

Chapter Three – Band Launch

Nneka's older brother Ekene dropped us off outside a banquet hall in an industrial part of north Scarborough with rotating floodlights at each end of the parking lot. We slowly approached the entrance with our printed tickets. Hearing the bass thumping against the walls, we entered the venue timidly. Dry ice escaped from the doors to the main ballroom.

Liberation Mas was hosting their first event of the carnival season, the launch of their masquerade band, and the reveal of the season's costumes.

"Girl, super exciting!" Nneka said, pursing her lips. Her deep brown skin was always flawless, with the right amount of foundation and just enough highlight. Her cheekbones popped—her face card never declined, natural or with full glam. An expert makeup artiste, Nneka had given herself a sultry look for the night with smoky eyes and a cute black jumpsuit.

"Extremely," I agreed. "Okay. Let's not miss one single detail!"

She nodded her long boho braids to the soca song playing. She decided to wear the loose curls out for the night. Her mom did both of our hair, and never missed. My knotless braids were in a low ponytail; I was casual in a new pair of white jeans and a simple blue crop top.

Burgundy lights projected across the auditorium walls like liquid, and there were plastic wine glass structures around the room. "Sweet Wine," the year's theme, glittered across a huge banner. Life-sized cardboard cutouts of costumed masqueraders—men and women dressed in beautiful, bedazzled outfits from previous years—stood in the corners.

"Eeks!" Nneka said, squeezing my arm. We walked to the side of the stage and saw our names placed on the backs of chairs. Akie had reserved two spaces for us up close to experience the show.

“I think I’m going to like it here,” I said, and Nneka nodded, moving her eyes from one illuminated object to the next.

“Evening ladies,” an athletic hottie said to us both, taking the seat next to Nneka. I recognized him from the TFC. His friend—equally hot—followed behind him, nodded, and took a seat. We smiled and said hello, shyly. Nneka sat up straighter and kept her smile bright as we continued to look around.

Off to the side of the stage there was a brass band. I wasn’t familiar with a lot of the soca music, but the sounds were festive, so I nodded and moved my shoulders along with the rhythms. Nneka chair-danced along with me while we watched the crowd fill up the venue.

Within an hour it was standing room only. When the lights dropped, so did my stomach. The tuba played a dramatic bassline and a dozen dancers wearing shiny gold bodysuits with low necklines took their positions on stage. The brass band faded and the DJ began to play a familiar calypso oldie I’d heard my Pops play.

Six costumed dancers pranced out to join the gold ladies, dressed in sheer black body suits with beaded gold accents at the top and high black stilettos. Wearing nude fishnets, their skin glimmered from all angles; their long gold eyelashes were fierce. They bent down at the same time, circling a lady who backflipped and landed smoothly in her heels, launching the routine.

“Eh eh!” Nneka whispered. “This is Olympic-level.”

The troupe of ladies grooved with grace to every beat. People cheered and whistled. Someone blew an airhorn, and almost everybody danced along with them.

I was too excited not to clap. Soon, others around us were clapping too. I let out a cheer, applauding as the routine came to a close.

“Them girls ate down!” Nneka said, squeezing my arm. Touch was definitely her love language, and I knew my arm would be sore by the end of the night. It was Nneka’s best and worst habit! Ms. Ingrid came on stage with a microphone, dressed in an elaborate gold skirt and a shiny black blouse. Her short, curly natural hairstyle had small gold jewels in it. “Welcome, welcome! Carnival season is here!” she exclaimed. “Welcome to the launch of Liberation Mas, and our presentation of Sweet Wine for the 2024 Toronto Carnival!” Applause.

After some more words about their sponsors, her sister Ms. Gladys exclaimed dramatically, “Without further ado, we present to you: Sweet Wine!” They walked to the podium at the side of the stage.

The lights went down and a solo steel pan began to play. I felt another pinch on my arm. Nneka couldn’t contain herself!

A tall, slender, chocolate-skinned man dressed in a gold loincloth strolled on stage, barefoot and serious. He paused at the end of the runway and surprisingly started to sing. I didn’t understand the language, but his deep voice was strong and resonated throughout the room.

“That’s an Igbo song,” Nneka whispered. Her parents were Canadian-born, but both sets of her grandparents were from Nigeria. “I thought this was an island people t’ing?” The singer/model continued to croon.

“Owww!” a female voice cheered from the back of the room, followed by catcalls from other women in agreement. The singer looked down modestly and continued to speak in his language. I looked at Nneka, raising an eyebrow. “What’s he saying?”

“Something about community and love and...” Nneka paused. “Something about new life and...liberation? Ah! Liberation. My Igbo ain’t that good,” she said, chuckling. When we were younger, she used to take lessons on Saturday mornings with a Nigerian elder who helped her to

learn the language. Her parents barely spoke Igbo, and even when talking to family back in Africa they usually communicated in English.

After the poem, he walked majestically to the back of the stage and paused. To the left and right of him emerged two beautiful brown-skinned women wearing Akie's costume—I recognized the neon yellow body suit, pink and teal feathers, and the gold accents.

“Our first costume of the evening is Rosé Rendezvous, designed by Akilah Johnson,” Ms. Ingrid said while a soca song began to play. The women in costume began to dance down the runway with spotlights on them.

The feathers fluttered as they took control the stage. My eyes were fixed on the pretty headpiece with gold and teal gems hanging along the models' hairline, and the gold choker-style necklace that matched the straps of the bikini top, worn over a neon yellow bottom and sparkly gold fishnets.

“If I had a body like that, I would rock that string bikini too!” Nneka said, clapping. “Gorg!” One woman was wearing a neon yellow and pink bikini with an elaborate colourful feathered backpack and headpiece, in addition to multiple jewels going across her arms and legs. She extended each limb to highlight the details.

“This must be the fourteen-hundred-dollar costume,” I whispered.

“It's so incredibly pretty!” Nneka gushed while the girl in a simplified version of the same costume walked to our side of the stage, raised her hands, and paused for the photographers, vloggers, and bloggers standing in the special media area.

She was wearing a barely-there version of the bikini, a combination of jewelled neon yellow strings and tiny patches of pink fabric wrapped and tucked around her body. Her headpiece was simple, a jewelled tiara.

A male model was next with fitted teal Bermuda shorts on and a pink and teal decorated belt; he was shirtless with pink and teal decorated bands around his calves and upper arms. He had a teal jewelled headband on and surprised us all with a quick backflip before he made his way down the stage.

“Whoa,” I said, taking a few pics with my phone.

“Wonderfulness!” Nneka agreed, recording a quick video for Snapchat. Akie’s costume was just one of eleven that would be featured in the presentation.

The costumes were all beautiful. Akie’s pink design was followed by ten others, introduced one by one, each with their own set of models. There was Candied Cherry in red, Bordeaux Bodies in orange, Albarino Vines in yellow, Melon Zinfandel in green, Licorice Moscato in blue, Violet Sauvignon in purple, Naught Pinot Noir in black, Copper Merlot in brown, and Sauvignon Blanc in white.

Dozens of smartphones lifted in the air, snapping and livestreaming to their personal audiences.

When the final costume, Cranberry Chardonnay in a deep burgundy, took a lap, all of the models from the evening paraded across the stage one last time for more photos and applause. The audience danced along with them and the music continued as feathers swayed and jewels sparkled. Finally, the last set of bum cheeks could be seen shaking off the stage