

# The Halloween Party

By  
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# The Halloween Party

## CHAPTER 1

### The Planning

"I WANT TO HAVE a party," Dakota declared, stroking the warm skin on Yemaya's stomach.

"What kind of party?" Yemaya asked, clasping her lover's hand to keep from being distracted. When Dakota wanted something she usually got it... but a party? Few people were invited into her home. It was the one place she could truly relax; her sanctuary. The thought of having it invaded by a bunch of people made her cringe.

"A Halloween party... like in the old days... with costumes."

Dakota rolled over onto Yemaya, trapping her with her weight — not that Yemaya couldn't have reversed their positions at any time. When Dakota crossed her arms over Yemaya's chest and rested her chin on them, Yemaya's eyebrows shot up questioningly.

"And who would you invite to this party?"

"Everyone!"

"Everyone? Everyone cannot fit into our banquet room, nor does it accurately answer my question."

Dakota's green eyes twinkled with mischief.

*Not good*, Yemaya thought, knowing she had a hard time denying Dakota anything.

"Well, you know, there's mom, Raidon and Reymone, of course... and a few of your friends from town... ummm... Sonny, Suzanne, maybe my publisher..."

"I am not —"

"Then there's Granny, Mari, Sarpe... oh, and Ekimmu. We can't invite Sarpe with inviting Ekimmu," Dakota mused.

"You want to —"

"Let's see... Arbora, Ursa... Heck, we can invite all of the Spirits," Dakota said, grinning.

"You want to invite the Spirits and humans?"

"Sure! Why not?"

"First," Yemaya said, "I doubt if the Spirits would care to mix with humans and second, the humans would be terrified."

"Don't be ridiculous. Our friends are used to being around weird people... Well, I don't mean weird like weird. You know what I mean."

"I am afraid so," Yemaya said. "I will think about it."

"Great! Then it's settled. Oh, and we can't leave out Intunecat."

"Intunecat! Are you serious? And what do you mean, it is settled?"

Dakota shrugged

"I kind of like him, in an odd sort of way. And when you say you'll think about it, it's a done deal."

"You like Intunecat? He has caused us nothing but trouble," Yemaya said. "I have obviously spoiled you."

"Me? Spoiled? I'm not even going to go there," Dakota said. "And I happen to like Intunecat... in a strange sort of way. He did help save you in New Orleans... and I think he's just lonely."

"Lonely." Yemaya rolled her eyes. "How did you come to that conclusion?"

"He acts lonely. Besides, Lilith can keep him company... and the ladies from the nightclub."

"You also want to invite Demons? Demons, Spirits and humans, all in the same room... at the same time? It is a disaster waiting to happen. There is no way I am —"

"Oh come on, Yemaya. Isn't it time everyone put away their biases?"

Rolling Dakota off of her, Yemaya sat up and swung her legs over the edge of the bed.

"Why not just invite a few Angels too?" she asked, her voice tinged with sarcasm.

"Do you know any?" Dakota asked, ignoring the tone. "I think that would be awesome."

"No, I do not know any Angels, but I am sure Lilith does. Hell, we might as well invite Dis, too. Why leave him out?"

Dakota gave Yemaya a thoughtful look and then smiled.

"Now you've got the idea. Dis definitely would arouse a lot of interest."

"Dakota, I was being facetious. We **cannot** invite Dis."

"Why not? It's a Halloween party. No one will take him seriously."

"Everyone will take him seriously. He will make sure they do."

"Yemaya, you can be such a pessimist. If Lilith comes, she'll keep him in line."

Shaking her head, Yemaya stood and walked toward the bathroom. Dakota jumped up and ran after her.

"You have a lot of expectations for Lilith. Are you inviting her to have fun or babysit the boys?"

"Paleeze," Dakota begged, wrapping her arms around Yemaya from behind. "It'll be so much fun."

Yemaya turned and wrapped her arms around Dakota. Leaning down, she kissed her gently on the lips and then pushed her lover away.

"I will think about it," she said, knowing Dakota was right. She was going to give in, just not too quickly.

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Dakota was thrilled when Yemaya finally agreed to the party, especially after she offered to pay for everyone's airfare... humans, that is. All Dakota had to do was send the invitations and make the arrangements. That meant enlisting the aid of others.

*Mom will help. She can send the invitations to everyone in the States, Dakota thought. I'll send her an email outlining the plans and the date. This is going to be so much fun! Now, who to invite?* Chin cupped in her left hand, she stared at the blank sheet in front of her and then grabbed a pencil.

Snick!

*Damn pencil!*

Flinging it into the fireplace, she picked up a pen and began scribbling names. *Let's see. There's Sonny, Suzanne, Robbie, and all of Yemaya's crew. Mom, of course.*

For a moment, a great sadness swept over Dakota. Memories of her grandmother flashed through her mind. Paz had died less than a year ago. *I wish you could be here, Grams. I miss you so much.* Dakota sighed and then perked up thinking of others to add to the list. *Granny Dakota and Mari, and all the Spirits... and I can't forget Ekimmu. Sarpe wouldn't like that.* The list grew longer and longer. *Lilith and all the Demonesses from the club... oh, and Dis. Who else? Gypsies! Yemaya will be hurt if I don't invite them... and a few of the townspeople. I'd better get her approval on which ones. Some of them are a bit superstitious and might freak out.*

"Surely you're going to invite me," a soft voice to Dakota's left said, making her jump. Spinning around, she saw a ghostly apparition floating near the fireplace.

"Saira! How —"

"I was called. Apparently your party is going to be quite an event... if the tug is any indication," the Traveler said.

"I hope so. And I would never leave you out of any of my parties."

"I'm not so sure you'd be able to keep me away. Such a gathering has never occurred before... if you can make it happen."

Saira's comment was like a splash of cold water in the face.

"Oh, I hadn't considered —" she said, suddenly feeling depressed. "Maybe no one will want to come."

"That's a possibility," Saira agreed, gliding toward the desk. "But you'll never know if you don't try."

*That's true! What do I have to lose?* Dakota thought.

"You're right," she said aloud and then snapped her fingers. "Saira, would you help me with this?"

"What do you need?"

"If I write up the invitations, could you deliver a few for me? I don't have a way of contacting Dis... and... well, maybe you could take one to Sabnock and Constance. I know it's only wishful thinking, but I'd like them to know I'm thinking of them."

Saira gave Dakota a thoughtful look.

"I'll let them know. Dis is unpredictable and very self-absorbed... and he has little use for humans. I'd be surprised if he showed up. Sabnock and Constance? Their journey would be extremely difficult," Saira said.

"I know. I appreciate your help. I didn't think about how much work was going to be involved in just getting invitations to some... and I still have to make arrangements for —"

The den door opened, interrupting Dakota.

"Who are you talking to?" Yemaya asked, walking into the room.

"Hi sweetie. Saira dropped —" Dakota motioned toward the fire and then frowned.

"Apparently she had another calling," Yemaya said, her lips curving slightly upward as she suppressed a smile. "How are the plans coming along?"

"I didn't realize parties were so much work. I'm just finishing up the guest list and haven't even thought about the decorations or menu."

"Maria can take care of the menu. Perhaps you should focus on the decorations, since this is going to be a Halloween party. Andrea can take you to town to check out the local shops."

## CHAPTER 2

THE SOUND OF FALLING water was faint, far quieter than it should have been, considering the volume of water pouring over the precipice thousands of feet in the air. Dakota stood transfixed, mesmerized by the white mist swirling inches above the crystal blue lake.

"It's so beautiful," she said and then turned and hugged her spirit grandmother. Maopa hugged her back.

"I nevah grows tarred of it," Maopa said. Mari, her partner, stood quietly beside them. "But that tain't why yer here, Chile. What be a troublin' yah?"

"Nothing, Granny. I'm planning a Halloween party and want you two to come."

"A Hallerween party! Why in tarnation would yah be wantin' us tah be thar? We're just a couple of old Spirits."

"All the more reason," Dakota replied, grinning. "What better reason to come! Besides, it'll be fun. I'm inviting a bunch of people... Well, not people exactly... Some people, of course."

"Chile, yah bez as flustered as a flock of hens. Who yah be a askin' to this here party, anyways, that got yah so excited?"

"No one you don't know, I think. If you'd let the Council know, I'd appreciate it. And tell Sarpe to bring Ekimmu. Oh, and Intunecat."

"Intunecat?"

Maopa and Dakota turned to look at Mari.

*She is so like Yemaya, Dakota thought. If it wasn't for the silver hair, they could be twins.*

"Sure! Why not?"

"I really don't think Intunecat's into partying," Mari said. "He likes his solitude."

"I think he's lonely," Dakota said. "And I can't invite the other Council members and not him. He'd be hurt."

"Chile, tain't nothin gonna hurt Intunecat's feelins."

"Maybe not, but I'm not taking the chance. He's been sort of nice lately."

"I believe you're right, Dakota," Mari said. "It certainly won't hurt to tell him. I wouldn't get my hopes up too much, though. Who else are you inviting?"

Dakota's green eyes sparkled with enthusiasm and she smiled proudly.

"Lilith, Kali, Agra and the other Demoneesses from the club, Also Cammie. Some of Yemaya's crew... and mom, of course."

"Of course. I haven't talked to Lilith in awhile. She's a fascinating person."

"She certainly bez that," Maopa agreed.

"Yes, I've also talked to Saira. She's going to contact Dis and see if he'll come."

"Dis?" Mari's eyes widened in surprise. "You're asking Dis to a Halloween party?"

"Yah bez purty brazen to ask that un," Maopa chimed in. "Why would yah be a wantin' that rascal, fer goodness sakes?"

Looking down at the ground, Dakota scraped her right foot back and forth. Mari and Maopa made eye contact and shook their heads simultaneously. Mari winked and nodded her head toward Dakota. Maopa smiled.

"Nevah yah mind, Chile. If'n yah wants that un tah be thar, tain't no skin off our necks. I bez a-doubtin he'd showed up... but I has tah say it'd make thangs mighty interestin', seein' him and Intunecat tahgether in the same room."

Sighing with relief, Dakota looked at the two Spirits, her enthusiasm returning.

"I was thinking the same thing. Okay, I have to see if I can find Lilith now. I hope she's not out of town... or the planet, for that matter. See you soon." Giving Mari and Maopa a hug, Dakota vanished from the Spirit world.

"I hope that chile knowed what she's gettin into."

Mari laughed.

"She's your daughter, Love."

## CHAPTER 3

LILITH FROWNED AS she listened to Kali's report on the Sisterhood.

"Some of the whores are being harassed by a new pimp in town. Two Sisters have been attacked, but no one knows for sure if it was the pimp's thugs."

"Who is this man?" Lilith asked. "And where is he from?"

"His name is Franklin Wilson."

"Senator Wilson's son?"

"The same," Kali replied.

"I'm not surprised. The Senator's escapades are well known amongst the less reputable businesses. His day is coming soon. Take Agra and pay young Franklin a visit." The energy around Kali crackled. No one touched her whores. Teaching Franklin a lesson was going to be a pleasure. "And Kali, make sure he understands that his own whores are now forfeited. They are under the protection of the Sisterhood."

"He's not going to like that," Kali said, smiling broadly.

"His likes are of no concern to me... and I'm sure your gift of persuasion will make him quite agreeable to any terms you wish to dictate to him, should you think of a few more."

"I can always think of ways to make pimps amenable."

"Excellent. I'm looking forward to your next report," Lilith said.

As Kali turned to leave, Lilith's phone rang. Holding up her hand, Lilith signaled for Kali to stay.

"Lilith's Den. This is Lilith."

"Lilith, this is Dakota. How are you and the girls?"

"The girls are fine," Lilith said, her lips twitching slightly. "As am I. How are you and Yemaya? It's been quite awhile since you've visited the Den." An audible sigh on the line made the Demoness smile. "Is something wrong?" she asked.

"Oh no. We flew back to Moldova a couple of months ago. Hopefully we'll be back in the States in a few months. Yemaya is planning a new show... But that's not why I called. I'm having a Halloween party and want you and all the girls to come."

"All the girls meaning **all** the girls or just the Den's girls?"

"Well, I was mostly thinking about the nightclub employees, but..." A slight pause was followed by an almost inaudible giggle. "If any of your **girls** want to come, all the better. Yemaya said she'd pay for everyone's airfares. Maybe she'll charter a flight."

"I can afford my girls' fares, if any wish to attend. They're due for a little vacation. Is this party going to be formal or informal?"

"It's a costume party," Dakota said.

"You convinced Yemaya to have a costume party? I'm surprised. She doesn't strike me as one who would participate in such an event."

"Well, it wasn't easy... and I'm not sure if I can actually get her into a costume, but she's a good sport. If nothing else, she can always wear one of her performance outfits. Ummm... The girls won't mind coming in costume, will they Oh, damn! I forgot to tell Mari and Grandma Dakota it's a costume party."

"You've invited the Spirits?"

"Yeah, all of the Council. Mari's going to see if Intunecat will come. She has little hope of that though."

Lilith could hear Dakota's disappointment and was surprised.

"I didn't know you liked Intunecat," she said.

"He's okay. I think he's lonely. A little socializing would be good for him."

"You may be right, Dakota. Perhaps I'll pay him a little visit and see if I can help persuade him. It would certainly make the night more interesting."

"Oh would you? That would be wonderful. Listen, I've set the date for ..."

Lilith scribbled the details on her calendar.

"I'll pass on the information. Thank you for inviting us," she said and then turned to Kali once she hung the phone up. "You heard?"

Kali rolled her eyes and nodded.

"I'll let everyone know. Now I'm going to have to think up a costume."

"You could always go as a Demoness," Lilith suggested and smirked.

"Now there's an idea." Waving goodbye, Kali left to take care of business.

## CHAPTER 4

THE WRITHING BODIES looked like a mass of intertwined worms locked in a struggle for freedom. Laughter, grunts and groans filled the room, making it impossible for anyone to have a conversation, not that anyone wanted to. The pleasures of the body were all that mattered.

Dis yawned. Bored with the activities around him, he climbed out of the enormous bed and strolled from the room, not even bothering to put on his robe. Several minions scrambled after him, anxious to fulfill his every wish.

"You something wish, Master?" Gornich asked, wringing her hands nervously.

"No. Yes. Bring me a drink."

"What wish you, Master?"

"I don't know. Something with ice. Bring me a cola."

Gornich bowed and rushed from the room. The Underlord loved soft drinks, especially those that came in red cans. A special freezer had been designed to store ice and cold beverages. Snowballs did have a chance in Hell, as long as they were the property of the Underlord.

\* \* \*

Sipping his drink, Dis stared at the flames dancing in fireplace. Life was no longer exciting. The Great Battle had ended eons ago. His Twin had all but abandoned the mortal world, preferring to remain secluded in a laboratory filled with thousands of experiments. Many humans had grown bored with religions and no longer believed in Angels and Demons.

*At least I can still count on the fanatics to keep my minions and Demons occupied. Without them, this place would be become bedlam.* Sighing, he raised the glass to his lips, when the air around him shimmered.

"Don't you ever knock?" he asked as the apparition appeared in front of him.

"What would you have me knock on?"

"A door... a wall. You females just pop in uninvited as if you own the place."

"I'm assuming you are referring to Lilith as well as me," Saira said.

"Who else? Gornich!" he bellowed, standing up. "Bring me my robe."

"No need to dress up for me," Saira said. "I'm only here to deliver an invitation to you."

"An invitation? To what?"

"Robe here, Master." Gornich and several minions offered the garment to Dis, making sure it didn't touch the floor. Dis waved them aside.

"To a Halloween party. Yemaya and Dakota are having one. Dakota has asked me to extend an invitation to you."

Dis threw back his head and laughed.

"What a ridiculous idea! Me at a Halloween party?"

"I'm just the messenger. No one expects you to show up."

The remark caught Dis by surprise.

"Why not? I love parties."

"You love orgies."

"Of course. Is there any other type of party? Naked bodies thrashing around in bed, indulging every sexual whim and perversion the mind can conceive?"

"Yes, a costume party."

"Costume! You mean like monsters and clowns stuff?" Dis strolled over to the fireplace and rested his right arm on the mantle. "Has this human lost her mind?"

"Not at all. She invited Lilith and the other Demonesses, as well as the Spirit Council. I believe she's under the impression that you are lonely."

"Me? Lonely? Absurd! I am the master of my domain and those that live here. How could I possibly be lonely?"

Saira moved to the balcony and pointed to the fiery world in front of her.

"How could you not?" Saira replied. "Your world is beautiful. The oranges and blues are a striking blend. You have millions of inhabitants who either worship you or fear you, but does anyone love you?" Saira held up her hand to keep Dis from answering. "An unfair question and none of my business. My mission was to give you the invitation. I've done that. Now I must be gone. I feel a new tug."

Saira disappeared just as suddenly as she arrived.

"Damn female!" Dis bellowed, clenching his hands into fists and throwing his arms into the air. "I get no respect!" Only the presence of Gornich and the other minions kept him from stamping his hooved foot. "Out!" he ordered and then watched with satisfaction as they scurried from the room.

"Me! At a Halloween party! Ridiculous!"

# THE PARTY

## CHAPTER 1

THERE WERE OVER a hundred people at the party. The costumes were as diversified as the people and entities wearing them. Vampires and werewolves were the most popular choices, although not by the villagers. Their fears of such creatures were deeply embedded. Elves, skeletons and clowns followed. Only the humans chose the typical outfits, with the exception of the gypsies. They came as themselves, believing that being colorful was what really mattered.

\* \* \*

"Just about everyone took your wishes seriously," Yemaya said, staring at the milling crowd from the balcony overlooking the banquet hall.

"I'll say." Dakota clapped her hands together like an excited child. "I recognize most of the people and a few of the others. The Demons and Spirits showed very little imagination, though. That's kind of disappointing."

Yemaya laughed. "What better costumes than being themselves? Everyone has been asking where we got such well-trained animals."

*That's true*, Dakota thought. Dressed as an exotic snake charmer, Ekimmu had Sarpe draped around her neck and over her shoulders. The snake Spirit rested her head between her lover's breasts, obviously quite contented. Her elliptical eyes were closed. She appeared to be asleep. Dakota knew better.

Arbora was simply Arbora. Dark green hair cascaded down her olive green back. A wreath of purple flowers circled her forehead. Her short, thigh-length gown was purple and made of

woven spider silk. Arbora's left hand rested on Ursa's broad, furry shoulders, her fingers casually scratching the sensitive spot at the base of the neck. Dakota was surprised the forest Spirit had managed to talk the bear Spirit into coming to the party. Ursa was normally grumpy and somewhat anti-social.

Mari stood a few feet away from the other Spirits with Ladyhawk resting on her right shoulder. She had chosen a shimmering pale blue, ankle-length gown, emphasizing her height and perfect figure. Her silver hair flowed like water over her shoulders and back while her face was concealed behind a mask the color of her dress. Considering her likeness to Yemaya, Dakota thought the mask was a good idea.

Granny Dakota wore Eighteenth-Century buckskin breeches, boots and shirt. Simple, but one-hundred percent Granny.

Needless to say, the Spirits were attracting a lot of attention, something they weren't used to, but appeared to be taking in stride... and enjoying.

"I would say your party is a success," a sultry voice said from behind Yemaya and Dakota.

Turning, both women watched the costumed figure of Lilith approaching.

"Morticia!" Dakota exclaimed. "What a great outfit! It suits you."

"Thank you," Lilith said, her bright red lips curling into a smile. "It did seem appropriate, although for the life me I don't know how she walked in such a tight dress. I think I'd rather be wearing your costume, Yemaya."

Everyone laughed. Yemaya had chosen one of her performance outfits, a sleek, form-fitting, single-piece black jumpsuit with flames running up both legs and down the arms. Her mask had a similar design. Icy blue eyes twinkled through the slits.

"I bet you do," Dakota said. "It's hot!"

"You don't look so bad yourself. There was once a time when women were highly prized if they were skilled exotic dancers."

"As property, you mean." Dakota grimaced.

"Yes. The world has changed a lot, but not always for the better. Well, I really should check on my girls. This may be a bit overwhelming for them."

Dakota touched Lilith lightly on the arm.

"Thank you for bringing them... and for coming. It means a lot to me."

"You're welcome, Dakota. It was an honor to be invited. Perhaps we'll have some time to talk later. I'd like to know more about your next show, Yemaya."

"I look forward to it," Yemaya said and then turned to Dakota. "We should join our guests."

\* \* \*

No one knew for sure what made them look up toward the balcony overhanging the banquet room... no one, that is, except the Demonesses and Dis. Even the Spirits' eyes were irresistibly drawn to the two figures standing quietly together, arms wrapped in a gentle embrace. Lost in each others' gaze, the two women appeared oblivious to the curiosity and admiration of the crowd below.

"What a stunning woman," Suzanne whispered to the small group around her. As Yemaya's senior assistant, she was used to seeing beautiful people in the entertainment community. None of them compared to the taller woman, who seemed to be shielding her partner.

"I'll say," Bobby said. "She's even more gorgeous than Yemaya."

Suzanne hit him on the shoulder with the back of her hand and looked around, hoping their boss, Yemaya, or Dakota wasn't within hearing distance.

"As beautiful," she corrected.

"Yemaya wouldn't care if we thought someone was better looking," Paula piped in. "She's the most unpretentious person I've ever met. Knowing her, she'd agree with Bobby... and I have to say: Wow! What a body!"

From the conversations taking place around them, others were voicing similar thoughts.

\* \* \*

Tall, lightly tanned and lithely muscled, the woman had a thick mass of wavy red-orange hair spilling onto her shoulders and

down her back like molten lava. A two-piece, coal-black bikini top and short loincloth trimmed in fiery orange emphasized her physical perfection. The loincloth barely reached her thighs. A slit on the side of each leg exposed an orange brief underneath. Strapped to her hip was a sword sheathe similar to the Japanese Katana. There was no doubt this woman was a warrior. Sandals with leather laces wound around and up her calves, ending just below the knees.

"That bez a mighty fine 'lookin' woman," Maopa said nudging Mari in the ribs. "I swore'd 'if'n I 'weren't yourn, I'd be houndin' her like a coon dog in heat."

Mari gave her Spirit-partner a wry look and shook her head.

"It's a good thing I decided to come with you, then, isn't it?" she teased.

Maopa grinned. "Naw. Ain't no one as good lookin' as you. Still, ain't no denyin' that one is something else. The li'l one next tah her is as cute as a button. They makes a mighty fine couple."

"You're right about that. I wonder who they are."

"Let's go ask 'em," Maopa said, pulling on Mari's arm. "And find out if'n them thar tattoos is real. I always wanted me a tattoo and them's the best I ever seen. They almost looks real from here, all flickery, I mean."

\* \* \*

Maopa was right. Several brilliant orange flames ran up the warrior's left arm and down her right forearm. Each glowed and wavered faintly whenever an arm moved. Had it not been for that, she could have been mistaken for an exquisite statue.

Leaning slightly against her was a shorter woman, with black hair fixed in coils on top of her head, and wearing a Roman-style, golden, floor length dress. Golden bands surrounded her biceps. A gold chain hung around her slender neck. Attached was an iridescent green pendant that seemed to pulsate, as if mimicking the heartbeat of the wearer. Her pale complexion gave the impression of vulnerability. Perhaps that was why her companion seemed to be supporting her with her left arm.

The whispers continued. It was only when the two turned their gazes from each other to the crowd below that the room grew

silent... and then returned to normal. Several guilty giggles, mostly from the whores, could be heard above the hum of conversations. The only thing they liked better than gossiping was fantasizing, and the latest arrival had stimulated their imaginations well beyond anything they had ever experienced before.

\* \* \*

Yemaya was chatting with Kenyon and his wife, Gerda, when she sensed a new presence. The **beast** also felt something. It shuddered and withdrew deep into its lair, afraid. Surprised, Yemaya shook her head feeling momentarily disoriented.

"Are you alright, Miss Lysanne?" Kenyon asked, his expression showing concern.

"I am fine, Kenyon, thank you. Please excuse me. If I ignore Dakota too long, she will think I have forgotten about her. I appreciate you and Gerda coming to the party."

"It was our pleasure. The missus and I haven't enjoyed ourselves this much in years."

Watching Yemaya as she walked away, Kenyon leaned toward Gerda and whispered in her ear, "Such a wonderful person."

Gerda nodded and then tugged Kenyon in the opposite direction.

"I just have to talk to that woman with all those animals. Maybe I can get her to bring them to my classroom. The children would love it."

"Yes, dear," Kenyon said. His wife was now on a mission, and he was being dragged along as an accomplice.

\* \* \*

Dakota watched Yemaya weaving her way through the milling guests and frowned, sensing something was wrong.

"Are you okay?" she asked, her concern evident in her voice.

"Something frightened the **beast**," Yemaya said. Dakota would know what she was referring to.

"Are you in danger? Can I help in any way?"

"No, I am fine. It has been quiet for so long, I had almost forgotten about it. I was caught off guard when I felt its terror."

"Well, I'm all for anything that keeps it at bay," Dakota said.

"Normally, I would be —" Yemaya stopped and looked up toward the balcony. As if on cue, everyone around them did the same and the room grew quiet.

"Holy shit!" someone exclaimed, breaking the silence, and then the whispers began.

"Is that? It is! It's Sabnock!" Dakota grabbed Yemaya's hand and pulled her toward the stairs. "Who's the woman with her? Why isn't Constance —?"

"I believe that is Constance," Yemaya said. Dakota stopped so suddenly, Yemaya bumped into her, almost knocking her down.

"It can't be. Constance is an old woman. I mean... this woman is young and... and handsome." She turned her attention back to the couple and her eyes widened. "That's Constance!" Yanking Yemaya's hand again, she ran up the steps. Yemaya had no choice but to follow.

"Constance!" Dakota squealed, tears running down her cheeks. She rushed to the librarian and gave her a long hug. "I missed you sooo much. You look stunning... and Sabnock, you're gorgeous! How are you?"

Constance looked up into the eyes of her lover and smiled. Her black eyes twinkled with suppressed humor... and something else.

"We're fine!"

Sabnock gave a slight nod.

"I never had the chance to thank both of you for all that you did for Constance," the Demoness said.

"We were honored that you trusted us," Yemaya replied. "And there is nothing we would not have done for her."

"You know I'm in the room, don't you." Hands on hips, Constance gave everyone an indignant look.

"Apparently, everyone knows you are in the room. How long can you stay?" Yemaya asked.

"Only a few hours," Sabnock said. "Perhaps we can go somewhere more private for a chat after we've circulated amongst your guests. I'd like to pay my respects to Lilith. I owe her more than she can ever imagine."

"Let's meet back here in an hour," Dakota suggested. "That way you can talk to... Uh oh. Granny's on her way up. Make that two hours. She's going to want to know everything about you."

"I think we'll be able to handle her," Constance said, smiling. "Besides, it should be an interesting conversation. I haven't met many Spirits in my lifetime. Have you?" she asked, turning a questioning look to Sabnock.

"No. It will be an honor to talk to your ancestors. Constance has mentioned your grandmother Dakota and the Earth Mother."

"Then we will see you later. Dakota?" Yemaya said, extending her hand to her partner.

## CHAPTER 2

LUCIAN AND NICOLAE had been friends all their lives. Where one went, the other followed. Usually Nicolae was the instigator.

"I tell you we do this," Nicolae said, trying to reassure Lucian. "No one pay attention to us while in these costumes."

"But if we get caught, Nicolae, we —"

"We what? What they do? Eat us? Drink our blood? You scared of boogie man, Lucian?"

"Mama and Papa say the Lysannes are not human. Maybe even Drac!"

"Your mama and papa like villagers in old movies — superstitious and scared of own shadows. Come on, Lucian, nothing happen, I promise."

Reluctantly, Lucian agreed. He and Nicolae had spent an entire week putting together costumes. They would dress as Romani. Wearing bright red vests, white shirts, head scarves and sashes around their waists, they felt secure they would blend in with the other guests. The biggest obstacle was slipping out of their homes and traveling several kilometers up the road to the castle without getting caught.

They had taken a practice run with their bikes three days before and knew they could make the trip in less than an hour. Stashing the bicycles behind some trees about a half kilometer away, Nicolae and Lucian crept through the woods, guided mostly by the noise of music and voices. Fortunately, the sky was cloudless and a full moon lit the forest, making it easy to see where they were walking. What they didn't see, however, were the creatures of the night lurking nearby, each intent on preventing the trespassers from reaching their destination.

"Look!" Nicolae said, lying on a rocky precipice overlooking the castle. Several people were standing on a wooden bridge spanning a moat. Others wandered around the manicured property, obviously fascinated with the structure if their pointing to the gargoyles on the crenulated walls were any indication.

"There are wolves down there," Lucian said, his voice quavering slightly.

"So what? They don't know who invited... unless you think they read. Come on. We sneak down to cars and then just walk..."

"Grrrrrrrrrrrr!"

The low growl startled the two boys and they froze.

"Did you hear that?" Lucian whispered.

"Shhhhh! Be quiet!" Nicolae ordered, looking around. The growl had come from his right, but he didn't see anything.

"Grrrrrrrrrrrr!"

Another growl came from the left. Turning his head slowly, Nicolae gasped. White glowing eyes and fangs gleamed in the moonlight. Slowly, deliberately, a large black wolf stepped from the darkness, followed by two smaller ones.

"We're dead!" Lucian cried out, and crossed his chest with his right hand.

When two more wolves approached them from the right, Nicolae knew his friend was right and called out to the Virgin Mary to save him. He would be disappointed.

\* \* \*

Yemaya had just finished chatting with Lilith, Kali and Cammie, when her housekeeper touched her on her left shoulder. Leaning down to hear better, Yemaya listened to Maria's words and nodded.

"Where are they now?"

"Andrea has brought them to the kitchen. Regina and Voinic are guarding them."

"Good! Keep them there. We must think of a proper punishment."

"Trouble in paradise?" a deep baritone voice asked.

Maria and Yemaya looked up to see a large, partially naked, red-skinned man with horns strolling toward them. Polished hooves clicked on the marble floors.

"Dis!" Even Yemaya couldn't conceal her surprise at seeing the Underlord.

Dis' laughter rumbled through the room, temporarily silencing everyone. The guests turned toward the source and quickly averted their eyes when they saw the huge, muscular Demon. A burgundy loincloth barely concealed the enormous bulge beneath it.

"He's big!" one of the whores said.

"In more ways than one," another added. "Would you look at the size of that package!"

"I'd like to see if it's real."

"See, my ass," a third replied. "Any man who can dream up a costume like that has to have a great imagination. I bet he knows a hundred ways to pleasure a woman."

A young man standing near them giggled.

"Or a man. All those bulging muscles. Mmmm... mmmm... mmmm... mmmm... mmmm. He's yummy."

"Yummy?" Dis wasn't sure whether to be insulted or amused at the description.

"Consider it a compliment. Jacque is hard to please," Yemaya said.

"Maybe I'll see how hard later tonight," Dis said. "But that's not why I'm here. You wish to punish someone? I'm an expert at punishment."

"Nothing drastic, Dis. Two young villagers wanted to join the party. I would prefer they not interact with my guests, and be discouraged from any future ambitions. Without harming them, of course."

"Of course. Even I understand youthful indiscretions... and that you have an image to maintain. Perhaps a man-to-man... boys... chat will suffice."

"Why are you being so helpful?" Yemaya asked, suspicious of Dis' motives. "This is not like you."

Dis' eyes flared momentarily and Yemaya felt the **beast** slink deeper into its lair. A pain shot through her temples. Closing her eyes, she pressed them with her fingertips, trying to alleviate the

residual ache that followed. When it disappeared, she opened her eyes and looked up into Dis' calm gaze.

"I have my moments. Consider it a thank you for the invitation. This night has been quite entertaining. Some of the humans are trying to figure out how I was able to attach my horns and make them stay in place. Others think I'm wearing a **body suit**. They tell me it looks very real. Naturally, the Spirits know who I am. I find them interesting, especially Sarpe. She is very old."

"Mari says she is ancient. I am surprised Sarpe talked to you. She can be **distant** at times."

"Sarpe and I have a lot in common. Enough about her for now. Do you want me to deal with your intruders or not?"

Yemaya thought about it for a few seconds and then relented.

"Why not? As long as you do not do irreparable harm."

Tipping his head at a slight angle, Dis nodded and then turned to Maria, who had remained quiet and inconspicuous during the exchange.

"You will show me the way," he ordered.

Maria straightened up and puffed her chest out. Hands on hips, she leaned threateningly toward the Underlord.

Dis sighed.

"Please," he said, sounding disgusted.

"That's better." Maria stalked off, her back rigid with pride. She had just bested the head Demon... not that anyone would believe her.

\* \* \*

Dakota had watched the exchange between Dis and Yemaya. When Yemaya touched her temples, Dakota began pushing her way through the crowd, anxious to reach her partner.

"Are you all right?" she asked, reaching her goal.

"I am fine."

"What did Dis do to you?" Dakota asked.

"Nothing. I think the **beast** is going to be in hiding for a long time after tonight. It appears extremely intimidated by Sabnock and Dis."

"I can't believe he actually came, can you?"

"I am as surprised as you. He seems to be enjoying himself, though," Yemaya said.

Smiling, Dakota's eyes followed the Underlord as he made his way through the crowd. There was no doubt he was a magnificently intimidating figure.

"Cool!"

\* \* \*

Two figures sat huddled on stools in the kitchen. The wolves lay in front of them, their eyes never leaving their captives. Whenever the boys moved, the wolves growled menacingly.

"We're dead!" Lucian repeated. Nicolae, who was normally the leader, said nothing.

The kitchen door swung open, making both of them jump. The housekeeper walked in, followed by a monstrous-sized devil. Eyes widening, Lucian and Nicolae gasped and then trembled. A wet spot appeared on Nicolae's crotch and spread down his thighs.

"Mother Mary, protect us!" he prayed aloud, crossing his chest and then clasping his hands in prayer.

"You dare invoke the holy in my presence?" the devil demanded, striding determinedly toward the frightened boys.

"No... No, sir."

"You have pissed yourself, boy," the devil said, his voice filled with disgust.

Cheeks flushed, Nicolae lowered his head in embarrassment.

"Look at me, boy, when I am talking to you."

Nicolae's head shot up.

"You piss yourself and then call on Mary to save you?"

"Noo... I mean... Ye... Yesss, sir."

"She will not save you. Nothing can save a liar. You are mine, now."

"You... Yours?"

"Yes, mine! You trespass on this property. You sneak out of your parent's home, hoping to crash a party you aren't invited to. Such behavior deserves a reward. I'm going to enjoy your company for a long time."

Lucian, who had remained quiet, leaned toward Nicolae and whispered.

"I told you we shouldn't come here."

"Quiet! You were not told to speak," Dis ordered. "At least you have not fouled yourself like your friend. I like bravery. If you please me, I may reward you. I can be generous, when I want. Now, what should I do with you for now?"

"Please... Let us go home and we'll be good," Nicolae begged.

"Good! You think I want you to be good?" Hands on his hips, Dis threw back his head and laughed. "I get no pleasure from good little boys."

"We'll do whatever you want. Just let us go home."

"Well now. Whatever I want! That is a bargain I like. Perhaps I will let you go... this time. If I do, I **will** collect the debt owed. Make sure you are willing to pay it."

"Yes, sir," Nicolae and Lucian promised, simultaneously.

"Go then! And remember, I know your names and everything about you. You are mine, now."

Dis turned and left the room, but stopped just outside of the boys' sight.

"Are you going to keep that promise?" Lucian asked Nicolae.

"No. Didn't you hear him? He said he had no use for good boys. I be good from now on. Real good!"

"Me too!"

Neither heard Dis' chuckle as strolled away to rejoin the party.

*This is turning out to be a lot of fun,* he thought.

## **MIDNIGHT STRIKES**

The chiming of the large clock hanging on the wall rang in the hour of midnight. Everyone stopped to listen.

Small clusters of costumed figures were scattered throughout the banquet hall, each involved in their own private conversations. Several whores were questioning the Spirits about their costumes, while others flirted unapologetically with Dis, making it clear their services were available at no cost. Yemaya's crew was torn between their admiration of the Spirits' costumes and fascination

with Sabnock and Constance. The villagers roamed from group to group, trying to interact with as many guests as possible. They sensed this night was like no other they would ever experience again, but didn't know why.

Needing a break, Dakota wandered to a secluded corner and relaxed against the wall. The party was a huge success, beyond her wildest dreams... and yet, something was missing.

*If only* —

"Ah, here you are, Little One. I've been searching for you."

Straightening, Dakota looked into the black eyes of the hooded figure in front of her.

"Intunecat!" she squealed, throwing her arms around the dark Spirit. "I didn't think you would come."

Caught off guard, Intunecat remained still until Dakota released him and stepped back.

"Oh, gosh, I'm sorry," she said, embarrassed. "That was rather undignified for you, wasn't it?"

"No need to apologize. No one saw you," Intunecat said. "Both our reputations remain intact."

"As if I'm worried about my reputation. Besides, it would give the Spirits something to talk about."

"Just what those females need. More gossip material." Dakota smiled. She could just imagine the razzing Intunecat would get from Granny Dakota. "So, how are you doing? It's been awhile since our last encounter."

"I'm fine. Things have been quiet. Thankfully," Dakota said.

"And Yemaya? She is well?"

Dakota knew he was referring to the **beast**. It had been quiet since the New Orleans trip. The fact that it had reappeared tonight was troubling, even if it was in retreat mode.

"She's... fine."

*Damn!* Dakota thought. Intunecat would notice the hesitation and know something was wrong.

"I wouldn't worry too much about it," he said. "As long as she has you, it will never win."

"I know, but I still worry. There was a time when I thought you controlled the **beast**."

"How can you be so sure I don't?" the dark Spirit asked.

"New Orleans. When you helped us, I knew you didn't."

"Beware of jumping to wrong conclusions, Little One. Helping you served my purpose. The priestess had perverted her religion and was using Yemaya to gain more power. I couldn't allow that. But tonight isn't the night for serious discussions. Let us enjoy the moment."

"You're right." Taking Intunecat's hand, Dakota led him from the darkness. "Let's go find Yemaya. I'm sure she'd like to say hi."

"Yemaya never says hi," Intunecat replied, but relented to the human holding his hand.

\* \* \*

Sabnock and Constance had returned to the balcony after visiting with a few guests and Lilith. When the black-cloaked figure appeared at midnight, they watched as it looked up at them and then glided silently through the crowd to the steps leading upward.

"I never expected this," Sabnock said, her right arm pulling Constance closer.

"If it makes you nervous, we can leave."

"No. There is no one who knows me better, or who I know better. It's strange, but I feel like I've gone back in time. I always looked forward to our meetings."

"I've only met it once," Constance said. "I never had the opportunity to say thanks. Shall we go and greet our benefactor?"

Sabnock nodded.

\* \* \*

"It's good to see the two of you finally found each other." Its voice was calm and irresistibly soothing.

"Thanks to you," Constance said.

"Was the wait worth it?" The question was directed more at Sabnock than Constance.

"Yes. I would endure a thousand more deaths to be with Constance."

"I thought you were tired of that life."

"Happiness has a way of dulling the pains of the past," Sabnock said.

"Then I, too, am happy. No one deserves it more than you. Have you seen Dis? I sense his presence."

"No, we've managed to avoid him."

"That's wise," It agreed. "He was furious when you disappeared. You were his favorite. If he sees you, he'll want you back."

"Dis has no hold on me."

"Perhaps not, but that won't stop him from trying... And never underestimate the Underlord."

"I don't. Nor should he underestimate the strength of our love. Why are you here? I can't imagine you being invited."

"I'm rarely invited to parties," It said. "Nor do I normally like them. This one, however, is quite unique. I thought it would be fun walking amongst the living without being feared. For now, I'm just another guest in costume."

\* \* \*

A shimmering in the air next to It attracted the attention of several costumed figures.

"What a great trick! Yemaya and Dakota must have spent a fortune on special effects," one guest said.

"She is The Illusionist. Who better than her to make this party interesting? I just wish I knew how she did that one. Hello!" the other person called out, waving to the apparition. When Saira waved back, everyone laughed. "That's so cool. An interactive hologram. It must have cost a fortune."

\* \* \*

"So, at last, the final guest has arrived," It said. "What took you so long?"

"The same reason you took so long," Saira replied. "I had to wait until you arrived, although I didn't know it was going to be you. I hope you aren't here on business."

"I have no business here tonight, or anywhere else for the next hour."

"Then this is indeed a momentous occasion. It's too bad the world will never know."

\* \* \*

"Hey! Hey you — hiccup — in the black robe and hood," a voice called out, the owner obviously intoxicated. "That's the worst costume — burp — here tonight." Turning abruptly back to his friends, the man staggered and then up-righted himself. "He thinks... he's the Rim Creeper — hiccup. No imag... nation. I ought to — burp — take that... sickle from his hands and —"

"Shut up, Jaimie," a girl said, pulling him toward an exit. "You're such an ass when you drunk."

\* \* \*

"It's a good thing for him you decided to take a vacation," Saira said.

"His time is near. Perhaps then he will like my costume better."

"I doubt it."

"No matter. As you say, I am on vacation. My time is short. I think I shall take advantage of what's left and mingle. In the entire history of sentients, there has never been such a gathering of so many egos. This should prove most interesting."

It glided slowly away. Strangely, almost every human stepped aside, unconsciously clearing a path for the guest masquerading as the Grim Reaper. Others felt irresistibly drawn to the person in the black robe and hood. Obliging, It stopped and patiently listened to the comments and even took time to answer a few question. Socializing was a new experience for Death.

\* \* \*

Yemaya could feel the **beast** slinking cautiously toward the entrance of its lair. Apparently the fear of the Demons had eased enough that it had decided to test the barriers Yemaya had erected to keep it under control.

*Go back into your hole.*

The **beast** snarled, testing Yemaya's willpower for weaknesses. Even the smallest crack could give it the opportunity it needed.

"It will never give up," a voice calmly said, startling her and the **beast**.

Before Yemaya stood a hooded figure dressed entirely in black. The right emaciated hand held a long, curved sickle. Light reflected off the polished, gleaming blade. Rarely could anything or anyone leave Yemaya speechless. This was one of those occasions. She knew exactly who the person in front of her was. During one of her performances, she had felt its presence, something she would never forget.

"If I make you uneasy, I will go," Death said, turning to leave.

"No. No," Yemaya replied. "You caught me by surprise. Dakota and I saw you talking with some of our guests earlier and thought... she thought..."

Death cocked its head slightly. White eyes glowed from the blackness of its concealed face.

"She thought what? That I was mortal?"

"I am sure she did, although she did not mention that. She found it strange that no one else had dressed like the Grim Reaper, since it is a popular choice for Halloween parties. She thought you wore it well and commented on how you seemed to glide across the floor."

"And you? What did you think?"

"I knew you were real."

"Yet you didn't tell her. Why?"

"Dakota is a very caring person. She worries about those she loves."

"Yes, I felt her sorrow when I took her grandmother and again when I took Constance. She feels deeply."

Yemaya nodded and couldn't resist glancing at her partner who was in a conversation with Tee, Granny Dakota and Mari.

"She would think you came for her mother... or for me. Dakota would take even you on to protect us. She's like a mother hen defending her chicks. No matter how futile the effort, she would fight to the death." The irony of her comment didn't escape her and made a wry face. "You know what I mean."

"Your Dakota is tenacious, a worthy companion for you. Even now she comes to make sure you are well."

"You must allow me to do the introduction," Yemaya said.

"As you wish," Death said.

\* \* \*

"Hey, Yemaya, I see you've found our mystery guest."

"Yes. Dakota, this is... Mr. Maortae, an old friend of... the family."

Dakota gave Yemaya a strange look. She obviously wanted to say something, but decided against it.

"I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Maortae. I'm at a slight disadvantage, since Yemaya has never mentioned you. No doubt an oversight."

"Understandable, Ms. Dakota. I travel a lot and rarely have time for casual visits."

"Oh, that's too bad. Yemaya and I always enjoy visitors. Since you're an old friend, perhaps you could squeeze us into your schedule while you're here. You'd like that, wouldn't you?" Dakota said, turning to Yemaya for confirmation.

"I would say that is completely up to Mr. Maortae," Yemaya said.

"It will be an honor to spend some time with you and Yemaya, but I'm afraid it won't be for awhile. I have several appointments that must be kept, the first less than twenty minutes away."

"Oh, can we get Andrea to drive you somewhere?" Dakota offered. "The car's just outside."

"That's kind of you, but I have my own transportation. Another day, maybe." Lifting Dakota's right hand, It leaned forward and placed a kiss on the back. "Until the next time." Turning, It gazed into Yemaya's eyes, its own gleaming white eyes narrowing almost to slits. "I've yet to determine when I shall return, but I can assure you it won't be soon,"

"I understand. Thank you." Yemaya understood the meaning.

"You have nothing to thank me for. Were it your time, nothing would keep me away."

"I know."

"Because this has been such a wonderful experience for me, I'd like to give you a gift, Yemaya."

"That is not necessary."

"Maybe not, but take it none the less." Reaching into his robe, he withdrew a small silver pendant with a matching silver chain. "This was your mother's. She wore it to keep her **demons** at bay. It will do the same for you."

Placing the pendant and chain in Yemaya's hand, he cupped his over hers. The **beast** whimpered and shook its head frantically. Then it yelped as if stung and charged into its lair, disappearing into the darkness.

"It will be a long time before it gets enough courage to return. This **beast** is powerful, but a coward. Wear the pendant. You have nothing to lose."

"You are protecting me. Why? And what price will I pay?"

"I enjoyed myself tonight. It felt good to walk among the living and not feel their fear. That is payment enough. Besides, as I said, the pendant was your mother's. I promised her that one day I would return it to you. I just didn't think it would be while you were alive. Goodbye, Yemaya. May you and Dakota live long and be happy."

"Thank you for this and for coming," Yemaya said.

Dakota listened to the conversation without interrupting. It wasn't hard for her to put two and two together.

"I'd also like to thank you for coming, Mr. Maortae. Feel free to attend any future parties... but keep the visit pleasure. Yemaya and I like to separate our work from our play... if you know what I mean."

"I know exactly what you mean, Ms. Dakota. Thank you for the invitation and the warning. Now, I must be gone. I look forward to seeing you one year from today." Without ceremony, Death vanished.

"What did he mean by that?" Dakota demanded, glaring at the spot where It had stood.

"I think he expects us to have another Halloween party next year," Yemaya said.

"Right, as if one close brush with Death isn't enough. I'll think long and hard before I do this again. Can we just sneak out and go to bed? I'm tired."

"You're forgetting that we have an appointment with Sabnock and Constance."

"Oh damn! That's right. We'll make it short. Sabnock did say they have a long journey. The other guests can leave whenever they want. Maria and Andrea will lock up."

"They have already gone to bed."

"Oh. That means it's just us." Dakota sighed.

"The wolves will make sure everyone gets off the property. They have done it before."

Taking Dakota's arm, they walked toward the stairs and looked up. Constance was leaning heavily against Sabnock, her head resting on the Demoness' shoulder. Eyes closed, she appeared to be sleeping. Sabnock stood straight and tall, her muscular arms wrapped gently around Constance's waist. Her chin rested on her lover's head as she gazed somewhere in the distance. The pendant around Constance's throat had ceased to glow.

"Maybe we should just let them alone," Dakota whispered.

"We will just say our goodbyes and hope they will be able to visit us another time," Yemaya said.

\* \* \*

Sabnock didn't move when she saw Yemaya and Dakota walking toward her. Constance was asleep and Sabnock didn't want to awaken her. Their trip would be a long, exhausting one. No one could ever imagine the enormous distance they would travel to reach the Great Beyond.

"We're so sorry we didn't get here sooner. Is she alright?" Dakota asked, concerned for her friend. Asleep, Constance looked fragile.

"She will be fine once we are home. I'm sorry we can't stay. She was looking forward to talking with you. I would have liked to get to know you better."

"Maybe you can come another time... when things are less hectic," Yemaya suggested.

"Maybe. It isn't an easy journey."

Saira appeared beside Constance and leaned forward to look at the exhausted woman's face.

"Your journey will be quicker if I take you," she said. "I already have a strand leading there, so it will be no longer than the blink of an eye for you."

"I would be in your debt," Sabnock said.

"A favor among friends requires no debt. Are you ready?"

Sabnock nodded.

"Goodbye, my friends," she said. "We will return when we can. Thank you for thinking of us."

Dakota's eyes filled with tears. Walking to Sabnock, she stood on her tip toes and planted a kiss on her cheek. "I will miss both of you. It seems we are always saying goodbye."

"Goodbyes are only painful when they are final. Ours will never be that. Goodbye, Dakota. Goodbye, Yemaya."

Saira waved and then the three vanished, leaving Dakota and Yemaya alone on the balcony.

"Come, love," Yemaya said, wrapping her arm around Dakota's waist. "Your Halloween party was more successful than anyone could ever have imagined. We can relive it tomorrow, but tonight our bed calls to us."

Neither noticed Dis strolling out of the hall, surrounded by eleven whores. Lilith and Kali did, but decided to let things slide. They had promised their whores a good time. Dis was just the one to provide it. The two Demonesses also knew those particular whores were highly skilled in their trade. The Underlord would enjoy hours of entertainment and stimulation. Halloween was officially over, but for some the party was just beginning.

**THE END**