

The Temp
By
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The Temp

A PILE OF PRINTED emails lay neatly stacked on the right side of the black marble desk. Strewn on the floor were hundreds of others. To the left were a few possibilities, although none quite so impressive as to be instantly accepted.

Slim, elongated fingers picked up the next page. After reviewing the content for several seconds, it was placed with the other potential candidates.

I knew this was not a good idea. Modern technology complicates everything. Maybe I should just send my regrets this year. No one would miss me. The thought of not attending Yemaya's and Dakota's Halloween party was more depressing than it should have been. Last year's had been quite enjoyable. Receiving an official invitation from the Illusionist and her partner was quite an honor and not to be taken lightly.

A long arm stretched out and swept the remaining papers off the desk, scattering them around the room. Some flew into the nearby fireplace, causing it to flare up unexpectedly. *I do not have time for this. One of these will have to do.*

CHAPTER 1

Virginia

LINN THREW THE car keys on the foyer table and headed toward the kitchen. It had been one of those weeks when retirement seemed a good alternative, except taking a pay cut would be painful.

Painful! Linn gave a little snort. *The next two weeks are going to be painful. Two weeks and nothing to do*, she mentally grumbled, plopping down in her favorite chair. On the coffee table in front of her was a drab brown envelope from the IRS. After reading the contents, Linn had left it lying in the same spot for a couple of weeks. Hoping that problem would go away was a waste of energy. The IRS never went away, especially when they were right.

Next to the letter was a brochure on Germany. In two days, she was supposed to be flying to Bitburg. An old friend had invited Linn to the local Oktoberfest. That wasn't going to happen. The Internal Revenue Service's notification of a tax return error killed all prospects of taking a trip this year. She would be sending her vacation money to Uncle Sam now. *I'll be damned if I'm paying the interest or late penalty. Lori's paying those. She's the professional.*

Lori had been Linn's tax preparer for years, and to be honest, she was normally very good at her job. Unfortunately, last year her work was less than stellar. A typo had resulted in Linn's deductions appearing higher than they actually were. What should have been a three was an eight. A few thousand dollar error made a huge difference in taxes owed. After the IRS added everything else to the bill, the final amount was several hundred dollars more.

And to think, I actually wanted to work for them when I was young. Well, no use crying over spilt milk. Maybe I can do something else for the next two weeks. I suppose I can work on some reviews...maybe even do a few posts and stir up some of the members in my online group. The thought actually made Linn smile. *Naw, that's too easy.*

Linn sighed and picked up the evening paper. Curious, she glanced through the Temp column in the Wanted section. One ad caught her interest. It sounded intriguing and mysteriously vague... and, to Linn's disgust, poorly written.

TEMPORARY HELP WANTED: Temporrary assistent needed. Must be willing to travel. Hospice experience desirable but not necessary. Applicants must be mature, compassionate and able to make tough decisions. Salary negotiable. Health and life benefits available. Application must be received by Tuesday. Send short resume to IM666@4evrhot.com.

Whatever happened to spellcheckers? Linn thought, shaking her head in disgust. There was no way she would work for someone this illiterate. Glancing at several other ads, she noticed similar errors. *Doesn't anyone proof these things?* Disgusted, she started to throw the paper in the trash but hesitated as her gaze was irresistibly drawn back to the temp ad. *Oh what the heck! It can't hurt to see what's involved. At least the person has a sense of humor.*

For the next hour Linn typed away on her laptop, creating a short résumé. After ensuring there were no typos or grammatical errors, she sent it to the email address in the ad. *There! See what you think of that!* she thought, feeling almost defiant. *You wanted short. I gave you short. No runs-ons, no quips, no errors. Just the facts!* A growling stomach reminded her that she hadn't eaten dinner. Closing the lid on her computer, Linn headed for the kitchen.

Checking her emails the next morning, Linn was surprised to find a response to her job application with an appointment scheduled for an interview the following Monday.

CHAPTER 2

THINGS WERE NOT going well. None of the applicants were suited for the position and the last had been particularly trying.

I should have known better than to pick a schoolteacher. The résumé was well-written, short, precise and to the point — traits to be admired in a world where education was appreciated less and less. The errors in the ad were proof of that. Thinking about the interview was almost painful. Linn Firsten was a force to be reckoned with.

* * *

The knock came at one minute before the scheduled appointment. When the woman entered, she examined the penthouse with a critical eye and seemed unimpressed.

"Come in, Miss Firsten. Please have a seat."

Confidently, the short, stout woman approached the desk and sat down, eyeing her interviewer speculatively.

* * *

I've always wondered what one of these places looked like, Linn thought. *What a waste of money!* Turning her attention to the figure in front of her, she tried unsuccessfully to make out the shadowed features. *Hmmph! That's just plain rude. Probably from old money.*

"Are you ready to begin?" her interviewer asked.

"Of course," she replied. *At least he has a nice voice.* "What would you like to know about me?"

"Straight to the point, I see. A quality I respect. Why did you apply for this job?"

"I need to make some extra money. I had planned a vacation in Germany but thanks to an accounting mistake I now have to pay the IRS instead of celebrating Oktoberfest. That means I have extra time on my hands and I hate sitting around doing nothing. If I can earn enough to pay off the government and keep me from getting bored, I'll have turned a fiasco into just a bad memory. Of course, that's if the job is something that interests me. What exactly is it that you expect me to do?"

"If I hire you, you mean," the interviewer corrected.

"And if I'm willing to accept the offer. Look, Mr.—What is your name anyway? You didn't sign your email or introduce yourself. I should at least know who I'm talking with."

"Masters. I apologize for my unintended rudeness."

"Well, Mr. Masters, as I was saying, I need to know more about the job if I'm going to accept it."

"I believe it is I who am interviewing you, Miss Firsten, and I have not offered you the job yet."

The gentle reprimand caught Linn by surprise. She realized her assertiveness was due to being nervous. It had been a long time since she had applied for a job.

"I'm sorry. I guess I'm a bit nervous."

"I understand. You have been a teacher for over thirty years. Taking charge is an essential quality when dealing with the young. If you are ready, we can continue with the interview."

"Certainly." Linn relaxed slightly. The man's understanding was assuring.

"Are you a religious person, Miss Firsten?"

A strange question, Linn thought. "Not very. Is it a requirement?" she asked cautiously.

"No, it is not important in itself. Do you believe in life after death?"

What kind of question is that? "I suppose. Are you a minister or something? Your ad did mention hospice experience."

"I am not a minister. A **something** may be a different matter." The interviewer clasped his hands together and leaned back in his chair. Linn had the impression he was trying to decide on something. After a few moments, he unlocked his fingers and placed his hands palm down on the desk. "I know these questions seem odd to you but I do have a reason for asking them. I have only two more to ask. I want you to think of someone, past or present, who you would consider the most horrible person on the planet. If you had the power to save or kill that person, which would you choose?"

This is getting too freaky. Before she could answer, the interviewer held up his hand to stop her.

"Obviously this is theoretical, but your response is important. If you could save thousands of lives by taking one, would you?"

"I don't know," Linn replied. Killing was abhorrent. *Not that some people don't deserve it.* The interviewer said nothing, obviously giving Linn more time to think about the question. "I think I could," she said, sounding more confident.

"And if that person were a child? Could you kill a child to keep him or her from becoming a monster?"

"I..." Linn didn't even want to think about that. "You said this is all theoretical. I'm not willing to even consider something like this even in **theoretical** terms." Standing, Linn stepped closer to the desk and the man sitting behind it. "I'm sorry, Mr. Masters, I think we're both wasting a lot of time. I'm certain that whatever you are looking for in an assistant is not one of my strong points."

"Perhaps this is the one thing you and I are in complete agreement with, Miss Firsten. Thank you for your time. My driver will be happy to take you home, now."

Not on your life, Linn thought. I'll be damned if I'm getting in a car with anyone connected to you. As she was closing the penthouse door behind her, she swore she heard a chuckle.

* * *

Only one more applicant. I never realized how difficult it is to find good help. Crumbling up Linn Firsten's résumé, the interviewer tucked the wad in his pocket and then vanished. A soft knock on the door of a penthouse almost twenty-five hundred miles away indicated the final applicant had arrived.

CHAPTER 3

Lake Tahoe

"ENTER," A VOICE commanded.

The hotel room was exquisitely furnished and dimly lit. The overhead lights were off. Red velvet curtains partially concealed large tinted windows. High ceilings and large chandelier were intimidating, making Cassidy feel small. A dark mahogany desk and chair were strategically placed so the occupant faced inward, his back toward a window. The dimly lit room made his features hard to distinguish. The man motioned for Cassidy to take a seat in the chair opposite him.

"There is no need to be nervous, Miss Donnelly. I have read your résumé. You attended college for only one year. Why did you quit?"

"I couldn't afford the tuition. I had gotten into an accident and wasn't able to work for over a year."

"Had you continued what would you have majored in?"

"Before the accident I was majoring in computer programming and system building along with English, writing and anthropology classes."

"I see. That was an ambitious combination. You have considerable experience with the public," her interviewer said. His voice was pleasantly low, which calmed her jitters.

"Yes, I'm good with people. I enjoy working with them."

"Your resume says you have one child."

"A son, yes. Brandon. He's my pride and joy."

"The ad specifies you must be willing to travel. Where will the child be when you are away?"

"My neighbor, Yvonne, will take care of him. She's my best friend. Our children play together all the time," Cassidy said.

"The job requires you to be away at night," the interviewer said, clasping his hands together and leaning slightly forward.

"Oh. Ummm... Would I be away very many nights? The ad did say it was a temporary job. If it's only for a few weeks, then I'm sure Yvonne wouldn't mind Brandon sleeping over. We've helped each other out before."

"I will require your assistance for only one night."

"One night? That's all? I don't understand. The ad offered health and life benefits... and... well, it doesn't make sense to offer that for just a night of work." The interviewer leaned back in his chair and said nothing. Cassidy wasn't sure what to think. "Wait! You mean I'll be working during the day and just have one night to worry about," she said, relaxing.

"No. I need you for one night."

"You don't... You aren't asking me to... to..." Feeling panicky, Cassidy jumped up. "I'm not..."

"Sit, Miss Donnelly," her interviewer ordered. "I am not looking for a prostitute."

Embarrassed, Cassidy sank down onto the chair. "I'm sorry."

"A reasonable interpretation under the circumstances. Shall we continue?"

Cassidy nodded.

"What I offer is not for everyone. It requires dedication and complete obedience. You will go places and see things you could never imagine, but you will be amply compensated for your efforts."

"How much will I be paid? I mean, I need to fix my car and I'd like to buy Brandon a gift. I haven't been able to do much for him since I lost my job."

"What are you worth?" the interviewer asked.

She thought about the question for a few moments. For some reason, Cassidy got the impression he wasn't asking about hourly wages.

"A lot!" she declared showing a side of her she rarely allowed out. Working with the public meant maintaining control of one's emotions. 'The customer is always right' was a mantra drilled into her by her past employers. "If I'm to give specifics, though, I'd like to know what my duties will be."

"Then you shall." The interviewer stood and moved slowly from behind the desk to stand next to her. "Tell me, Miss Donnelly, do you believe there is life after death?"

The question caught Cassidy by surprise. "I suppose," she said cautiously, wondering if it was a trick question. "I haven't thought about it much lately. It's a bit depressing."

"In what way? Is not death a natural progression to life?"

"Of course, but that doesn't mean it's something I want to think about too often."

"I see. If my questions make you uncomfortable I assure you there is a purpose to them. I have only a few more and then I will tell you what the job will be if I choose you."

"Okay."

"If you were given the opportunity to kill the most horrible person you could think of, past or present, could you?"

"I... I'm not sure. I think I could... if he or she was really horrible." Cassidy shifted uncomfortably in her chair.

"And if it was the most wonderful person, your son for instance?" Before Cassidy could answer the interviewer held up his hand to stop her from speaking. "If Brandon was in terrible pain and nothing could stop it. If you knew it would grow worse and he was going to die a slow and agonizing death, could you end his suffering?"

Cassidy could feel her heart pounding painfully in her chest. Her first reaction was to say no, absolutely not. There was no way she would even consider it, but...

"But," the interviewer responded. "That will do."

Confused, Cassidy could only shake her head. "I don't understand," she said.

"My assistant must be both compassionate **and** be able to make tough decisions. You have shown me you possess those qualities. Now I will tell you the job."

* * *

Cassidy shook her head as she looked at the list. She had spent several hours being interviewed by her potential employer and then listening to him... no, **It** describe what her work would entail. At first she thought it was joke. Then she started searching the room for signs of hidden cameras. When she realized the seriousness of the situation, she felt a little numb, and a little frightened, especially when a scroll was handed to her. It was supposed to be a short list.

Did he... It ... really expect her to deal with so many people? There was no way she could travel the planet fast enough to be with all of them. Cassidy looked at the partially unrolled document she held in her hands. *Death... Death...* had given it to her to review. *Short? There must a million names here and some I don't even know how to pronounce, let alone what they are. I can't be everywhere at the same time.*

"Is there a problem?" It asked. "I did stress the job would be difficult, did I not?"

"Yes... you did. It's just that, well, I didn't realize there would be so many," Cassidy said. "I mean there must be... I don't know, a million names here."

"Actually, there are only four hundred thousand, seven hundred and sixty-one. I intentionally kept the number low."

"Low?" Cassidy squeaked out. "How... How can I possibly vis... visit that many in just five hours?"

"There are no barriers to death. That is why life is so precious."

"But five hours? It seems —"

"Time is a mortal concept, and all living things are mortal... even those who think otherwise. You will be that reminder. Some will welcome you, others will curse and fight you with every ounce of strength they can muster. Every breath in their body becomes precious. They will struggle, hoping beyond hope, beyond reason, but in the end all will go with you."

"Where? You haven't told me what I'm to do with them."

"That I can only disclose to my apprentice. You have not accepted the job yet. What I can tell you is that for each there is a destination, one fitting for the life lived."

"It so overwhelming. I'm not sure I can do this," Cassidy said hesitantly.

Slender fingers gently took the list from Cassidy's trembling hand.

"It is not as hard as you think. I have chosen them carefully. Come. We will visit one; a practice run, as you might say. If afterward you feel you cannot do this, you may withdraw your application, and I will search elsewhere."

"I'm sorry to be so much trouble," Cassidy said. "I want — well, I don't want —" Death held out its hand, offering it to Cassidy. When she took it she was surprised at the comforting warmth. "I thought you would be cold," she whispered and instantly felt embarrassed.

"To some I am. For others I am the warmth they longed for, the light they sought in the darkness. I can be peace or I can be fear. I am all things to all things and yet I am nothing more than their guide. Their destiny is written long before my arrival. Now, shall we go?"

* * *

Her surroundings were like nothing she had ever seen. Fires burned everywhere. The cries of millions of tormented

souls filled the air. It didn't take a lot of imagination for Cassidy to know where she was.

"Why are we here? Aren't all of these people dead already?" she asked, looking up into the shadowy face of her companion.

"I do not come for those already lost. I come for one of their torturers."

"A demon? You're going to kill a demon?"

"Kill? I do not kill. I only take those whose time is passed. Their removal makes space for others."

"I don't understand. Where does a demon go when it dies? I mean it's already in Hell."

"Hell is a human concept. To the inhabitants here, this is Karylimikaneal. The literal translation is The Underworld. Like you, Demons and Minions have their own afterlife. Their qualifications just differ a bit," It said. "Come. Time is short."

"I thought you said time didn't exist."

"So I did." Pointing to an area to its left, Death motioned for Cassidy to follow. "That is where Philatanus dwells. He has enjoyed his pleasures for over a hundred thousand years. There are others who have earned his place."

"Philat —"

"Philatanus. He specializes in sodomy and pedophilia." Its voice was quiet and nonchalant. Death didn't judge... well, normally. Occasionally someone or something penetrated Its calm indifference. Philatanus wasn't one of them. They had known each other a very long time.

"Death, my old friend," Philatanus called out as the dark, shrouded figure glided smoothly toward him. "What brings you here and who is that mortal? Have you brought me a guest?" The Demon rubbed his hands together, obviously anticipating a new victim. "She is quite lovely... for a human. I will take great pleasure testing my newest invention on that plump, soft —"

"She is not for you. She is here to watch," It replied.

"Watch? Well, that's wonderful. I love audiences, but I've never known you to bring a guest before. What makes this one special?"

"Let us say I am training her. She is my assistant for a short while."

"Assistant? Since when did you need an assistant?" Philatanus eyed Death speculatively. "Are you going somewhere? Perhaps your time has come, eh?" he teased.

"No, but yours has," Death said, moving closer to the Demon.

Philatanus' eyes grew wide. His mouth opened to speak, but no words immediately came out.

"Mi... mine?" he finally stammered.

Nodding, Death placed his hand on his old friend's shoulder.

"Do you come freely?"

"Where? Will it be Okyllmetakin or Sagleemorlin?" Philatanus asked.

"Does it matter? Your destiny is already written. You cannot change it now."

The Demon bowed his head for several moments and then raised it proudly. Meeting Death's gaze, he nodded.

"It's as you say, old friend. I go freely and welcome my new adventure. This world has grown boring. I wonder who will take my place," the Demon mused.

"You have trained your underlings well. Someone will take your position, but not your place. No one can replace you. Come. We will walk this journey together, the three of us. Never have I allowed another to accompany me during these moments." Signaling for Cassidy to step closer, Death held out its hand for her to clasp. Then taking Philatanus', the three vanished. For a moment The Underworld grew quiet and then the cries of tormented souls resumed.

"Was that so hard?" Death asked, staring emotionlessly at the human sitting in the chair across from him.

"No," Cassidy said. "He seemed almost happy."

"Happy? No. Accepting is a better word. Philatanus is an old soul, bored with life, trapped in a routine that no longer brought him joy."

"Then why did he keep doing it? What an awful job! Sodomy... Well, there's nothing wrong with that I guess if everyone's willing, but I seriously doubt any of his **guests** were volunteers... and I don't even want to think about pedophilia."

"I would not judge him too harshly. Demons are... let me say **born** to carry out the duties humans find abhorrent... and yet many humans don't hesitate to commit the same atrocities. Demons cannot change what they are. In a way, humans are more evolved. They can... at least, most of them."

"I suppose. Will it always be this easy?" Cassidy asked, looking hopefully at the dark figure in front of her.

"No."

"Oh!" Cassidy was surprised at the frankness.

"But I have given you only those that will be the easiest."

"Over four hundred thousand, though. That's a lot of people, even if some are Demons."

"Cassidy," It said, leaning slightly forward. "I am Death. People are not the only things that die. All life ends eventually."

"All? You mean **all**? Like puppy dogs and cute bunnies and —"

"Yes, and... It is the way of things. Are you up to the challenge? Time is running short. If I am to make a decision I must have your answer now."

Cassidy swallowed.

Puppy dogs, she thought. Tears rolled down her cheeks.
Eyes filled with sadness, she met Death's solemn gaze.
"Sobeit," It said.

CHAPTER 4

LIKE LAST YEAR, the villagers attending the party were dressed in various costumes ranging from monsters to fair maidens. Not surprising no one dressed like a vampire or werewolf. In the land of Transylvania, few had the desire or courage to tempt the unknown. Spirits were respected, not mocked by trivial representations.

Yemaya and Dakota moved through the crowd stopping to talk to different guests along the way. Both were thrilled that almost everyone from last year's party managed to make it. Several gypsies wandered through the great chamber, some playing their violins softly while others played gypsy accordions in the courtyard and gardens. Occasionally wolves were seen prowling through the crowds but rarely allowed anyone close enough to touch them. A slight curl of the lip or low growl was ample warning to those daring enough to try.

"I hope someone doesn't push one of them too far," Dakota said, watching a young male wolf baring his fangs at a villager attempting to pet him.

"It will be a lesson learned," Yemaya said. "Volni has been surprisingly tolerant considering his age. Regina and Voinic have taught him well."

"Well, I wouldn't blame him if he did finally bite that guy. He's been following Volni around all night."

"Perhaps it is time we intervened." Motioning at Maria, Yemaya pointed to the villager and then the exit. Nodding, her housekeeper made her way toward the man and discreetly whispered something in his ear.

"But I only want to pet him," the villager whined looking longingly at the gray wolf a few feet away. "He's so beautiful."

"Mr. Slovonov. You were instructed not to touch any of the wolves. They are not pets."

"They certainly can't be wild. I mean I know people think they are, but we both know Miss Lysanne had to have trained them. I bet they aren't even full-blooded."

"I can assure you they are, Mr. Slovonov, and they are not trained animals. Now, I believe it's time for you to leave."

"What?" Slovonov exclaimed, spittle spewing from his lips. "Is this how guests are treated here? I must have a word with Miss Lysanne." Glancing to his left and then right the villager's eyes scanned the room for the hostess. "There she is. Miss Lysanne... Miss Lysanne!" he called out rudely, waving his right hand in the air, attracting the attention of several nearby guests. "I must speak with you right now."

"Mr. Slovo —"

"Aren't you the housekeeper?" he asked, turning his gaze back on Maria. "You really should know your place better." Raising his arm to push her aside, Slovonov was startled by deep growls to his left and right. Looking down he saw two large wolves approaching, their white teeth gleaming.

"As I was saying, Mr. Slovonov. It's time you left," Maria continued, her smile a blend of satisfaction and smug enjoyment.

"Well... well... I never."

The growls grew slightly louder.

"Nor will you ever again. Regina and Voinic will escort you off the premises," Maria said and then spun around, obviously a sign of dismissal.

Raising his head proudly, Mr. Slovonov tried to appear calm and in control as he left the great hallway. He'd have probably pulled it off if it wasn't for the dark stain spreading from his crotch down the front of his toga.

"I don't think he'll be coming back," Dakota said, laughing. Putting her arm around Yemaya's waist she gave her a firm squeeze. "I do so love how you make things disappear."

Yemaya grinned. "All the credit goes to Regina and Voinic. They can work their own magic when it is needed. Shall we tend to the other guests now?"

"Yep! Let's go talk to Sabnock and Constance. They look so... so at peace. What a beautiful couple they are."

* * *

Sabnock and Constance had made the long journey from the Great Beyond and were busy talking with Lilith and Intunecat. Sabnock looked magnificent in her warrior outfit. A burnt umber loincloth clung to her hips. The matching bra covered her breasts. Both were trimmed with golden threads that glinted whenever she moved. The flame tattoos on her arms and legs glowed a vibrant red and orange. As always, she stood protectively behind Constance, her strong arms wrapped loosely around her lover's waist. Her chin rested lightly on Constance's head as she surveyed everything around them.

Constance no longer appeared frail or vulnerable. Dressed in silver and blue, her dress clung sensuously to her slender figure. Slits up each leg showed a hint of pale thighs. The one strap crossing over her left shoulder draped down the front, covering her left breast completely but exposing the curves of the right. A pendant hung from her neck resting in the cleavage. An unnatural light flickered deep within the emerald green stone, its power felt by everyone sensitive to supernatural energies.

"It's good to see everyone again," Constance said, leaning into Sabnock's warm embrace. "Especially Dakota and Yemaya. I miss them." The longing in her voice didn't escape the demones.

"Are you unhappy?" Sabnock asked, gently turning Constance in her arms so she could look into her lover's sparkling black eyes.

Smiling, Constance shook her head. "No, I'm the happiest woman in the world."

"Worlds," Sabnock corrected teasingly.

"Worlds," Constance agreed. "That doesn't mean I don't long for more. This was my home for thousands of years. My people are still out there doing god knows what."

"God?"

Constance laughed and patted her lover's arm. "Sorry." God wasn't a topic demons cared to discuss. Sabnock no longer belonged to the Underworld but as the past commander of Dis' Legions, she still had strong ties and loyalties to the Underlord. "Lilith is as sultry as ever," Constance said, deciding to change the subject.

"Her life amongst humans agrees with her. I'm happy for her."

"So am I. Let's go see how she and the others are doing. It'll give you a chance to say hi to your old boss." Placing her hand on Sabnock's forearm, Constance pulled her toward the small group gathered near a life-size marble statue of a female warrior.

* * *

Lilith had again chosen a black dress, but no one was complaining. Sleeveless, the halter-style top swept around her neck, across her breasts and around to each side, leaving her midriff bare. The tan skin couldn't conceal the firm muscles underneath. A slit from the left ankle up toward her thigh displayed a long, exquisitely shaped leg. Few were immune to the demoness' sexual aura.

Standing next to her were Intunecat, the Dark One, and Dis, the Underlord. Intunecat was wearing a black tuxedo. Dis

wore nothing but a dark red loincloth, barely long enough to conceal his enormous penis. Several of Lilith's prostitutes stood near him, each hoping to take advantage of his renowned prowess and knowledge of the pleasures of the flesh. Dis had every intention of granting their wishes before the night was over, as well as a few demons and demonesses that were also in attendance.

* * *

As the large clock struck midnight, the banquet hall grew eerily quiet. The pendulum swung slowly back and forth. Some in the group could be heard counting each loud gong in anticipation of the twelfth.

"Do you think he'll make it this year?" Dakota asked.

"I think he already has," Yemaya said sensing a presence emerging near them.

"I am not a **he**."

Startled, Dakota jumped. "Don't do that!" she gasped nervously and then felt embarrassed. Death was not someone to be chastised.

"I did not mean to startle you," It said, bowing slightly. "I am used to my presence being felt by the mortals I come in contact with."

"Oh." Dakota thought about the comment for a few seconds and then her eyes widened like a deer caught in headlights. "OH!" she repeated, turning to look at Yemaya as fear coursed through her body. "**You** felt him."

"Yemaya and I have a unique connection. We have crossed paths on several occasions and will continue to do so. Tonight, however, I am here strictly for pleasure."

The relief on Dakota's face would have been comical under other circumstances.

"We are glad you could attend," Yemaya said, wrapping her arm around Dakota to comfort her.

"Thank you. If you will excuse me, I would like to visit a few old friends. I must leave in a few hours."

"Of course," Yemaya said graciously. "I imagine it must be nearly impossible for you to take time off."

"Yes." Death bowed slightly at the waist and glided away, leaving Dakota breathless and Yemaya intrigued by the courtly manner of the most feared being in human existence.

"I would like to get to know him... It better," she said and then winced at the painful slap on her right arm.

"No you wouldn't!" Dakota declared, her eyes flashing angrily.

"I meant figuratively, love, not literally," Yemaya replied. "Now stop beating on me. Our guests will think I am an abused woman." Leaning down she kissed Dakota on the lips. "You, I plan on getting to know literally... later," she promised.

* * *

Only a few guests remained when the clock struck three. The villagers had been long gone, most still uneasy about traveling the fourteen kilometer journey home through the dark forests of the Transylvanian mountains. Dis and the prostitutes had disappeared earlier but not before thanking Yemaya and Dakota for future endless hours of pleasure.

"Thank you, again, for inviting us," Lilith said to Yemaya and Dakota. "My whores are no doubt enjoying Dis' company and I will probably have to listen to their escapades for months."

"Perhaps you should take a vacation. We'd love to have your company," Dakota offered.

"I might just do that. May the rest of your night be as successful as your party."

"You are always welcome here, Lilith," Yemaya said. "I look forward to seeing you soon." Lilith vanished. Four guests

remained: Sabnock, Constance, Death and Saira, who had arrived shortly after Death's appearance.

"We must go also. The journey home is long and tiring for Constance," Sabnock said.

"I am not an old woman anymore," Constance replied, giving the demoness a stern look. "When will you stop treating me so delicately?"

Sabnock, whose arm had never left the historian's side, gently pulled her closer. "Never! I lost you once. It won't happen again."

"You do not need to worry about that anymore," Death interjected. "You are both where you belong."

"Please come back soon," Dakota said, giving Constance a hug. For a moment she looked at Sabnock and then stretched up on tippy toes and planted a soft kiss on Sabnock's left cheek, surprising everyone. "It's not often I get to kiss a demoness," she teased.

"It is not often I let you kiss another woman," Yemaya joked and then chuckled.

"Then I'm honored," Sabnock said seriously.

Saira, who had been standing quietly to the side, laughed. "Well, now I know why I'm here," she said. The Traveler was constantly being drawn to unique moments in time, normally starting with the present and following threads into the past. Tonight there were no threads to follow other than the one that had brought her to the party. Being stationary for awhile was a good feeling, but now she was restless. "Do you mind if I accompany you on your journey home? It appears I have a little extra time on my hands, no pun intended."

"We would love it," Constance said. Bidding everyone goodbye the three vanished, leaving Yemaya, Dakota and Death.

"Once again I thank you for the invitation. I too must leave. I fear my assistant is a bit overwhelmed at the moment."

"Assistant?" Dakota asked. "I never knew you had help... Not that I thought about it," she added as an afterthought.

"Normally I do not. It is an experiment. I am discovering that time off can be satisfying."

"Oookaay," Dakota said, unsure how else to respond.

"I believe you have left her speechless. Not an easy accomplishment." Yemaya grinned at Dakota's indignant look and then pretended to wince at the light slap on her forearm.

"You're going to pay dearly for that," Dakota promised. Both knew it was a meaningless threat.

"A price I will gladly pay, my love," Yemaya said before turning back to Death. "Thank you for honoring us with your presence. We look forward to seeing you next year."

"At our party," Dakota said quickly.

"I understand," It replied. "Until then." Death vanished.

Yemaya pulled Dakota against her body and wrapped both arms around her. "You are getting quite brave, considering who you were talking to."

"I'm just making sure Death stays in its place. On another note, I'm ready to collect on that remark you made earlier. Move it!" Dakota ordered pointing toward their bedroom.

"Your wish is my command!"

CHAPTER 5

THREE HUNDRED THOUSAND twenty-nine thousand six hundred and forty-seven Cassidy thought. *I can't believe I have that many to go. How does Death do it?*

"I see you are having problems." The calm voice could belong to only one...

One what? Person? Cassidy thought.

"That will suffice for now. You're not very good at this," It said and then held up its hand to stop her objection. "I am not criticizing you."

"I hope not! I mean I did manage to kill... guide over a hundred and fifty thousand souls to the right destinations. It wasn't easy, you know." Cassidy was clearly piqued.

"Indeed you did and for you, quite an accomplishment," Death agreed calmly. "I am surprised you managed so many."

Cassidy looked at her toes and blushed. "I know you're making fun of me now, but... well... it was easier to practice on bugs. I was building up to something bigger."

"So I see," Death said, noticing several thousand spiders and rodents were highlighted. "I commend you for your efforts, Cassidy, but you not are quite ready to be my assistant."

"I'm sorry. I really did want to do this, I mean... Do my job."

"I know. I have no complaints about your performance. My driver will take you home. You will forgive me if I do not pay you tonight. There appears to be a lot of catching up to do and time is of the essence... something I am not used to."

* * *

The black limo silently pulled up to the curb in front of Cassidy's house. Except for a dog barking several houses away, the neighborhood was eerily quiet. The driver, the same one who had picked her up earlier, opened the door and stepped back, offering his hand to assist her out of the vehicle.

"Thank you," Cassidy said.

"You're welcome, Miss Donnelly. Have a good night." Tipping his hat with his right hand he got back into the car and left.

Cassidy walked slowly up the sidewalk and entered her house. The barking stopped.

* * *

"The mail's here," Brandon yelled. "Nothing but junk except for a large letter or something. Can I open it?" he asked, waving it at Cassidy excitedly. "Please?"

"No, but you can shred all the junk mail."

"Cool!" Handing his mother the envelope, he ran for the paper shredder. Brandon loved watching paper disappear into the slot and then come out as tiny diamonds.

The envelope, nine-by-twelve, was made of white linen. Cassidy had never seen anything like it before. Her name and address were beautifully written in an old Calligraphic style. Not wanting to destroy it or the handwritten part, she gently pried the flap open and slid the two documents out. The first was a check for several thousand dollars. The second a letter addressed to her. At the top was a name she didn't recognize. Cassidy's eyes grew wider and wider as she read the contents.

Dear Miss Cassidy,

Please be advised that you have been selected for sponsorship by our organization. Enclosed is the first installment of twelve checks you will be receiving over the next year. The money comes with no obligations or

conditions other than those imposed under normal tax codes. If you choose to use the funds for educational purposes, an additional amount will be at your disposal. Should you have any questions, you may contact Mr. Quinton at the phone number supplied at the bottom of this letter.

Respectfully,
Daedi Masters,
Chairman of the Board

Additional information followed the signature which mirrored the writing on the envelope. Cassidy reread the letter several times.

It's a joke, she repeated over and over.

"Hey mom, what's up?" Charging into the room, Brandon flung himself onto the couch and threw his booted feet on the coffee table.

"Feet off!" Cassidy ordered automatically. "Nothing. I mean I don't know." Handing Brandon the letter, she gave him a few minutes to read it. "What do you think?"

"Cool! Who's this Masters person?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe he works for the guy you were supposed to meet last night?"

Cassidy gave Brandon a strange look.

"What guy?"

"Aw mom, you know, the man who interviewed you a few days ago. You said he might hire you to do some work for him on Halloween night. It sounded a bit creepy to me. Who wants to work on Halloween? You know, ghosts and things."

Brandon raised both hands in the air and made a face.

"Bwwahhh haaah haaaahhh!"

"Oh, him. I never heard back. I guess he picked someone else... and he was a bit creepy." Secretly Cassidy was glad she didn't get the job. The interviewer was a bit strange, especially his questions. She couldn't remember much after he had asked her about life and death. Shaking her head, she quickly put him out of her mind. "Say, how would you like to go out for a hamburger or something? I think we can afford to splurge a bit, don't you?"

"Cool!" he replied, jumping up.

"Cool!" Cassidy agreed. "And afterward, we're going to the bank and then the university. I'd like to check into a few courses. It's time I went back to school."

Hurrying toward her car, Cassidy didn't notice the tall, slender figure walking down the sidewalk.

"Oh, sorry," she said, almost bumping into him. As his hand reached out to steady her she couldn't help but admire the long, beautifully formed fingers.

"Be more careful, Miss Donnelly," the stranger's deep calm voice warned. "You can't afford another accident." Before she could answer the man moved away.

"Wow, is he creepy!" Brandon exclaimed and then lost interest. "Come on, Mom. I'm starving to death."

"Me too," Cassidy said and grinned. Life was definitely looking pretty good for the moment.

The End