

The air was thick with humidity and salt, the pungent stench of rotting fish mixed with sweat burning my nostrils and turning my stomach. Pulsing beats and flashing lights were a cacophony of stimuli, but I couldn't afford to let myself get distracted.

The taste of my drink, some rum cocktail I'd been nursing for hours, barely registered on my tongue as I observed my target from across the crowded club—a merfolk who had embezzled quite a bit of money from my wealthy seraphim client. It would be difficult for him to deny he'd come into some serious cash based on the amount he was currently dropping on the three cute werewolf omegas that surrounded him, pawing at his chest and begging for drinks. I'd been following him and his little pack all day, from the salon to the spa to the designer stores, where he'd paid for everything they'd wanted and more.

They must have fleeced him out of thousands of runics so far, but Arius Darkwave didn't seem to mind.

The green-haired beta wore white linen pants and a pink button-up shirt with a seashell print, making him thankfully easy to spot. He grabbed one of the werewolves by the ass while ramming his tongue down the throat of another, whooping when he finally released her to slam down another shot.

He was probably having the night of his life, and I almost felt bad for being the reason it was about to end.

The Feast of Cethelyne, Tideholm's patron goddess, was starting today, and the whole place was going to be one giant party for the next three days. Magiks from all over Solaria flocked to the merfolk city-state this time of year, making my job a little more complicated than I liked. It'd be all that much harder to get Darkwave alone, away from the ladies whose company he'd been paying for all day, without anyone noticing.

But I'd made a deal to deliver him back to Halcyon before the week was over, and my deals were unbreakable.

I'd get my bond or I'd die trying.

A group of elves walked in, and a cute beta brunette with freckles and curves for days caught my attention. She tucked a lock of curly hair behind her pointed ear and then hooked her arm around her friend, her doe eyes wide as she scanned the room. Her face paled when a pack of alpha werewolves began ripping off their shirts and roaring in each other's faces, while demon women danced on tables in their bikinis. A few witches in the back got high on *bruum* and spelled the air with pheromones, ramping up the debauchery.

I ground my teeth together when an alpha vamp woman snuck up behind her, sniffing her neck and preparing to take a bite.

Another distraction.

My fingers itched around my glass, and I took another sip to ground myself. I was here for Darkwave, not to protect naive little girls from the consequences of their own poor decision-making.

Nobody came to the Feast of Cethelyne without knowing what to expect, and she looked old enough to be here.

Besides, maybe this was the kind of experience she'd wanted. Who was I to step in and "save" her? I was certainly no white knight.

My eyes darted back towards Darkwave, who held up his hand to tell one of his new girlfriends to wait, gesturing towards the bathroom.

Time to move.

I slipped from my table and down the hall before him, grabbing the "Out of Order" sign from under my jacket and hanging it on the door. I stood and waited until he stumbled through, acting like I'd just taken a peek inside and then pinching my nose. "Some werewolf totally wrecked the toilet."

He grumbled to himself, his eyes red and blinking as he tried to think of a solution. I lightly smacked his shoulder with the back of my hand and pointed towards the exit in the back. "Come on, we can go piss out there."

He bobbed his head in a sloppy nod, and followed me down the darkened hallway, the thumping music and screaming Feasters fading with each step.

The back door squeaked open on hinges rusty from the sea air and swung shut tightly behind us. Darkwave, uneasy on his feet, unzipped his pants and sighed as he relieved himself against the wall in the dark alley.

I looked up and down to get my bearings. On one end there were bright lights, honking cars, and cheering revelers roving the street in search of another party.

The other was quiet, with my car parked conveniently right around the corner.

A tendril of smoke slowly rose from the palm of my hand, and I let it wind its way around Darkwave's head towards his mouth. Just as it brushed his skin he turned around, unhinged his jaw and shrieked.

Fucking merfolk.

I stumbled back and hit the opposite wall, holding my splitting head. It was as if a million little flies with knives had flown inside me and were scraping my brains clean from the inside of my skull, making it impossible to think about anything other than wanting it to stop.

By the time the pain cleared I just barely glimpsed him disappear into the crowd at the busy end of the alley.

I growled under my breath, wiping away the blood that dripped from my ears, and took off after him before he could reach the shore. The real Tideholm was under the water, and nearly impossible for non-merfolk to get to without serious magic.

If I didn't catch him before he hit the surf, I was fucked.

Young people of all Magiks and in varying levels of undress covered every inch of the sidewalk, their bodies painted in glitter and decorated with strands of seaweed and pearls.

A startled witch accidentally spilled her drink on me and in my surprise I ran straight into an alpha seraphim's wings.

"Watch it, demon!" he yelled, taking a swing I easily dodged.

I didn't have time for this.

I punched him in the gut, leaving him gulping for air as I continued rushing down the street, desperately trying to keep the slippery merfolk in my sights.

I had locked onto his bright hair when the sound of heaving drew my attention and I narrowly escaped a stream of vomit, pivoting at the last second before it landed right on my boots. The smell of partially digested seafood mixed with alcohol almost had me gagging myself.

This just wasn't my night.

I looked up and cursed again when I couldn't see Darkwave anymore. Shit, he could have been anywhere. Not only was the beach just a few blocks away, there were half a dozen bars and clubs on this block, and several winding alleyways he could have wriggled his slippery, thieving ass through.

I needed to be on my way back to Halcyon tonight, or the clock would run out on my deal and I'd be screwed.

I hadn't wanted to resort to this, but I was running out of options. A group of five merfolk, not completely in the tank yet, stood on a corner looking at the phones, distracted as I made my approach. Tendrils of red smoke snaked from my hands, winding their way around them and slithering into their mouths. Their expressions became blank and they stood straight, turning towards me to await their orders.

*"Find Arius Darkwave,"* I commanded.

Their eyes, now rimmed in crimson, didn't blink as they nodded, my vessels disbanding immediately to begin their search.

Separating my soul into even more pieces than it was to possess so many people was supposed to be impossible, but I was an exceptionally powerful demon, and since the alternative was death it was worth the risk.

I breathed a little easier once they dispersed, cracking my neck and wading through the crowd with a little more finesse, moving with the waves instead of against them while I searched for my prey.

An omega vampire wrapped her arms around my shoulders and tried to kiss me, and I twirled her around and transferred her onto the demon next to me, hearing his hiss of pleasure as she sunk her teeth into his neck.

A few steps away, I managed to grab the phone dropped by an elf, high on *bruum*, smoothly putting it back in his hand as I weaved around him in one fluid motion.

*Green...pink...white.*

*Green...pink...white.*

I swept over the crowd, my eyes moving with laser-like focus as I tried to zero in on that color combination.

Another woman, a seraphim, reached for my junk and I pivoted, giving her a wink and blowing a kiss before I got back to work, smirking to myself at the sound of her disappointed groan and the laughter of her friends.

While the feast in Tideholm was an annual event, the party in my hometown of Tenmorne never ended, and I was almost getting nostalgic. The demon city-state was devoted to the pursuit of dark pleasures, lending to its well-earned nickname, "Desire's End."

For Magiks from all around Solaria looking for a place to let loose and have fun, it was the ultimate vacation spot. For the demons who lived there, though... not so much.

No child should be walking by orgies and stepping over pools of blood and people drugged out of their minds on their way to school, but that had been my life. It was made especially difficult by having shitty parents who refused to shield me from those types of activities, but eh, what could I do now except continue to block their calls and refuse to visit?

I hadn't been back in over a decade, and Kaoshin willing, I would never have to go there again.

Finally, a garish flash of color crossed my vision, and I spied my bounty ducking into an alleyway. I nodded to two of my vessels, who ran around the block to meet Darkwave at the other end.

Tipping my head back and sighing, I savored the sweet taste of prey and victory on my tongue. I flicked one of the curling black horns growing from my temple for luck and put my hands in my pockets, whistling as I closed in.

The desperate thief grabbed every door knob he could find, yanking to see if any of them were unlocked.

"Enough is enough, Darkwave," I said. He froze, his eyes wide with fear. "You stole over half a million runics from Elyon Damaris. Did you really think you'd get away with it?"

I quickly shielded my ears just as he opened his mouth, releasing another sonic shriek. When he saw it wasn't going to work this time, he turned and bolted for the other end of the alley, where my vessels were waiting.

One kned him in the stomach while the other grabbed his arms, holding him back and presenting him to me with wordless obedience.

"P-please, whatever Damaris is paying you, I'll double it. Triple it!"

I clicked my tongue as a wet spot grew from the crotch of his pants and down his leg, the sound of his pathetic whimpering making me curl my lip in disgust.

Why did they always beg like this? Didn't they know it was pointless?

"I made a deal, Darkwave. No amount of money can break it. Now..." I released another tendril of smoke, possessing the simpering merfolk. "*Follow me.*"

I discharged my other vessels, withdrawing the controlling power of my dark magic. Their minds blanked, erasing the past few minutes from their memory before they forgot all about me, laughing and going to look for their friends.

With one hand firmly on Darkwave's shoulder, I made my way back to where I'd parked my Hellfire X-666. Her cherry red paint was a beacon in the night, and I smiled every time I saw her. She wasn't the most inconspicuous vehicle around but damn, she was sexy.

I was going to put him in the back, but he reeked of piss and I was pissed he'd gotten the slip on me, so I cuffed his hands and shoved him in the trunk. He didn't even blink as I closed it, wiping my hands and taking out my phone to call my client.

*"Damaris."*

"Hope you like sashimi, because I caught a fresh one for you."

*"It's about time. Bring him to my office immediately."*

He hung up and I sighed, taking out a roll of vaporleaf and lighting it up, leaning against the side of my car. I looked up into the sky, watching the little cloud of smoke rise and dissipate in the warm air. I could already feel the effects of the deal loosening their hold on my soul, but it wouldn't be completely done until I'd delivered this asshole.

After finishing my roll and stubbing out the remaining embers with my boot on the ground, I punched in the address on my phone. It was a long drive to the seraphim city-state of Halcyon, and I wanted to get this over with.

I was just about to get in my car when the sound of giggling and moaning captured my interest and I looked up. The elf woman I'd seen earlier was pushing the vampire from the club against the wall outside, their mouths latched onto each other. Two puncture wounds on the elf's neck seeped blood, staining her white shirt.

I smirked and shook my head. Apparently I wasn't the only one who'd found what they'd been looking for here tonight.