hurt Zaiah, I can't guarantee he'll be alive long enough to regret his actions. Fuck the consequences. I'll find another way to get my mother and sister their money.

With closed eyes, I inhale deeply and practice self-control.

Pausing the video, a prompt I set up asks if I want to load it to my site. I hit decline. This video is for my own personal collection. Although the idea of Zaiah and I recording a video together for the world to watch me claim him has its own appeal.

A tempting idea flickers to life, and suddenly, I'm grinning again.

Pulling up the group chat with my fellow Black Harts, I type out a message and hit send.

Devyn: Is anyone at Castle Black? I could use a favor.

It doesn't take me long to figure out how to reactivate the tracking I had set up for

Zaiah. The flashing dot on my multi- slate is a basic tracking program that shows me exactly where he is on campus.

My little doll hasn't gotten far. Did I wear him out? I smirk when I remember that he probably had to clean himself up. Next time I mark my prey, I'll make sure it's visible for others to see.

By the time I find him, he's in the ballroom, hovering near the long tables covered with food. He constantly looks around, occasionally glancing over his shoulder. Curious about who he's waiting for, I frown when I don't instantly spot any dark corners or alcoves. I head toward a small sitting area where Zaiah will have trouble spotting me. On my way, I pluck a chocolate from a nearby tray. Remembering tonight is also Cor Night, I make a mental note to buy something pretty for my little doll to wear.

The item in my pocket is a heavy reminder that I already have a fun gift for my Praeda.

As soon as I'm in my seat, I pull out the earbud attachment of my multi-slate and slip it in before tapping on the tracking program. From this angle, I can see Zaiah and the anxious look on his face.

Lana rushes through the door and practically jogs past the dance floor and over to her friend's side.

"Zaiah, there you are. I just got your message." Quickly hugging him, Lana pulls away to examine his body from head to toe.

"Thanks for rushing over."

"Of course. Are you okay?"

“Yeah. Light,” he sighs, running a hand through his red hair. “I’m okay.”

“You sure? Something about you is different. It almost looks like you’re glowing.” She pauses and narrows her eyes. “Holy shit. Are you freaking glowing? Did you hook up with someone?”

I bark out a laugh, startling a couple at a nearby table. Oh, I like Lana. Maybe it’s the special cream on his face that makes him glow.

As if hearing my crude joke, Zaiah turns scarlet and rubs at his cheeks. He mumbles something under his breath, and I turn up the volume on my earbud, smirking.

“I’m fine. And I’m not freaking glowing.” He rolls his eyes. “No, I ran into Devyn.”

“Oh shit! Devyn Shio? Does he know you have that information on Marco Lombardi and his father?”

I sit up. The hell?

“Holy shit. Shut up, Lana.” Zaiah grabs Lana’s elbow and drags her to a private table in the corner. “You can’t say things like that. Not here. Conor Shio might be a bad man, but he could have ears anywhere.”

My lips twitch. Smart man.

“Zaiah, I’m worried about you. This information can get you killed. You need to hurry up and find a Black Hart and tell one of them.”

Red-hot rage boils my blood. My face scrunches into a nasty sneer. What the fuck has my pretty doll gotten himself into?

For two years, I've secretly studied Zaiah from the shadows, hoping to understand him better while searching for the courage to talk to him. And not once did he ever involve himself in anything illegal.

Zaiah is good, probably too good. If he has any incriminating information on Marco or my father, then this is Remy's doing. Remy trying to poison the beauty around him.

If he needs a Black Hart, why the hell didn't he stick around and tell me? Then again, he probably assumes I'm one of my father's little puppets.

Suddenly, it hits me. Zaiah might have the information I need to free my mother and sister.

I need to know what he knows.

"Do you think Devyn is guilty, too?" Lana asks.

I lean forward, observing Zaiah's face. He bites his lip. My heart pounds a frantic rhythm in my chest as I wait for his answer. I don't know why it's so damn important to hear the next thing he's about to say. I'm not a good person. How can I be when I have all these dark, primal desires?

But, for a moment back there, when Zaiah was kneeling in front of me, submitting, I felt seen. I wasn't someone to be feared. I saw that subtle change when he realized who I was, and in that instant, with Zaiah on the floor, he trusted me.

Finally, he shakes his head. "I'm not sure. I've known Devyn for about two years, and he doesn't strike me as the type to do something like this." My eyes widen with shock as his words register. What does he mean he knows me ? Only my fellow Black Harts know me.

Lana's lips part. "I didn't realize you two were that well acquainted."

Zaiah fidgets in his seat and blushes again. "We had chemistry class together. At first, I didn't realize he was a Shio. Back then, he was just Devyn. Stoic and smart. A little mysterious and so fucking handsome. He took my breath away."

I blink.

I don't think anyone has ever described me like that.

"Did you know I used to tutor his little sister?" Zaiah asks suddenly. I knew he tutored students during his free gap in his schedule, but since I had a class during that time, I never paid attention to who he helped. I had no idea Lillie was one of them.

"No, I didn't even know he had a sister."

Zaiah nods. "Their father is an overprotective asshole," he laughs. "Her words, not mine. Anyway, she didn't really need any tutoring. She's always at the top of her class and probably knows more than me. She used to tell me all kinds of stories. He might keep some things hidden from his sister, but something tells me, deep down, he's still good."

"Oh, poor na?ve, Zaiah," I tsk to myself. A good man wouldn't be willing to kill a man just for looking at you. Plus, you have no idea about all the depraved shit I want to do to you right now.

The rest of their conversation is short, and I'm shocked to find out Zaiah wants money for his information. He wants enough money to get him off-planet.

Like fucking hell am I letting my fire leave Usturn without me. Looks like I'll have to make things very clear from now on. Zaiah is mine. Whether he likes it or not.

I don't miss the way Zaiah scans the different corners, as if looking for his stalker. Looking for me. I smirk. Pretty Zaiah, already desperate for more.

A part of me mourns the time I missed with my pretty little doll. But maybe things were meant to unfold like this. Maybe Zaiah needed to be with that piece of shit, Remy, to help me put my father away.

I tap out one last message in the group chat. If I can't get Zaiah to give me the information about my father, I need a backup plan, just in case.

Devyn: Looks like I might need one more favor. Let me know if anyone is free in the morning.

Light, my brothers are going to give me so much fucking crap when they realize just how obsessed I am with Zaiah Ruca.

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Chapter five

Devyn

Like red stars in a dark sky, dozens of glowing red pins shimmer on the dimly lit dance floor. Zaiah sways to the beat, eyes closed, and arms high in the air. The sultry music highlights his beauty, especially as more of his midriff is revealed. Bringing my drink to my lips, I take a sip from my glass right as someone approaches Zaiah.

Jealousy slides down my back. An overwhelming sense of rage fills me at the thought of some random man dancing with my prey.

I walk onto the dance floor, knowing he has no idea I've been stalking him for the past thirty minutes. I kept myself completely hidden, listening in on his conversation with his friend until they finally decided it was time to dance.

When I violently shove the other guy away from Zaiah, he opens his mouth to say something, when he spots my obsidian pin and scurries off. Stepping up behind him, I place my hands on Zaiah's hips, encouraging him to continue his seductive dance. He still doesn't realize it's me, still lost in the music.

"Fucking Black Harts," he yells loud enough to be heard. "At this rate, I'll never find one."

I chuckle low in my throat because I'm pretty sure he thinks I'm Lana. I press the front of my body against his back as my hands begin to explore his body. I push against him, letting him feel the hard outline of my angry cock. Zaiah freezes as I

continue my exploration of my roaming hands until one reaches his throat.

“Don’t worry, Doll. A Black Hart has found you instead.”

Zaiah gasps when I start to squeeze.

A wicked smirk spreads across my lips and my fingers tighten around his neck as soon as he recognizes my voice. He squirms under my hold, and it’s only then do I realize how fucking good his body feels against mine.

“Do you have something to say to one of my Black Harts?”

He tries to wrestle free, but I easily overpower him in strength. “Fucking let go of me,” he snarls.

I laugh, pressing my front harder against his back. With my free hand, I slide it over his flat stomach and under his pretty floral crop top.

He thrashes against me, only causing his ass to grind deliciously against my hard cock. Fucking tease. For the past two years, this man has captivated my thoughts, my dreams, and now my memories. I drag my nose against his jaw and inhale. Lemon and vanilla. Light, why did I stop following him? I should have stolen him from Remy-fucking-Lombardi.

Having him here in front of me is better than I ever could have imagined. With my other hand, I grip Zaiah’s hip and shove my groin against him, encouraging him to keep moving. “That’s it, Zaiah. Dance for me.”

His Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows. My cock is hard against his ass, straining against my pants. This need to fuck my pretty doll is becoming undeniable. I’ve wanted him ever since the first day he walked into our chemistry class and sat in front

of me. How many times have I fantasized about throwing him onto our chemistry lab table and taking him right there?

His pulse is beating a frantic rhythm. I've never been much of a dancer, but Zaiah makes me want to try new things. I kiss the back of his neck, loving the way he shivers. Toying with the hem of his crop top, I speak right into his ear so he can hear me over the loud music. "Did you design this?"

As soon as I saw the floral print and how well it hugged his body, I knew it was one of his pieces.

Zaiah freezes.

I give his ass a sharp spank, my other hand still on his throat. "I didn't tell you to stop," I growl.

Slowly, his hips grind in a sensual circle. My breath hitches when he places his slim fingers over mine, encouraging me to keep squeezing. The music slows, but our hips sway to a beat that only the two of us can hear.

"Tell me, Doll. Did you design this shirt?"

He nods. "Yeah. How did you know?"

Disregarding his question, I reward him for his answer instead by slipping my fingers beneath the waistband of his pants. Praeda is all about the hunt, but this particular hunt started the moment Zaiah Ruca walked through the double doors of the Science Wing. It's time for a new game.

Zaiah hisses when my fingers dip lower. "What the fuck are you doing?"

Even though he can't see it, I give him a wolfish grin.

There's only one rule for Cor Night.

Be vicious with your vices.

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Chapter six

Zaiah

A part of me knows I should get as far away from Devyn Shio as soon as possible, but a sinister, wicked part of me yearns for more. More of him, and more of whatever the hell this dance is between us.

My body moves against my will, taunting and teasing Devyn as I grind against his hard length. I'm absolutely floored—and oddly touched—that he knew I designed this shirt. Remy never cared to notice, but Devyn did. After our earlier encounter, it's undeniably obvious that Devyn is my stalker, but just how well does this Black Hart know me?

Could he possibly be aware of my knowledge concerning his father's criminal activities? I had a feeling Remy would eventually connect the dots. He has cameras set up all around his house. Though it's been a few weeks since I left Remy, perhaps he's finally seen the feed from the night before I left.

Remy would have seen me listening in on his call, going through his things, and taking photos. Did he report his findings to Devyn, and that's how they met?

Devyn's grip on my throat loosens a fraction, and I already miss the extra pressure. It kept me grounded. If he lets go now, I might fall apart.

Light, what the hell is wrong with me?

I circle my fingers around his, marveling at how much bigger his hands are compared to mine. And then I squeeze, silently begging him to not stop. To hold me to him. To stake a claim.

He embraces me tightly and softly hums in my hair before giving me that added pressure my body craves. This is so fucking wrong, and yet, I don't ever want him to stop. I must be touch starved or something because this addiction I have for Devyn Shio isn't right. Devyn is like the sun; beautiful and blinding, but too much exposure will leave you burned.

"Tell me, Doll. Did you design this shirt?" He sounds amused.

"Yeah," I pause. "How did you know?"

Devyn keeps his grip on my throat but steps back enough so our bodies are no longer pressed together. With his free hand, he trails his tantalizing fingers down my stomach before dipping lower. His fingers dip into my waistband and hook on my underwear.

When his fingers don't stop, my head begins to spin. "What the fuck are you doing?" This asshole thinks he can just ignore me and do whatever he pleases? That's when I remember who he is.

What he is.

A Black Hart. And tonight is Praeda.

Devyn can do whatever he wants with whomever he wants, and no one here will stop him. But I'm not his prey. His chosen Praeda is supposed to be Remy. Not me. Never me. Being chosen by a Black Hart is supposed to be an honor, no matter how depraved their claiming might be.

Devyn's hand drops from around my throat. His fingers dig into my hip in a punishing grip, holding me steady. My legs are shaking now, but I can't quite tell if they're shaking in fear, panic, or lust. Fuck. Maybe it's a little bit of all three. And how messed up is that?

His hand dives between my crease, and suddenly his index finger circles my puckered hole. My pants remain buttoned, and the material cuts into my stomach. I'm trapped. A caged animal on a leash, unable to get away.

My chest tightens. There's no way in hell he'd actually finger me right here in front of everyone, right? When a little extra pressure is added to my hole, I jerk away, pushing forward and out of his grasp.

Devyn snarls, one hand still down my pants and the other catching my waistband and yanking me back to him like a sick game of yo-yo.

The dance floor is a whirl of people and lights, but then, as if rehearsed, I'm back in his embrace.

I stomp on his foot and twist around. Considering he's wearing thick boots like I am, I doubt that stupid move even did anything to him. Facing him now, my eyes flick up to his crimson gaze. A dangerous, lust-filled fire burns within his eyes.

He must see something on my face because he leans in, nostrils flaring. "There're certain things I like, sweet fire. Dark things . And the way you struggle? It does things to me. It ignites a passion in my soul. Fight me all you want, but don't misunderstand. By the end of the night, you'll be mine."

His words echo in my head, pinging around until I'm nothing but confused and flushed. Devyn's hand slides behind my blazer and under my shirt. It travels higher until his fingertips trace a pattern of scars I always keep hidden. Devyn stills.

Embarrassed, I spin back around in his hold so that I'm no longer facing him. Pausing, Devyn takes this as an invitation, pressing his body against mine from behind, and closing the distance between us.

Terror causes my entire body to freeze.

Standing in front of me, only about fifteen feet away, is Remy. The anger pouring off him seems to fill the space between us.

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Devyn glance up. His fingers flex against my hip when he sees who I'm looking at.

I take a step back, accidentally pressing my body firmly against Devyn. He wraps a muscular arm around me, like a thick bar holding me in place. Trapped between a monster and a demon, I make a decision and lean against the Black Hart behind me.

"Ah," Devyn murmurs into my ear. "There he is. Should we show the prick he can't take what's mine?"

What's his? "Wh—what are you talking about?"

Suddenly, Devyn is grasping my chin and twisting my face toward him. The angle is almost painful. Our lips meet in a desperate frenzy, and before I can catch my breath or even understand that Devyn is claiming me in front of my ex, he's leaning over me, shoving his tongue so far down my throat that I can hardly breathe. He continues to kiss me sloppily, and for some reason, I'm here for it.

All my senses are hyper-focused on Devyn Shio. His touch, the way he tastes, and that intoxicating scent of cinnamon and cloves.

I'm so distracted that it hardly registers that his fingers are getting wet from all the saliva between us. That is until his fingers let go of my face and trail down my body and between my crack. My muscles tighten with arousal and anticipation. His finger finds my hole easily before he's thrusting it inside of me.

The stretch burns and feels good at the same time. He barely gives me time to adjust before he's thrusting in and out, opening me up right here on the dance floor.

Blood rushes to my cock until I'm panting and needy.

Arousal and humiliation thrum through me like a wildfire scorching me with heat. This fucking Black Hart is fingering me on the dance floor. I should be pissed. Really fucking pissed at the way he treats me like his little plaything. It should remind me of the way my ex used me, but it doesn't. Instead, he makes me feel alive.

Tiny whimpers and gasps are falling from my lips.

"Look up, Doll. See how badly your ex wants you? I'll bet you anything he's hard right now, missing the sweet heat of this tight hole."

I shake my head. "I'm pretty sure he wants you, Hart."

He laughs. "Doesn't matter what that asshole wants. I'm yours... and you're mine."

Those words make my heart race, even though I know he doesn't mean them.

Remy's closer now, just watching, his eyes blazing with anger. I know it's foolish, but somehow staring at my abusive ex, while another man fills me with pleasure, knowing he'll never be able to touch me ever again, is the single most powerful feeling I've ever felt.

There's something frightening and intoxicating about gaining the attention of a Black Hart. No. Not just any Black Hart, but the one my piece-of-shit ex is obsessed with. The same man I've been obsessed with. My tempting demon.

Ripping my gaze away from Remy, I reach behind me and grip Devyn's chin in a punishing grip. Then I bring his mouth down to mine and clash our lips together. I'm claiming Devyn just as much as he's claiming me.

"Remy's gone. You two can stop." A throat clears and I tear my lips away from Devyn's. Slowly, he pulls his finger out of me, leaving me empty and breathless. I'm so horny, I could cry.

Fucking hell, I really hope she didn't see what Devyn was doing to me. I readjust myself in my pants, unable to hide my state of arousal. While some people glance our way, most partygoers are engrossed in dancing and laughter, but Remy is nowhere in sight.

With an angry expression on her pretty face, Lana stands in front of us, tapping her foot.

Devyn gives Lana a once-over before chuckling softly. "I'll go get the two of us a drink, Doll. Would you like one, Lana?"

Lana's mouth drops open. "You know my name?"

I yank her to me, half wondering if she has some kind of death wish. She should have never interrupted a Black Hart. Not one who looked so murderous only moments before.

“I know Zaiah,” he replies, his eyes dark and possessive as they sweep up my body.

My whole body tingles, flushing with embarrassment. And then he’s gone, weaving his way through the crowd. It’s only then do I realize he didn’t ask what drink I wanted.

“What the hell was all that?” Lana waves a hand at Devyn’s retreating form.

“I’m not sure.” I tug her to the edge of the dance floor, where the music isn’t as loud.

“Are you his Praeda?”

I shake my head, about to deny it, but I’m not entirely sure I have any words. Am I?

A bark of laughter has me spinning around.

Remy is standing there with a cruel smile on his face. “Zaiah? Someone’s Praeda? What a fucking joke.” He steps closer to us. Lana tenses before maneuvering herself between my ex and me. Light, I love her. But I also noticed she didn’t act this way with Devyn. Interesting.

Lana reaches back and slips her tiny hand in mine, squeezing it, and giving me silent support.

“You’re nobody, Zaiah. You don’t have money, you don’t have any family, and your bloodline is common. Nothing about you is interesting,” Remy continues. “You might be the pathetic little toy he throws away, but the night is still young. I’m meant to be his Praeda. It’s all been negotiated beforehand.”

The darkness in his tone causes me to flinch. I’ve worked so hard these past two months to detox myself from all the self-hatred and shame this man has beaten into

me. I've prided myself on healing quickly. And I've made a vow to never let a man make me feel less than ever again.

Then here comes Remy with a few careless jabs and calculated words, and suddenly, I'm afraid I'll crumble into the shell I used to be.

Negotiated beforehand?

Coldness slithers down my spine. Is this some sick joke the two of them planned together? I heard the rumors from others, but now, with Remy here in front of me saying he's Devyn's chosen one, I'm left wondering exactly what my role is in their stupid game.

No. Fuck that. I don't give a shit what Remy thinks. His games won't affect me anymore. I'm strong and I won't cower in front of this man. If I need to steel myself and lick my wounds in private, I will, but Remy Lombardi will not see me submit to him ever again. True submission requires trust.

I squeeze Lana's hand back and step in front of her before looking my ex in the eye. "That's funny. All night I've heard people talking about you and Devyn. That Devyn chose you. Yet, I don't see him talking to or acknowledging you. I don't see your daddy here negotiating on your behalf."

His fists clench and unclench by his sides. He wants to hit me, but he can't with the people around us. A small crowd starts to form, watching us. My body shakes with adrenaline and anger. I hate this man in front of me. All those nights he hurt me.

I deserve better.

Suddenly Devyn is standing there, right behind Remy, anger rolling off him in waves. My lips part.

His anger is like a tempting poison heating my veins. I want him. Fucking hell. I want him so badly.

Remy follows my gaze looking behind him. He straightens his shoulders and smiles.

Devyn's nostrils flare and then, like a mask falling into place, Devyn visibly calms himself before glancing at me. All that controlled anger now hidden by a mask of indifference.

Ignoring Remy, he walks past my ex in a deliberate move, brushing against him in a silent warning before making it to my side. As soon as he's in front of me, Devyn passes me a vibrant blue drink.

"Hello, Praeda," he purrs, a wicked smirk curling on his lips.

Oh, fuck.

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Chapter seven

Devyn

The red winking heart pin on Remy Lombardi's blazer taunts me as I brush past him. It takes everything inside of me not to bash this man's teeth in. As soon as I walked away from Zaiah, I pulled my earbud out of my multi-slate and slid it in place.

A small smile played on my lips, imagining Zaiah discovering the tracking program I had designed to monitor his conversations. My sweet fire was going to be pissed, and the outcome would be delicious.

But when that piece of shit, Remy, filtered through my earpiece, it took everything within me not to rip his throat out when I returned, especially when I saw the crowd gathered around them. This is another reason why I fucking hate spectacles like Praeda. Everything is a huge announcement. A show for everyone's entertainment.

I don't know how much clearer I can get about Zaiah being my Praeda than fingering him on the fucking dance floor, but apparently, everyone needs the words to be said out loud.

Dipping the glass of Blue Sugar in front of Zaiah's face, I hand him his drink. "Hello, Praeda."

A few people around me gasp as Zaiah takes the glass. I give them all a wicked smile, encouraging them to go tell all their friends. Devyn Shio has chosen his Praeda this year, and it isn't fucking Remy Lombardi.

Lana stands just behind Zaiah with a wide grin. My gaze lingers on Zaiah's face before returning to Remy. "Do you have a problem with my Praeda?"

Remy, beet red with fury, glares at Zaiah, his narrowed eyes seeming to envision the evil things he wants to do to my precious doll. Icy rage slides down my spine, and I place a possessive hand on Zaiah's back.

Light. His back. The angry scars my fingers had traced earlier. If I find out that Remy did that to him, I'm going to kill the fucker, or hell, I'll have Balthazar have his wicked way with him. If my fellow Black Hart gets hold of him, then at least I can guarantee Remy will suffer before he dies.

Remy finally turns toward me. "No problem at all," he says, tone clipped. As soon as Remy leaves, I face Zaiah.

"Aren't you going to take a sip of your drink I got you?"

Zaiah places the glass against his lips and tips the glass back. Before the cool liquid reaches his mouth, he narrows his eyes. I give him a wolfish grin. My sweet fire is smart, I'll give him that. I pluck the glass from his fingers and make a show of twisting the cup around until his lip prints are facing me. Lining them up, I place my lips on the smudge he left on the glass, pretending it's him I'm tasting. I tip my head back and take a healthy swallow.

"Not drugged," I say and hand him back his glass.

He takes a hesitant sip before his eyes widen with shock. "Blue Sugar?"

I nod. "Your favorite."

"Fuck," he says with awe.

Zaiah might be starting to grasp the extent of my obsession.

Just then, my multi-slate dings with an incoming message. I pull up my Black Hart group chat and smirk.

Ares: Everything's ready for you.

Ryker: Have fun, you kinky fucker.

I drag Zaiah off the dance floor and to the closest restroom. One person is at the urinal and the other is washing his hands. Both men jump when I thrust myself through the door, slamming it against the wall. "Everyone, out!"

Not even ten seconds later, Zaiah and I are alone in the room, and I'm shoving him against the wall with a violent force of need. My hand shoves its way down the back of his pants. I thrust a finger into his hole and he arches his back.

He scrambles to unbutton his pants, and I waste no time spreading his cheeks wider and thrusting a second finger in his tight hole.

He hisses in pain and slams his fist into my jaw. "You fucker. That hurt." Then he's kissing me hard while I finger fuck him. Zaiah sucks my lower lip between his and bites hard enough to break the skin.

Blood rushes in my head and my heart races. Adrenaline rushes through me. This. This is what I crave. The wild, out-of-control passion between Zaiah and me.

Pulling away from his tempting bites, I slow my breathing, not wanting to get distracted. "I have a proposition for you," I say.

He narrows his eyes. “A proposition?”

I have to tread carefully here. “You mentioned you were a fan of Demon’s videos.”

He arches a brow.

“We’re going to film a video together. And then I’m going to pay you.”

Zaiah’s eyes flare with anger. A part of me wants to reassure him but fuck if I’m not addicted to his passion.

“I’m not a whore you can just pay off and—”

“You misunderstand me, Doll. You will be in a video with me tonight. I don’t give a shit whether you want to. Tonight is Praeda. You are my prey and this is my demand.”

His face is flushed. I pause and I let the words sink in. “That being said, a live video will get us a lot of money. My fans have been begging for me to replace that silicone doll with the real thing. You will get at least half of that money.”

I know he’s desperate for the funds and as much as I want him to stay here on Usurn, the information he has on my father and Marco Lombardi could potentially get him killed. I need to know what he knows. And as much as I want to take things slow and earn his trust, my mother and sister’s safety is also at stake. I have all intentions of going with Zaiah and my family, but just in case, I need a backup plan. I’ll just have to get one of my other Black Harts to agree to talk to him. This way, he can get money from the video and money for his information. I need him safe, and setting him up with enough money to not only get off-planet but to start a life is ideal.

I can tell he’s about to argue, so I spit out the ungodly amount of money. It will be

enough money to not only get him off-planet, but to get him to one of the planets past Vitality.

Zaiah snaps his mouth shut. He knows this is a good opportunity to start fresh.

“What’s the catch?” he asks.

I smirk. “No catch. We’ll record our live video for all my fans to see. I’ll have my wicked way with you, you’ll get paid, and then you can do whatever you want with the money.”

He swallows hard. “And what exactly will you do to me in the video?”

I laugh. “Whatever the fuck I want, Doll.”

Zaiah’s eyes darken with lust. I pull out the velvet box I’ve had hidden in my pocket. “Happy Cor Night,” I say and toss him the box. “Put this on. We have to walk across campus, and by the time we get there, I want you to be stretched and ready for my cock. By the time the morning sun rises, I’ll own you, Praeda.”

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Chapter eight

Devyn

Zaiah studies the velvet box with an adorably flustered look on his face. With trembling hands, he picks it up and opens the box with a loud snap. Nestled in the cushion of the box is a butt plug with a pretty emerald jewel decorating the end. Next to the plug is a tiny jar of oil. It's enough to lube his hole for me, but that's not what it's for.

It's an expensive oil that works like an aphrodisiac. Within minutes, Zaiah will be so wild with lust that he won't care what I do to him. As soon as Zaiah sees it, he gasps. Oh yeah. My doll knows exactly what this oil is for.

"Fine. Let's do this."

"Good. You have ten seconds."

"Ten seconds for what?" he huffs.

I laugh darkly. "To get that toy inside of you and redressed before I drag you across campus. Ten...nine..."

Zaiah scrambles, panting hard as he rips his pants and briefs down. His hands are trembling so badly I almost feel bad. Almost .

His cock is so fucking hard, it's pointing straight out. I watch with hungry eyes as he

coats his slim fingers with the shimmering gold oil before he shoves them into his hole.

“Six...five...”

Zaiah growls. “Shut the fuck up,” he says, flustered by my countdown. He pushes the plug against his opening, but it’s too slippery, and he’s too tight.

“Three...two...”

“Fuck!” he yells. “You do it. I can’t.”

I groan. Striding forward, I shove him against the sink and bend him in half. His hands scramble for purchase as he pants, face against the cold tile. I hold him down and thrust the thick plug into his lubed-up ass.

“Fucking hell!”

I chuckle and press a kiss to his temple. Pouring the remaining amount of oil on my hands, I flip him around and give his cock a few violent strokes. His eyes widen when he realizes what I did.

“Oh, shit. You better not fuck me in the middle of the dance floor,” he says as he tucks himself away and pulls up his pants.

I bark out another laugh. “No, Doll. Anyone watching has to pay. Here.” I hold out my hand. “Give me your jacket.” He arches a brow but shrugs out of his blazer, anyway.

I tug the skull mask out of my pocket and slip it over my face. Then I pull out a delicate masquerade mask and tie it in place over his eyes. It barely conceals his

identity. His beauty is a stark contrast to my harsh appearance.

“Devyn?” He’s squirming now, the effects of the oil already doing their job.

“Hush,” I growl. Gripping his hips, I position myself behind my prey, flipping him around. He’s facing the mirror now. I trail my fingertips over the exposed skin of his flat stomach before returning to his throat, like a second home. I squeeze him roughly and grow hard when his eyes widen.

“Look at us,” I hiss into his ear, repositioning my obsidian pin so it’s visible.

When his eyes take in our reflection, I know he sees it. We’re fucking perfect together. Carnal lust stares back.

I snap a photo with my multi-slate before dropping my hand and ripping my mask back off. I hand him his blazer back.

“What was that?” he asks in a shaky voice. Damn, I love the way he trembles.

“That was me making sure we get you your money.” I step up to his side and show him the notes I’m typing up on my multi-slate. My lips twitch when I click on the countdown option. “Come now, Praeda. We have a live video starting in twenty minutes.”

A flood of notifications starts dinging, and I grin when Zaiah realizes it’s my subscribers. “Best not keep our viewers waiting.”

Chapter nine

Zaiah

“Where the hell are we going?” I pant, practically jogging through the snow to keep pace with Devyn next to me. At first, I thought we were going to Castle Black—not an actual castle—but the on-campus housing for the Black Harts.

Moving at this speed with a thick plug in my ass and a hard cock is a lot harder than one would think. Not to mention the effects of the oil have kicked in, and the friction of my cock rubbing against my pants is enough to edge me. Fuck, at this rate, it might be enough to make me come.

“You’ll see,” he chuckles, tugging my arm harder as he picks up the pace. Even though I’m the one slathered in oil, I can see the clear outline of Devyn’s thick cock in his pants.

“So why the pretty emerald jewel?” I ask, mostly to keep my mind off my throbbing dick. Although now I’m thinking about exactly why he needed to stretch me out. A whimper tumbles from my lips. Fucking oil. I’m so horny I’m going to lose my damn mind.

“I had it custom-made to match your eyes.”

I stop dead, remembering the gold and hazel flakes in the jewel. Dear light. How long has Devyn Shio been stalking me? And why the fuck do I love it?

“I thought we were going to do this in a bed,” I say when we approach the next building. My brows scrunch in confusion when he opens the double doors to the Science Wing.

“Let’s just say I was feeling romantic.”

Okay, because that’s not mysterious.

“Romantic ho—”

Devyn spins around, quickly leaning down into my space. He grazes his lips against my jaw, trailing up to my ear and biting the lobe. Hard. “So many questions. All you need to know, Doll, is that you’re mine.” His fingers tangle in my hair, forcing me to look up into his crimson eyes, and causing my heart to race. “I own you, Praeda.”

“Only till the sun rises.” I shake my head, but he yanks my hair again. It hurts. And yet, I shiver at the sensation.

He smiles and his eyes crinkle. “It’s cute that you believe that.” Suddenly, Devyn’s palm against the back of my head is gone, and I stumble.

“Jerk,” I murmur.

I follow him down the halls and pause when he pulls out a key to unlock the door to the chemistry room.

“Undress,” he orders.

I walk into the room and my mouth falls open. Bright lighting illuminates the classroom. Brighter than any other day I’ve been here. At the back of the room where I used to sit during class are several things that look like leather straps. An old-school

holo pad rests on a stand, the camera on and already logged onto his site.

I whip my head toward him. “You planned all of this?”

“I said undress.”

My cock jumps at his dark tone. I undress quickly, too turned on to fold my clothes. I toss them onto the lab table next to us.

Once I’m naked, I shiver as the cool air touches my heated skin. When I notice the way the holo pad is angled, I know immediately what Devyn wants. His comment about being romantic settles into my bones. This is where we first saw each other.

I climb up on the table. “Fuck! It’s cold,” I say as I immediately try to climb off. Before I can go anywhere, Devyn places a firm hand in the middle of my back. A silent command to stay still. To my shock, he tenderly traces the scars Remy left on my back. We don’t say anything for a long moment. No one has ever touched me like this.

Suddenly, he flips me onto my back. The lab table feels like ice against my skin, and I hiss out a protest.

Devyn directs my hands to either side of the table. “Hold the edges of the table and don’t remove them until we are done here tonight. Do you understand?”

I nod eagerly, my breath now coming out in harsh gasps. I nervously peer over at the leather straps sitting next to me. “Do I get a safe word?” I ask nervously.

“Sure, Doll. What is it?”

“Maybe red?”

Devyn shrugs, placing a pillow under my ass, giving him access to my hole. “Easy enough.”

He picks up the first strap and tightens it around my thigh. Then, he lifts my knee and bends my leg. He clips part of the leather strap to the leather wrapped around the bottom of the table, then repeats the process with my other leg until both of my knees are pressed against my chest and spread wide open. Everything is on display for him.

My cock is thick and leaking against my flat stomach. He has complete access to my hole, my cock, and my nipples. The thought alone almost makes me spill over the edge.

Devyn walks over to his holo pad and angles the camera at me. I suck in a deep breath. “My mask,” I gasp. “Devyn, please. I don’t want anyone to see my face.”

“Don’t worry. You’re mine, sweet fire. No one else gets to see you like this. Only me.”

I almost cry in relief. My cock bobs. “Only you.”

Devyn walks back to my side and places the thin mask over my face. Then he pulls his mask over his head and begins undressing. Suddenly, Devyn is gone, and Demon now stands in front of me instead, with his crimson eyes that almost glow. I’m straining against my binds, gripping the table as hard as I can. The sight of him undressing for me while he wears his skull mask is the single hottest thing I’ve ever seen.

When he’s completely naked from the neck down, he walks over to a little basket that’s sitting on the lab table opposite us.

“How did you get all your supplies here?”

Demon smirks. “Ryker and Ares skipped out on Praeda today.”

I choke on my own spit. “They fucking know what you’re doing to me?”

His smile grows. “Don’t worry, Doll. I’m sure they’ll be watching too.”

My heart races.

“Who gave you those scars?” he asks suddenly, and I look away in shame. “Tell me, pretty fire, who gave you those scars?”

“Remy,” I whisper.

He curses and storms to the other side of the room. Pulling out his multi-slate, he places a call. Fear races through me. I wasn’t supposed to tell anyone. He’s going to kill me. He almost did exactly that the night he gave me these scars. He almost killed me. And the sudden fear that someone else knows means he’ll be back to finish the job. Tears spill from my eyes as anger boils through me.

“Have you decided?” someone asks through the speaker.

“Balthazar!” Devyn barks. “It’s done. Remy Lombardi is a fucking dead man.”

The other Black Hart chuckles darkly. “Any preferences?”

“Dealer’s choice. Just make sure he’s dead.” With that, Devyn ends the call. My eyes widen as a huge boulder is lifted from my shoulders. Did that just happen? I stare at the Black Hart in front of me with awe. He can’t hurt me anymore. Remy can’t fucking hurt me anymore. If it was anyone else, I might try to call it off, but after finding Remy’s plan to run a sex trafficking ring, I don’t give a shit what happens to him.

Suddenly, the need to be filled and claimed by this man is so strong, and I can't tell if it's because of the oil infused in my skin or the fact this man is apparently willing to kill for me.

I think it's a little bit of both.

"Demon," I whine. "I need you to fuck me."

Devyn's head whips back toward me, and his eyes darken with lust. "So eager," he laughs. "But not eager enough."

Demon flips on the camera on the holo pad, and the video goes live. He walks back over to me and that's when I notice the vial in his hand. More of the aphrodisiac oil. He unscrews the cap and pours it all over my cock, my balls, my nipples, and my stomach.

I whine, trying to thrust my hips into the air.

"That's it. Burn for me, little doll."

Slowly, he pulls out the plug, and I'm left with this needy, empty sensation.

"Remember when you said you like the idea of just lying there?"

I nod.

"Are you going to be a good little doll and let me fuck you?"

"Oh fuck," I whisper, thrusting my hips into the air, desperate to feel any pressure on my cock.

He smacks my thigh. “Dolls don’t move, remember?”

I whine, but hold myself perfectly still. The effect of the oil is driving me wild with lust. I need to come. Fuck. I’m already on a hair trigger, but I want to be good for Demon.

“Now, do you remember your safe word, Doll?”

“Yes,” I gasp. “It’s red.”

He smirks. “That’s right. And good little dolls don’t speak,” he says before slapping a piece of tape over my mouth and thrusting his cock into my hole.

He pounds into me with a wild force that leaves me a moaning mess. I know my arms aren’t bound, so I could remove the tape to use my safe word if I needed to, but there’s something about letting myself feel helpless that I’m leaning into. Just the idea that he took it away from me only makes this hotter.

“Such a pretty little fuck toy. So eager to be obedient for me. So eager to be owned.” He laughs wildly. “Look at you. You love being helpless. Maybe someday we’ll play with the idea of dollification.”

I moan, but the sound is muffled behind the tape.

“I own you now, Praeda. You’re my sweet doll to do whatever I please with.”

Yes. I nod my head frantically, moaning my agreement behind the tape. I’m yours.

And I mean it. When I’m around Devyn Shio, he makes me feel both filthy and sexy simultaneously. Things between us got so heated, so quickly. They feel primal, animalistic, almost feral. It’s as if he can’t control himself around me, as much as I

can't seem to control myself around him.

Before I know it, he's stroking me viciously, my oiled-up cock now sliding deliciously in his hand. With a muffled whimper, I come all over myself as Demon milks me. My hole tightens around him, milking him in return, until he's coming with a shout and spilling inside of me.

Standing, he turns off the holo pad and cleans me up. Devyn rips off his mask and unbuckles me from the table. He scoops me up and gathers me into his arms. Over the next thirty minutes, he gives me water and takes care of me, gently cleaning me and massaging my legs, my arms, and my shoulders, all the while whispering that I'm his. It's a stark contrast to the man who just fucked me like the demon he claims to be.

I bite the inside of my cheek hard enough to bleed. Of all the things this man has said to me tonight with his taunting tone and sparky quips. I never expected to hear tenderness.

A tear slips down my cheek. Devyn doesn't hesitate to catch it.

Several minutes later, we're dressed and sitting on top of the lab table. "I have something for you," I say suddenly. Trusting myself—and knowing I have this information backed up—I tell him everything. I tell Devyn about Remy and the phone call. I tell him about his dad's involvement, and then I pull up the proof to show him. There's the video of me listening in on the call, the files I found after hearing their plans for sex trafficking and embezzlement, and how Marco Lombardi and Conor Shio are stealing from the other founding families.

When I look up at Devyn, I expect to see hatred. But instead, I see... hope?

"Fuck, this is perfect, little fire. It might take a while to investigate, but this is a good fucking start. You might have single-handedly just saved my sister and my mother."

Chapter ten

Devyn

(Several hours later...)

Using my multi-slate, I sit in bed and flip through all the documents Zaiah emailed. “Remy is a fucking idiot.” Almost all the attachments from Zaiah were pictures of easily accessible handwritten notes—that anyone could have found at his apartment—or printed documents and receipts. “Why didn’t you go to the police with this information?”

Although some photos Zaiah took were blurry because of his haste, the video recording of Marco Lombardi, Remy, and my father’s phone call was enough to justify a full investigation.

We’re in my bedroom at Castle Black, and Zaiah is standing by the window watching the sun rise over the forest. The morning sunlight illuminates his fiery red hair, accentuating his beauty.

“Your father is a Shio. One of the leaders of this planet,” he says, joining me on the bed. “I couldn’t be sure which of the police, if any, were in his pocket. I needed to bring the information to one of the Black Harts whose family was getting screwed over.”

“That makes sense. We need to be smart and form a plan.”

“We?” He arches a brow and stretches out on the comforter. “Is it crazy that I already love the sound of that word when it comes to us? Light. It’s crazy.”

“We,” I agree, easily enough. I don’t give a shit if it’s crazy. It is what it is. And Zaiah is mine.

“From everything I’ve seen, I’m assuming your father is the only person from the founding families who’s involved. But I can’t be sure.”

“I agree. We need to be careful just in case. Let’s set up a meeting with my fellow Black Harts. I trust all of them, and they would have a better guess at which family members to trust. From there, we can form a better plan on how to approach the situation.”

“I have something else to confess,” Zaiah says nervously. “Remy recently started in with the threats. Leaving me messages and telling me I needed to come crawling back to him. I’m pretty sure he knew what I discovered. Lana thought one of the Black Harts would pay good money for this info. I needed an escape. I wanted to leave this planet and start fresh.”

In a move he doesn’t see coming, I flip him over onto his back.

“Wanted? As in past tense?”

“Now—” he hesitates, looking hopeful and a little lost. “Now, I’m not so sure.”

A warm feeling blossoms in my chest and this infatuation—or addiction, or whatever it is—between Zaiah and me intensifies. Two years ago, obsession took root in my heart, and I know it won’t ever let go. My hand grips his throat, a move that clearly drives my little fire wild. “I wasn’t joking when I said you were mine, Zaiah. You are.”

He shudders against me. Looks like my pretty doll likes my words.

I trace the outline of his lips. “I don’t give a fuck if you leave this planet. But if you leave, I will follow. If you stay, then I will protect you.” My fingers trail down his neck, his shoulder, his side. “You will never see that abusive asshole ever again.”

“I can’t always rely on you,” he argues. “At the very least, I should learn how to use a weapon.”

My lips twitch. “What kind of weapon?”

He bites his lip, looking all kinds of adorable as he thinks. “Hmm. Maybe a knife, like yours.”

My cock twitches at the image. “Why would someone as beautiful as you want to learn how to cut a man?”

He shrugs a delicate shoulder, my larger shirt practically falling off him. Fuck. He looks good in my clothes.

“Would you like that, little doll? Want me to teach you how to slice someone up and make it hurt? Teach you the best parts of the body to inflict the most pain while still keeping them alive?”

His breath catches and his emerald gaze meets mine. “Do you mean it? Or are you just toying with me?”

“I’m not teasing. I think it’s a good idea.” And fuck me; the thought of Zaiah with a blade is turning me on. “Maybe I can even get Zar to show you a few tricks I don’t know.” Balthazar could teach my little doll all kinds of things.

He props himself up on his elbows. “You really wouldn’t mind if I learned how to fight? How to defend myself?”

I chuckle, shoving him back down on the mattress and caging him in with my arms. “Oh, little doll, you don’t need to cause pain to protect yourself.”

Leaning over his body, I open my nightstand and reach for the blade I keep hidden inside.

His eyes widen. He’s panting now, his body reacting to my proximity. “But what if I want to hurt the ones who hurt me first?” he whispers, grinding his body against mine.

Anger and lust fill me. I trace the handle of my blade across his cheek delicately, almost lovingly. “Who else hurt you, Praeda?”

“Just Remy.”

“Fuck Remy,” I growl. “He’s a dead man. If Zar hasn’t killed him already, it’s only because he decided to take his time.” I toss the blade back onto my nightstand and trail kisses all over his collarbone. I lift him enough to yank my shirt off him before lowering myself back down to his neck.

I start off slowly, teasing him with my tongue, before finding the spot I know will drive him crazy. Then, I begin sucking hard. I alternate between claiming bites and rough sucks until I’m sure the spot is tender. He tips his head to the left, giving me better access, and I move over several inches before starting again.

Zaiah is writhing and thrusting against me and his eyes have rolled to the back of his head. “What are you doing to me?”

I'm pretty sure he's referring to how I make his cock so damn hard, but I smirk and tell him the part I know will piss him off. "I'm claiming what's mine. Now everyone will know."

His eyes snap open. "Wait, what?" He shoves me off him and rushes over to my mirror. I laugh when he sees the mess I made on his neck. Mine.

"Fucking asshole! There's no way I'm going to be able to cover this up."

I smirk. "That's the point, love."

His head whips back my way. He opens his mouth, probably about to tell me off when my multi-slate dings with an incoming message. I stand up, bracing myself for what I'm about to read.

As soon as I read the threatening message from my father, I punch a hole through the wall. "That bastard." I punch the wall again, needing to feel the pain in my knuckles. "Fuck!"

"What's wrong? Who was that?" Zaiah sounds different. Almost as if his voice is laced with fear. Even with us submitting to our carnal desires, never once did he sound like this—actually afraid. I don't like it. I silently promise myself I'll teach him everything I know when it comes to fighting and self-defense. I'll hire the best of the best until he feels safe in his own skin.

Zaiah is a good man, and something tells me I can trust him with this. I drop my hand and let him read from my multi-slate.

He scans the message with this adorable furrow on his brow.

"Is he talking about your sister?"

“Yeah.” I shake my head. “He’s a piece of shit. There’s a reason I continue to make videos as Demon. I’ve been saving up most of my money for my mother and my sister in secret, just in case we can’t ever access their money again. He has everything tied up, and if he’s murdered, everything stops to investigate who killed a founding family member. Meanwhile, the family’s money he invested elsewhere might never see the light of day.”

Zaiah nods. “So, if your father is alive and rotting in prison, your mother may be able to fight it and get her money back.”

“Exactly. Speaking of money...” I tap on my bank app and wire Zaiah his money from last night.

He checks his multi-slate as soon as it dings. “What the fuck is this?”

I grin. “Your cut. Looks like I underestimated just how pretty you sound when you’re whimpering.”

His cheeks flush. “Shut up.” He shakes his head. “Devyn. This is too much.”

I tug him to me as I sit on my bed. Zaiah sits on my lap, straddling me.

“It’s not, Doll. I need you to promise me something. When shit hits the fan with my father’s scandal, I need you to take my mother and sister off-planet.”

“You trust me that much?”

I tuck some of his pretty red hair behind his ear and nod. “I do. I’d prefer to go with you, but I’m the Shio heir. I might need to stay for a bit. But I promise I’ll follow as soon as I can. And plus, you said you want a fresh start.” A part of me thinks he needs that fresh start and time to heal. He needs to get away from everything that

reminds him of Remy and his abuse. This scandal will only bring attention to those who feared him.

“Like I said, I’ll follow you. It might require me to be momentarily preoccupied.”

Zaiah pouts.

“Why did you switch majors?” I ask suddenly, an idea forming in my head.

His head jerks up. “How did you—” He laughs. “You know what? Never mind. I did it for Remy and regret it every day. I recently requested another major change, but it was declined. I wanted to switch back to fashion, maybe take online classes and get my life back.”

I grin. “How do you feel about Raynetel?”

His mouth falls open. Raynetel is a safe planet famed for its cutting-edge fashion, boasting fashion-forward universities that are light years ahead of our time. It’s the perfect planet. My sister, mother, and Zaiah will be safe and happy there.

“Raynetel would be a dream come true,” he breathes.

“Good. Then let’s do it. We’ll talk to the other Black Harts and make our plans. And if you need to go first, you can find us a house near the school of your choice.”

A slow smile spreads across his face, and he wiggles on my lap. “You know, people might not care what happens to your father after the investigation.”

“Hmm. That’s a good point.” I laugh. “Maybe I’ll have Zar give him a visit.”

His smile widens. “This is fucking crazy. How is this my life?”

I grin back, wrapping my fingers around his pretty, marked-up throat and yanking his lips to mine. “It’s our life now, little fire. Crazy or not. It’s ours.”

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:44 am

Zaiah

(One year later...)

Breaking News!

Usurn's Founding Family Member Found Murdered.

Just hours after receiving a 25-to-50-year sentence for embezzlement, sex trafficking, and money laundering, Conor Shio was found brutally murdered in his cell. Authorities have launched an investigation into the deaths of Marco Lombardi and his son Remy Lombardi, Shio's accomplices. The public rejoices at the possibility of a vigilante following the discovery of Shio's murder.

We contacted Conor Shio's ex-wife, Numi Shio, who reported that she and her daughter Lillie are happily settled into their new home on Raynetel, and that "Conor got what he deserved."

"Damn, mom!" Lillie laughs, handing me my multi-slate. "Who knew she was such a badass? Has Devyn seen this?"

"Have I seen what?" Devyn asks as he walks through the front door. Numi and Lillie's house here on Raynetel is even bigger than it was on Usurn. They left the planet eight months ago, and their matching bright smiles every time we visit make Devyn incredibly happy.

However, his big scowl makes it impossible to tell right about now.

Devyn plucks my multi-slate out of my grasp before I can even reply and scans the article. His features contort with rage, and his crimson eyes lock onto mine. “Lillie,” he grits out. “Mind if I have a moment alone with my fiancé?”

“Uh-oh,” she laughs. “Someone’s in trouble.”

“Lillie.”

She waves a hand in the air. “Yeah, yeah. Calm down. I’m leaving.”

Before she’s even fully out of the room, Devyn has me pressed up against the counter with his hand around my throat.

I moan.

His grip loosens, and he rolls his eyes. “Fucking hell, how am I supposed to punish you if you like whatever I have to dish out?”

I bat my lashes innocently and grind my hard erection against his. “Why would you have to punish me, Demon?”

“Care to explain to me why Zar called you just minutes after my father’s brutal murder?”

I shrug, and he slams his free hand against the cabinet right behind my head, causing me to jump.

I blink. Then his words register. “Wait. What the fuck? You never got rid of that damn tracking device you put on me?” I shove against him, but he’s like a fucking brick wall.

“Zaiah,” he growls. “You didn’t answer the damn question. Why did my fellow Black

Hart call you last night?"

I roll my eyes and shrug again. "He called to offer us his congratulations on our upcoming wedding."

"You're lying." His grip loosens even more.

I lean forward and bite his bottom lip hard enough to bleed. He shuts his eyes and pulls me into a vicious kiss. We're both breathing hard by the time he finally pulls away.

"I'm not lying," I reply. "I asked Zar for a favor. I didn't want to marry you with some knock off ring. I wanted you to have your grandfather's ring. The family crest. It's not my fault Conor told Zar to pry it from his cold, dead body."

"You got me my grandfather's ring?" he asks, eyes sparkling.

"Well, technically, Zar did it. But if he wasn't up for the task, I would have been." I give him a wicked grin. "How else am I supposed to test my newfound knife skills?"

He tips my chin up to meet his eyes. "Light, you cutting a man, all covered in blood, with this wild look on your face might be my new fantasy. You are so fucking beautiful, Praeda. My lovely plaything."

I arch against him and moan.

"You, my doll, remind me of a flower, always have. You bloom under my praise, stretching and yearning for more. Always so fucking desperate to reach up toward the sky."

Damnit. He isn't wrong. If anything, Devyn Shio is the sun. I'm desperate for his rays of light to touch me, no matter how dangerous. I want whatever he's willing to give

me, even his pain. Because let's face it.

I fucking burn for this Black Hart.

Reaching between us, I stroke Devyn's thick erection through his pants. He laughs, grinding against my hand. "My sister will hear."

"I don't care, let the whole world hear."

Devyn may think he owns me, but he's sorely mistaken. I own him . I'm just as obsessed with him as he is with me... maybe even more.

Thank you for taking the time to read my debut dark romance!