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L.A. BANKS is the author of the Vampire Huntress Legends series. She has a bachelor's degree from the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School and a master's in fine arts from Temple University. Banks considers herself a shape-shifter: She has written romance, women's fiction, crime and suspense, and, of course, dark vampire huntress lore. She lives with her husband, four children, and dog in an undisclosed lair somewhere in Philadelphia.

THE
VAMPIRE
HUNTRESS
LEGEND

SAMPLER



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THE VAMPIRE HUNTRESS LEGEND SAMPLER

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NOTHING LIKE THE FIRST TIME

Six years ago, East LA

It was her turn to do the laundry. Fifteen-year-old Damali Richards sighed and turned the Walkman volume up to the highest number on the dial, then hoisted up the overflowing basket and marched down the basement steps. What she really wanted to do was sing, hit the big stage, and get phat-paid. Orphaned and trapped in circumstances beyond her control, to Damali her foster father was a demon she wanted to avoid like the plague, and she hated living on other people's dime . . . especially when they constantly rubbed her circumstances in her face.

It was all about being able to one day stand on her own without owing a soul anything, except maybe her best friend, Inez. That was her *girl*. But how come Inez got to go to the store and she had to bust funky clothes suds? Inez's mom seemed to always work it out to send Inez on an errand with money, like Damali would steal from her foster family! But it was cool. The lady loved her, showed her more affection than most foster moms had. None of it mattered anyway. As soon as she got discovered while doing her mad-crazy poetry or the right people saw her performing with a group on an open mic, she was out. She'd be getting paid. She'd have her own home. Maybe her own family one day.

Damali bopped to the music as she stuffed dirty clothes into the rickety basement washer, her mind a million miles away. Dreams of fame had her in their clutches. She would get a big house, drive a pimped-out Hummer, would be able to hire

somebody to do all the nasty chores, like cleaning the bathroom. One day she'd be free.

She kicked a few dance steps, closed the washer lid and belted out the song's refrain, and then spun around to set the laundry basket down in time with the music but froze. *He* was there. Red eyes, drunk, smiling, and standing way too close.

Damali dropped the basket and ripped off her headphones. "Oh, I didn't see you. Inez is at the store, and—"

"My wife is still at work," her stepfather said, stepping closer to her, that sick smile still in place.

Damali backed up so quickly that her butt hit the washing machine. Rap was still blaring, muffled, from the headphones she clutched. He stepped forward again. Everything happened so fast. He was much bigger and stronger than her. The stench of alcohol assaulted her nose. Male hands covered her breasts. His knee went between her thighs, prying them open like a lever. His rough, sweaty hands left her breasts to clasp her upper arms so hard they bruised beneath his clenched fingers. She could feel his erection through his pants as his pelvis ground against her. A scream of pure terror escaped her mouth and fused with bellicose, drunken male laughter.

Revolted and near-blind with fear, she pivoted away from the kiss he'd leaned in to deliver with his foul tongue hanging out. Her arm reached behind her, her hand grasping for a hard metal object on the dusty, cluttered shelf. A pipe came away from the shelf in her grip and connected with his skull. A stunned expression met hers. He dropped to his knees; she ran.

Up a flight of steps, across the kitchen floor, a wallet left on the table near a set of keys became hers, shoved in her back pocket. Headphones dropped; the wallet went with her in exchange. The pipe never left her right hand.

Out the back door, down the alley. It was dark outside; she didn't care. Something else was chasing her; just like it did in her nightmares. It ran faster than her foster father ever could. One glimpse over the shoulder; she had to be losing her mind. She saw a black shadow move; streetlights gave whatever it was fangs!

The sound of leather slapping leather; something invisible flying overhead like bat wings. She screamed and kept running, pipe in hand. She only made it to the backyard fence before she was forced to stop and stare in pure horror.

It unfurled from nothingness, just appeared in her direct path. Frozen in terror for a second, she couldn't move. But it advanced in that fraction of time it took for her mind to sync up with her reflexes. It was male, but not a man. It had red gleaming eyes and teeth that glinted in the moonlight like razors. Cold sweat washed her skin; adrenaline spiked within her to dizzying levels. The stench of sulfur stung her eyes and nose till she gagged. She heard her heartbeat in her ears fuse with an eerie ringing. The air in her lungs seized. An electric-like current snatched her from her feet and this thing had her by the throat, jaws gaping, turning her neck. She swung the pipe and caught it in the back of the head, which only made it growl and hiss, then slap her arm down.

From some strange reservoir of instinct she flung the pipe behind the beast's back and caught it in her other hand, then drove the metal through the soft tissue of its face, breaking off a fang. Black gook splattered her shoulder and arm. Her knee simultaneously went up between its legs, and her Timberland boot came down hard on its instep. The moment it reared back to grab the pipe from its face, she grabbed the other, longer, protruding end, yanked hard, and plunged it repeatedly into the thing's abdomen, then swiftly stepped back to land a kick to its torso, which sent it screeching and lurching backward into the wooden fence.

The impact was instantaneous. She held on to her pipe weapon for salvation. The fence broke; a spike of splintered wood went through its back and came out the front of its body through its chest. It stared at her, eyes wide, and then burst into flames and went to red ember ash. She was out. She didn't have time to even think about what had happened. Madness threatened to consume her. There really were demons, ohmigod!

Zigzag course, dodging traffic, adrenaline rushing, her ears ringing, legs pumping, feet slamming concrete. A furious roar of her foster father's obscenities now behind her, she became liquid motion.

Cars screeching. Curses. Curious onlookers. But no one called the cops. Lawns, houses, cross streets, all a whirl of fast-moving colors. Her tank top was ripped, her face streaked with tears. Body sweating. Demon gook was on her. Blurred vision. Micro-braids lifted off her shoulders and swinging behind her as

she hauled ass. Where was safety? Just get him away from her, Jesus! A bridge underpass. A neighborhood unfamiliar. Please, God, let Inez stay at the store. Let her momma get home first. Bitter sobs. A shadow against the wall her sanctuary. She'd hide. Maybe he'd stopped following her. Maybe the demons would, too. She had to catch her breath. There were demons; there were demons, heaven help her. She was going crazy!

Damali bent, fists on knees, heaving in air, her heart slamming against her breastbone. She checked the wallet in her back pocket to be sure it was still there. Rewarded by the leather, she grasped it tightly in her left hand. Slowing car headlights made her jerk her attention up and grip the pipe and wallet tighter. She stood erect, chin lifted, when the car pulled to a stop, music blaring. Five guys got out wearing red bandanas. All late teens, early twenties. Oh . . . shit. She was on the wrong side of town. Something unseen slithered back into the shadows and waited. Irrational instinct told her that her odds were better with the gang. She'd already seen what came out at night. Paralysis held her. She definitely had to be losing her mind.

"Hey, *mamacita*," the boldest one said, making the others laugh. He nodded toward the wallet she clasped and appraised her with a lopsided grin. "You a long way from home. You know there's a toll at this bridge, right?"

Damali shoved the wallet into her back jeans pocket and gripped the pipe like a baseball bat, allowing her actions to serve as her response. Fuck them. She was homeless. Whatever her foster father had in it was all she had left in the world. She was not taking her chances sleeping on the streets, now that she knew that demons were real. A rape and a robbery were imminent, anyway. At least she'd go out swinging.

"Yo, *holmes*," his sidekick said, pulling on a blunt and allowing the smoke to filter out of his nose before passing it. "Little bitch got heart. Gotta give her dat. Thinks she can fight."

Damali's gaze ricocheted around the group as they carefully edged closer toward her.

"Jus' give up the toll, Ma. Dat's all. Then it's peace." The leader laughed and shrugged. "Ain't she too fine to be fightin'? I can think of much better things to do with her all night, ya know what I mean."

The hair was standing up on the back of her neck. Some-

thing else was with them in the darkness; she could feel it crawling all over her skin. Every muscle in her body tensed. Her line of vision remained riveted on the gang members as they passed high fives and pounded fists but approached her in a deadly, slow-moving circle. She refused to wait for them to rush her. She had to get out of there, had to get away from them and whatever lurked in the darkness. Two bold steps forward, she swung and missed the ringleader.

He casually backed up and laughed at her with arrogance but caught a split-second lobbed roundhouse from her left fist to the jaw. She heard something snap, was sure it had to be her wrist or the bones in her hand. The blow reverberated up her arm. His boys burst out in jeers of laughter as he fell. Taking a wide-legged stance, she waited for him to get up, or for the next one to try her.

"Daaaayum!" one hollered, shaking his head. "Dropped your ass. Just coldcocked you, man!"

They all laughed, formed a circle around their fallen gang leader, and then slowly began to prod him as he lay on the ground.

"Aw'ight, man," his main compadre said, laughter trailing off into the night when he saw a thick ooze of blood leaking from his leader's mouth. "Enough is enough. We got you. Get up so we can do this bitch."

When they got no response from their fallen leader they rolled him over, inspecting his condition. Damali's gaze ripped around the darkened area for a way to escape and outrun them. They had a car. She was on foot. Something invisible and more frightening than them loomed in the darkness, making her hesitate. Two seconds past too late to figure it all out, the second in command pulled a Beretta from his jeans waistband and pointed it at her. The man on the ground stirred and groaned.

"You broke his jaw, bitch! That's my brother." Arm outstretched, he nodded to the others. "Get him back in the car. Then we get the wallet and smoke her for that foul shit. You played yourself, *chica*."

Heads nodded. Screeching car tires and a new set of headlights made everyone freeze. Whatever had been in the darkness temporarily retreated. A quick series of *pop, pop, pops* scattered the group like roaches.

* * *

It was the most amazing shit he'd ever seen. A pretty *morena* trapped under a bridge, five guys about to rush her, and she swings a pipe, then drops a left-handed roundhouse coming all the way up from Georgia, knocking the spit out of the mother-fucker's mouth. Saw it from half a block away. Punk bastards. Not in his yard.

His custom silver-plated Glock 9mm extended, motor running and music still blasting, car brought to a screeching halt, half on the curb, half in the street. He was over the driver's side door of his red Chevy in one jump.

"You know I don't allow this bullshit in my territory!" Carlos squared his shoulders and stepped to Renaldo's brother. He glanced toward the shadows. Something was making him edgy. He didn't like it. Felt like an ambush was about to go down. "You make your money moving my product. I told you—no women, no kids, no old people, no shit like that. We, as men, got our business to handle and here you go getting your sloppy asses kicked by some young girl, five to one at that. What's the matter with you?"

He looked around at the raggedy-assed street squad. It was time to take his drug hustle to the next level and go professional to move real weight. Working with local gangs as a network was played out—none of them had vision, knew how to prioritize, or had enough sense to go big time. This was bullshit!

"Yo, Rivera, man. This bitch got attitude! Broke Renaldo's jaw—"

Carlos cocked his head to the side, the dangerous look in his eyes instantly stopping the flow of words. He hated excuses. "You making me repeat myself, *hombre*." His voice was low and deadly.

The second in command backed away. "Naw, man. It ain't like that."

Carlos nodded. "Cool. I *thought* I heard you wrong. Take that dumb, bleeding bastard to the hospital or whatever, then bring me my fucking money. Unless you bitches is short. That why you gotta go rob some young girl? To make up the difference?"

"Naw, Carlos. Damn. Why you go there, man?"

He watched in disinterest as they hustled their fallen brother

into the car; then Carlos's gaze slid to the angry young girl, and he smiled. For a moment, words escaped him. From half a block away she was pretty. From twenty-five feet she was drop-dead gorgeous. Yeah, his mules didn't lie. She had attitude and fire glittering in her beautiful eyes. Face dirty, looking like a beat-up angel. Shirt torn, sweat making it stick to her awesome body, hair wild, ready to go for broke and die trying.

Carlos heard them pull away but couldn't take his eyes off of her. Five-seven, enough curves to make a man act stupid. All legs, skin the prettiest caramel he'd ever seen, almost had a golden glow beneath it . . . made him want to lick his lips. Natural braids down to her shoulders. A mouth made for pure lovin'. *Madre d'Dios*, this girl was beyond fine.

What was an angel doing down here in Hell's kitchen, ready to rumble? She should have been scared out of her mind. But that's not what he saw. Girlfriend was pure street warrior and she was pissed. The sight of his gun didn't move her, just made her grip the pipe tighter as he leaned against the hood of his car, studying her across the short distance. Like a pipe could stop bullets. She was crazy. Didn't she know who he was? Suddenly he laughed.

"Get in the car," he ordered. "I can tell you ain't from around here." He looked toward the shadows and the previous jumpy feeling he'd had vanished.

She just stared at him and bit her bottom lip. Tears of fury shimmered in her eyes.

Carlos let out his breath and shoved his gun into the waistband of his jeans, then raked his fingers through his hair. "This ain't no place for a young girl to be at night, alone, looking crazy. Feel me? I'll give you a ride home. That's it." He smiled wider when she didn't move. "There's predators out here at night, Ma, true dat. But I ain't like that. This is my yard; I run this joint. But if I ain't around, as you can see, fucked-up shit can happen—so get in the car."

She backed away, moving closer to the wall.

He opened his arms. "Aw, girl, come on. You can obviously fight, so if my hands are on the steering wheel, what can happen?" He waited. "Jus' don't bust me upside the head with that pipe while I'm on the freeway, or we'll both be in trouble."

She smiled. Wow. This was the craziest, sexiest thing she'd

ever witnessed in her life. The man had rolled up like a speed demon, phat-silver cross swinging, bum-rushed the curb in his shiny, tricked-out Chevy, chrome rims still spinning, then pulled a silver nine, jumped over the door with his ultra-fine self, eyes wild, set some shit straight, punked down a death squad, and sent them home like little kids! Ohmigod, she had to remember to breathe . . . big brown eyes, black lashes almost longer than hers, slight dimple in the chin, built like . . . ohmigod . . . wearing a white T-shirt and jeans *to death*. A six-pack soldier. For real! But she didn't have a home for him to take her to.

Damali lowered the pipe. That's when tears fell in earnest. "Thanks . . . but I ain't got nowhere to go."

He pushed away from the car, deeply disturbed but not sure why. "Whatchu mean you ain't got nowhere to go? *Chica*, fine as you are, I know you got family, friends. What, your momma put you out tonight? That why you out here doing rugged terrain, solo?"

Maybe it was the tone of his voice, the disbelief in it, that moved her. Maybe it was the fact that he'd made the invisible thing that had chased her go away . . . just like in her dreams. Problem was, even a drug dealer had a family and somewhere to go, but she didn't. Or maybe it was simply the fact that she had been fighting all night, all her life it seemed; invisible monsters had chased her in her sleep and had finally become real. And this wild brother had been the only person who had ever stepped up in her defense to even the odds. Somewhere in the music-fractured silence, she decided to let down her guard for a moment to tell him the truth.

"My momma and daddy are dead," she said in a quiet, weary tone.

He reached into his car and cut off the stereo, as if he had to be sure he'd heard her right. She toyed with the ripped strap of her tank top, suddenly modest about how she looked.

"My foster dad . . . tonight, he tried to . . . he must have thought . . . but I didn't want him to be my first time, not like that . . ." She swallowed hard, then closed her eyes. Two big tears rolled down her cheeks as she hugged herself, still clutching the pipe. "Like I said, I ain't got nowhere to go. So I couldn't give them the last money I had on earth. Thanks for

helping me, though." She turned away, humiliated, and began walking.

Maybe it was her painful truth combined with the soft sound of her innocent voice that held him for ransom. Could have been the two huge tears that spilled from her pretty eyes and rolled down her lovely face. Or maybe it was the fact that for all the drama in his life, it had never really occurred to him that a person could be totally assed out with no real family. Everybody he knew at least had *some* peeps. The dilemma tore at him. Weighed heavily on his shoulders. Something was definitely wrong in the world.

He was off the side of his car before his brain had consulted his mouth. He was a playa, a businessman, no long sob story was supposed to move him, but it did. Besides, her account of her reality had been a short statement of fact, truth be told. She hadn't asked for nothing, just to be left alone.

"I got family," he called behind her. "You can stay with my momma for the night, till you figure it all out. She's good people." He watched her stop and turn and was amazed that his pulse was thudding in his ears. Was he crazy? His momma was gonna have a heart attack. "She can cook good, too," he added, hoping the sister would hear him out and consider the tender offer. "She's real religious. Prays over everything. You'll be aw'ight under her roof—cool?" He waited, nervous energy balling his hands into fists. He shoved them into his pockets and leaned back on his car, reclaiming his former smooth demeanor.

Damali stood holding her breath, just staring at the man. Did some older, suave brother who didn't know her from a can of paint just offer to let her stay with his mother? He was actually gonna take her somewhere safe, feed her, and put her with *his mother*? This fine street warrior was actually gonna do that and hadn't called her out of her name or made the offer clearly in exchange for a booty call . . . there was a God in Heaven. That was the last straw. She lost it.

A torrent of tears became hiccupping sobs. The pipe fell from her hand as she covered her face. She heard him advance but strangely didn't feel fear. He didn't embrace her or make a sudden move, just used his voice as a warm, healing balm against her senses.

"Don't cry, baby. I don't know what happened, don't care, but it's gonna be all right." He bent and picked up the pipe and returned it to her, which only made her cry harder. "You hold on to this, just in case you get nervous. My sister, Mialissa, she's about your size, and you can borrow some of her clothes. Just chill, eat, sleep on the couch. Tomorrow, worry about all the rest of it. Aw'ight?"

He'd been many things, but bewildered had never been one of them. It was as though the sound of her voice and her tears just ran all through him. When she looked up at him, those big brown eyes of hers shimmering in the darkness, a current of familiarity jolted his system. In that moment, he knew it; she was *the one*. Yet he wasn't hardly ready to retire as a playa, but damn if she wasn't worth it. He hesitated as he stared at her, his hands tingling, arms aching with some inexplicable need to hug her, but thought better of it. She'd already been freaked out enough. But her eyes . . . it was as though his were playing tricks on him. It seemed like her pupils just opened up to eclipse her brown irises and simply drank him in. Rather than touch her cheek and kiss her, he turned and walked to his car, raking his hair.

He jumped over the door and waited for her to climb into the seat next to him. When she finally did, it seemed like the most natural thing in the world, her riding shotgun with him—but he'd just met her! He pulled off and drove without speaking and without music, something definitely not him. A red light made him slam on the brakes. He glimpsed her from the corner of his eye and noticed that she was shyly glancing at him. Unable to withstand it, he reached out to push her tousled braids away from her face. She flinched, which quietly stung. But he persisted.

"Don't worry; I won't bite," he murmured, not sure why his voice had dipped so low just for her. He wanted to taste her mouth in the worst way but brushed her velvety hair back instead, almost missing his cue to gun the engine again when the light turned green. Her skin was like butter beneath the tips of his fingers. Everything about her drew him like a magnet . . . she smelled so good; he just couldn't place the scent. And she was *a virgin* . . . unheard of around the way at her age. She had to be fifteen, sixteen, maybe seventeen—somewhere in there.

Oh yeah, he definitely had to take this young girl to his momma's house before she made him act stupid.

The whole ride seemed like a dream. She didn't know this guy from Adam, but it felt like she'd known him all her life. The feeling came up from a very deep and secret place within her soul. Everything about him, even down to the way he smelled . . . earthy, masculine, all of it raised tiny goose bumps of anticipation on her arms and made her remain very, very still in his presence.

When he pulled up to the house, the porch was loaded. Nervous energy coiled within the pit of her stomach as her gaze scanned each person. One guy, she could tell, *had* to be his brother. Same smile, same profile, just younger and a little shorter, had a slighter build. They all hailed him with gusto, shouting, "Yo, Carlos—who dat?" She smiled when he ignored them and asked if his momma was home.

"Jus' gimme a minute. You stay in my car. Won't nobody bother you as long as you're in my ride. I'ma go talk to her and explain everything. Then I'll bring you in."

Damali nodded, searching his handsome face, watching the muscle pulse in his jaw as he jumped out of the Chevy. This was unplanned, the man was obviously nervous, and his momma probably didn't go for a mess like this. Who could blame her?

Before the thought had even been completed in Damali's mind, her worst fears happened. Loud voices echoed from the house. A jarring flurry of Spanish made it impossible to translate; however, the tone was easily understood. She was unwanted.

Wide eyes glanced at her and then curious faces immediately pressed to the screen door. The words "*Negro puta*" at a feminine-shriek pitch made her cringe. Then a booming, louder male voice, her warrior's, kicked up a notch, and everything temporarily went quiet in the house.

Carlos bounded out of the house, down the steps past onlookers, and approached the car. "What's your name, boo?" he asked quickly, yanking the car door open, grabbing her by the arm before she could answer, and hustling her up the steps past his brother and friends. "I'm Carlos. Rivera is the last name. You tell my mother what happened, aw'ight? But tell me your name, fast, before we get in the house."

"Damali," she said, trying to keep stride with him.

"Cool." He stopped for a moment. "That's real pretty, like you."

"Damn, C," one of the guys on the porch said, laughing. "You don't even know her name, *holmes*—and you bringing her to Momma Rivera? You loco?"

Carlos didn't answer as he thrust Damali through the opened screen door. A short, stocky woman wearing a floral housecoat stood wide legged in the middle of the living room floor with her arms folded over her ample breasts. Damali could feel several sets of eyes at her back. There was a narrowed, skeptical female gaze at her front. But this man, whose name she now knew, had gone to war for her *in his mother's house*, had stood his ground, and had *again* taken up for her.

"I'm getting the Bible, okay, Momma? Is that what you want?" Hoots and cheers filtered into the house from the porch, but Carlos pressed on. "I'ma swear on it that there ain't no mess gonna happen in your house. You gonna turn an innocent girl to the streets, to the wolves, demons, after all she been through, and then go to church on Sunday and tell the priest what? How you gonna take the wafer and—"

"All right, all right, Carlos!" the older woman shouted. "You get the Bible, and swear to me on it, you hear? No funny business in my house!"

"Done!"

Stunned silent, Damali watched the man dash upstairs and return with the Good Book. He and his mother stood facing each other like Western gunfighters. He slapped his hand on top of it.

"No funny business. She stays a virgin in your house."

"Give her some clothes and a fresh towel—show her the bathroom, and get that poor child something to eat, then." The older woman made the sign of the cross over her heart, glared at Damali, spun on her heels, and walked back toward the kitchen with a grunt. "She sleeps on the couch—*alone*."

Carlos's shoulders dropped two inches, and long whistles could be heard coming from the spectators on the porch.

Just as quickly as it had all begun, the drama storm was over. Temporary safe haven had been granted. It was the most surreal but also the most profound gift she'd ever been given—by a

stranger, no less. She'd never really been with a man before in her life. Had never even had a boyfriend, let alone a lover. Carlos was everything that common sense said to stay away from, yet he'd been the only one to give the demons pause. In that moment she made up her mind. Knew it like she knew her name.

Standing in the living room in Mrs. Rivera's wake, Damali's mouth suddenly went dry as she briefly stared at his and then glanced down at the floor. Quiet desire filled her in a way that caught her off-guard. He looked at the wall when she glanced up at him. A silent understanding bound them; it was almost as though she could feel his thoughts moving through her like a slow-burning hunger. One day, very soon, a kiss . . . maybe more.

Then she saw it, moreover *felt it*, from where he stood across the room. His warm mouth pressed to hers gently . . . his tongue probing, asking permission to enter and dance with hers sweetly. A swift heat spread through her and moistened a part of her body that she didn't know could feel that way. His hand cradled her face in her mind's eye; trembling fingers traced her cheek and slid down the side of her neck, producing a shiver, and then found her collarbone. On a beach, alone, she was there, with him, wanting time to stop . . . wanting him to love her long and slow and gentle like the kiss. She heard his breath hitch for a second and it broke her brief trance. His intense brown eyes slid away from her gaze again and his face was flushed, as though he'd seen her quiet dream, too.

It was too much to consider while standing before him, exposed, his friends on the porch and his momma slamming pots in the kitchen. Still she couldn't get the possibilities out of her mind. But he hadn't her asked for anything, had expected nothing—therefore, he could have her all. Just not in his mother's house.

Damali smiled at him, saying thank you with her eyes. He chuckled, shook his head, let out a long breath, and walked outside, seeming like he needed fresh air. Oh yeah, he was definitely *the one* she'd been waiting for.

THE POWER PLAYERS

A tour by Master Vampire Carlos Rivera

I'ma give it to you straight, no chaser, from the perspective of a man who's actually been to Hell and back. When you die, the soul can either ascend or descend. The six realms of darkness mirror the six realms of Light, with the seventh hosting the power source of all evil, the Unnamed One; just like going in the opposite direction, you've got seventh Heaven, and we know who's got that on lock.

Bottom line is, sins create soul weight, dragging it down. But you've still got a shot to get your act together. Hope, faith, love, forgiveness, a serious prayer for redemption . . . all of that gives a soul a chance. But there's a serious battle going on between The Light and The Dark because neither side wants to lose a soul.

THE NETERU

*(Ancient Egyptian or Kemetian translation:
"God's divine powers latent within humans . . . divine ways.")*

Also known as the vampire hunter or the vampire huntress (depending on the sex when born), the Neteru is omnivoyant (has all six extrasensory capacities) and has a natural immunity to a demonic or vampire bite. A Neteru is only created once every thousand years, and my baby, Damali Richards, is the only one to date to span two millennia—the Millennium Neteru. She's

fierce and, even I came to find out, not a woman to easily mess with.

CHARACTER: Damali Richards, aka the Millenium Neteru, aka the Vampire Huntress

THE COVENANT

Nobody can top these cats. Twelve holy, seasoned brothers from the original twelve tribes of the land, from every corner of the earth, representing all the faiths. They are called to keep vigil in wait for the coming of the Neteru—the huntress or hunter. They've been standing watch from the beginning of time, and in this era a Neteru has come—my baby, who spans two millennia . . . and her womb can host either good or evil. But the choice is ultimately hers.

CHARACTERS: Father Patrick
Asula
Monk Lin
Father Lopez

THE GUARDIANS

The Guardians are family—Damali's family and therefore mine. Their divine mission is to protect the Neteru. But you could never describe them as ordinary. They're an elite fighting force of spiritual warriors that even the demons in Hell are scared of. Their job is to protect the Neteru and drop science.

Tactical Guardian Sensors feel the spiritual danger and are sensitive to levels one and two of The Dark Realms—where ether-based manifestations live.

CHARACTERS: Nafes Shabazz, aka Shabazz
Joseph Leung, aka J. L.
Daniel Weinstein, aka Dan

Olfactory Guardian Sensors smell and taste when danger is about to knock at the door. They're especially sensitive to entities that trail sulfur—mainly those cats down in levels three, four, and five of The Dark Realms. These are the most coveted Tracker Guardians.

CHARACTERS: Jacob Rider, aka Rider aka The Nose
Jose Cipointe, aka Wizard

Audio Guardian Sensors hear the whispers of spirits and are highly tuned in to the slightest sound coming from were-creatures from level five; they can hear vampires on Level Six roll up on you smooth, almost silently.

CHARACTER: Michael Roberts, aka Big Mike

Seer Guardian Sensors see between worlds with their third eye and are invaluable to any Guardian team. They are the "eyes" of the group; they can get into your head, into your dreams and consciousness through serious telepathy. These are the most sensitive of all Guardians.

CHARACTER: Marlene Stone

RINGS OF GRACE WITHIN THE REALMS OF LIGHT

When I went to Ethiopia and peeped the Ark of The Covenant (check out *The Forbidden*), I'ma tell you what they told and showed me—word for word.

Ring One: This is where souls go when they "cross over" and become Ancestors. These are helpful spirits that have a familial bond to the living. They guide and help us until we're strong enough (after mourning) for them to leave us and ascend further. Sometimes the grief of the living just won't let an ancestral soul go until the living can release their "life-tie." But there is no time in the Rings of Light and the

ancestors can be very patient with us. Guardian Angels also help the Ancestors and the living members of their families. Once they accept the loss, the soul can journey upward, higher to Ring Two.

Ring Two: This is where generations have passed and ancestral spirits become stronger, gain more focus, wisdom, and knowledge to prepare for their further ascension lessons after they've helped others close to the edges of transition. They can reach back and help the living in their soul group (or the "living soul") through dreams and signs, but without the heavy feelings of unfinished business.

Ring Three: This is where all types of creative vibes are kicked off. Angelic guides impart wisdom to make human existence better through art, music, science, medicine, architecture, design, technology, et cetera. In this ring, they can pass on inherent gifts to help those in their "living soul" group. They can also acquire new gifts to help humanity upon rebirth.

Ring Four: This is the Host Ring to the Ancestral Carriers of Prayers. These Light beings bring up the intercessions and answer them in with the Guardian Angels. This ring addresses specific "Group" human requests and also the needs down to the individual level. This is where the hopes of generations become magnified and heard On-High.

Ring Five: These are the Keepers of the Akashic Records of all knowledge. They also protect the Keepers of the Seals and are responsible for healing, nature, the things necessary to combat the darkness through ultimate understanding and comprehension. This is where ancestral spirits become very, very wise indeed and from whence "old soul" rebirths are summoned.

Ring Six: This is where warrior angels reside. These cats are fearless entities of pure Light and fight the righteous causes. They don't fear Hell. Each is a specialist and has been battle honed for generations. Ancestor souls in this ring are the

shaman advisors to entire family lines and cultures, while warrior angels watch their backs and protect their positive lineage energy.

Ring Seven: The Most High resides here, in seventh Heaven.

See why I'm tryin' to give to you word for word? *This* I'm not tryin' to mess up.

THE DARK REALMS

Now this joint I can tell you about first-hand.

Level One:

Realm of Lost Souls

Ruling Body: Pain Gangs

The whole joint is bone-dry desert, rocks, not a drop of water, and foul heat. Those entities are nuts—possessed by guilt and negative energy—and manifest as shades or can come as mist. Those are the boys that bring a cloud of sadness, despair, and give you the shivers . . . make it cold where they drew their last breath. They're not dangerous, per se, just twisted. The vampires tap their ability to serve mist from this realm.

Level Two:

Poltergeist Realm

Ruling Body: Splinter Cells

This is where your general regulation poltergeists, succubae, and incubi reside. So all that power of nocturnal persuasion, the ability to get inside a person's head or dreams, as well as kinetic activity, comes from there. The vamps talk bad about the succubae and incubi but use their type of mental assault seduction capability all the time. It's deep.

Level Three:

Demon Realm

Ruling Body: Serpent Congress
(reports to the Supreme Council)

This level is designed to really make you lose it. Raining maggots, sewage tar pools, everything nasty that slithers, creeps, and crawls, is down there in a foul soup of nothing but wet terrain. The messed-up part about it is, unlike on the levels above where the soul is just vapor, here lost soul bodies actually start taking on permanent monster forms. Every twisted demonic form down on this level has been compressed by the weight of the deeper caverns.

Level Four:

Realm of the Amanraths (revenge demons)

Ruling Body: Supreme Council

This is where the revenge demons reside, and you ain't got a chance against them. This is where the *Supreme Council* resides that runs levels three and four. These entities are fueled by hatred, jealousy-inspired acts of violence, and acts of revenge so crazy that you can't even wrap your mind around what they do.

Level Five:

Realm of the Were-Demons

Ruling Body: Were-Senate

You're talking Black Forest vibe down here—pure primal lust. These demons follow every deviant impulse they have and can shape-shift into werewolves, were-jaguars—the meat-eaters. Not smooth at all. I'm not even gonna get into their mating dens. Let's just say it's a total free-for-all. I almost got in trouble with one of the females from this level . . . but that's a story for another time.

Level Six:

Realm of Vampiri

Ruling Body: Vampire Council

I had to stand before the *Vampire Council* in their black marble chambers when I had first been turned. That's when I truly saw what evil was all about. Those old boys are shrewd, smooth, have every power and supernatural capability of the realms above theirs. They're the most highly evolved, sophisticated entities of the demon species with mad-scientist superior intellect.

and they play war games with global economics, politics, you name it. It's all about the power paradigm.

The vampiri are also all about the pleasure principle, and their environment reflects their refined sensibilities. But don't be fooled, they will "do" you in the blink of an eye, so once you're in, you ain't getting out.

Level Seven:

Realm of The Fallen Angel

Ruling Body: The Fallen Angel

Not even I will speak of what holds check there.

That's all I can tell you; you've been schooled, so act like you know. My best advice to you is this: If you're afraid of the dark, stay in The Light.

DAMALI'S JOURNAL

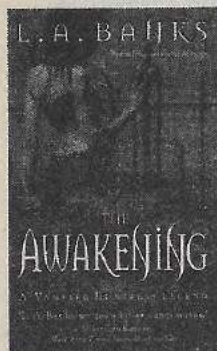
I was fifteen and an orphan when I discovered that I was the Neteru, or Vampire Huntress. Talk about a head trip. My mother-seer, Marlene, probably has everything I've been through already chronicled in her big black book of prophecies—the *Temt Tchaas*. But there are times when I have to stop the madness, sit back, reflect, and write all the drama down just to keep it straight in my own head.

Minion

I was kicking vampire butt, handling my business, but then all of a sudden I started going through these wild, preternatural changes—Neteru hormonal swings that Marlene had neglected to tell me about. It's called the ripening, in female Neterus. It's the time when a female Neteru is able to conceive another Neteru if she is so blessed or a day-walker (a vampire immune to daylight) if she is not. I started having bloodlusts and trailing Neteru scent—something that drives the vampire males wild. But this phase also broke my heart—Carlos, my man, got jacked by the deadliest master vampire I had ever come across, Fallon Nuit. The male vamps want me,



the female vamps want to kill me, but it's Master Vampire Fallon Nuit who may be my downfall.



The Awakening
The transition into my total Neteru powers came full force at the most inopportune time. I had to go down to Hell with my whole Guardian team to stop a vampire civil war from spilling onto the streets . . . we almost didn't make it out alive. Carlos was left for dead, and I learned an important lesson about winning the battle and losing the war.



The Hunted
My baby, Carlos, came back for me. Vampire or not, I couldn't resist his charms. There was a hot, new thing between us, sanctioned or not, until an Amazon weredemon entered the picture with an agenda of her own, and taking me out was at the top of her list. But this demon just bit off more than she could chew.



The Bitten
Carlos and I had been rolling so hard, making love so ridiculously, that, uh, well . . . I wound up with fangs for a minute. The Covenant was up in arms, my Guardian squad was ready to smoke me, and I still couldn't stop messing with that man. It was chaos. Biblical seals had been hijacked by the vampires, Armageddon was in the offing, and the only way to keep a lid on things was to take out all the topside master vampires in a one-time-only hit over in Australia. And I learned that nothing comes without a price.

The Forbidden

All the master vamps have been wiped out, but I know I'm in really hot water when I'm called before the Council of Neteru Queens. Remember what I said about nothing coming without a price? Being the lover of a council-level vampire is one of them. And Lilith, consort of the Unnamed One, has come up from the Seventh Level of Hell to "set affairs in order." But that chick has her own agenda, and when it involves someone close to my heart I know I have no choice but to take her out. It's not every day that you go up against the most evil and dangerously powerful woman to ever walk the earth.



The Damned

Even I don't know how this is going to turn out.





DAMALI **R**ICHARDS

CHARACTER DOSSIERS

DAMALI RICHARDS

Aka: The Neteru, the Vampire Huntress

The Neteru: Ancient Egyptian, or Kemetian, translation: "God's divine powers latent within humans . . . divine ways." A Neteru is only created once every thousand years, and Damali Richards is the only one to date to span two millennia.

Birth Date: August 15, 1982

Age: 23

Personal Power Color: Gold

Astrological Sign: Leo

Numerology Quotient: $8 + 1 + 5 + 1 + 9 + 8 + 2 = 34$ or $3 + 4 =$ Lucky 7

Extrasensory Specialty: Omnivoyant—possesses all six areas of extrasensory perception plus a seventh capacity only held by a Neteru.

Favorite Quotes: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil" (Psalm 23) and "A thou-

sand may fall at my side, and ten thousand at my right hand; but it [evil] will not come near me" (Psalms 91:7).

Height: 5' 7"

Eyes: Brown

Hair: Brown (Style: Nubian Locks)

Occupation: Vampire Huntress

Day Career: Spoken-Word/Hip-Hop Artist, Songwriter, Producer

Special Skillz: Aikido and slaying vampires

Weapons of Choice: Madame Isis—a thirty-six-inch, seven-thousand-year-old triple blade with jewel-encrusted handle specifically designed to instantly behead or penetrate the reinforced chest cavity of master vampires with silver alloys, steel, and crucifix formation blood grooves. In most cases, the religious symbols from the twelve major world religions that are etched along the blade edges will also cause spontaneous combustion when vampire or demon blood is drawn. Companion weapon—"The Baby Isis" dagger.

Background: Damali Richards was born in New Orleans and upon her parents' untimely demise was thrust into the foster-care system and lost to all Guardian teams. Her location and identity were hidden until Marlene Stone, seer-Guardian, discovered her living as a teenage runaway on the streets of Los Angeles, California. Taken under Stone's wing, the Neteru was taught the ways of being a slayer.

CARLOS RIVERA

Aka: A lost Guardian, also known as Master Vampire Rivera

Birth Date: November 5, 1980

Age: 25

Personal Power Colors: Black and crimson

Astrological Sign: Scorpio

Numerology Quotient: $11 + 5 + 1 + 9 + 8 + 0 = 34$ or $3 + 4 =$ Lucky 7

Extrasensory Specialty: Olfactory, top grade

Favorite Quote: "Shit Happens" (Author unknown).

Height: 6' 4"

Eyes: Brown

Hair: Dark Brown

Occupation: He is an enigma.

Day Career: Drug Dealer, Businessman, and Entrepreneur Extraordinaire

Special Skillz: Postmortem, all the secrets of the dark night through six levels of Hell. Before the Turn, master strategist, espionage, sabotage, smooth duplicity, and war games.

Weapons of Choice: Prior to death, Uzi. After death, six-inch fangs when really pissed off.

Background: Born in LA barrios, died in the Santa Monica Mountains. Lost a sister to crack and an entire posse to vampiric attacks. The Covenant, the Vampire Council, and the



CARLOS **R**IVERA

Guardians are three ends against the middle—and he plays them all like an expert hand of Three-Card Monte.

MARLENE STONE

Birth Date: April 5, 1951

Age: 54

Personal Power Color: Royal purple

Astrological Sign: Aries

Numerology Quotient: $4 + 5 + 1 + 9 + 5 + 1 = 25$ or $2 + 5 =$
Lucky 7

Extrasensory Specialty: Seer, second sight

Favorite Quote: “When the Spirits have a plan for someone, he/she survives even the unsurvivable” (Malidoma Some).

Height: 5' 6"

Eyes: Brown

Hair: Silver Gray (Style: Nubian Locks)

Occupation: Guardian Team Leader

Day Career: Violinist, Warriors of Light Productions—also group’s Business Manager and Publicist

Special Skillz: Healing, laying on of hands, setting up the prayer defense borders, amulet and personal power color R & D, astrology, reading planetary alignments... and is the



MARLENE **S**TONE

keeper of the sacred Neteru *Temt Tchaas* (an ancient tome of the hunter and huntresses chronicles). Marlene is the only one who can decipher it, and it is passed from Guardian-seer to Guardian-seer. She is the griot, the repository of Neteru spiritual practices, training, and guidance.

Weapons of Choice: The ebony African walking stick used as a defensive weapon and a wooden stake . . . right through a vampire's heart.

Background: Marlene Stone was born on the South Carolina "Geechie Country" islands before her family of seer-elders had to relocate to elude negative spiritual forces. New Orleans became her new home, hidden in the obscurity of a small church parish . . . until the vampire Fallon Nuit took the pastor and Marlene was forced to flee with the Neteru.

NAFES SHABAZZ

Aka: Shabazz

Birth Date: April 2, 1963

Age: 42

Personal Power Color: Midnight blue

Astrological Sign: Aries

Numerology Quotient: $4 + 2 + 1 + 9 + 6 + 3 = 25$ or $2 + 5 =$ Lucky 7

Extrasensory Specialty: Tactical, feels the unseen

Favorite Quote: "One who knows the enemy and knows himself will not be endangered in a hundred engagements" (Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*).



NAFES **S**HABAZZ

Height: 6' 2"

Eyes: Brown

Hair: Ebony (Style: Nubian Locks)

Occupation: Guardian Team Sharpshooter

Day Career: Bassist and Choreographer, Warriors of Light Productions

Special Skillz: Battle plan strategist

Weapons of Choice: "Sleeping Beauty," a black ceramic Glock 9mm, with hallowed-earth-packed artillery. Motto: If you're cool, she'll sleep, and everything stays smooth. However, is also extremely effective in utilizing martial arts.

Background: 'Bazz, as he is known to his fellow Guardians, was born in the urban jungle—East Coast . . . that's all he'll tell. Found his way to prison when a drug deal went bad in an alley, by way of vampire attack. Once incarcerated, he turned his life around under the protection and tutelage of a seer-mentor, learned Aikido, philosophy, strategy, and studied all about the unseen spiritual realm.

JAKE RIDER

Aka: Rider—The Nose

Birth Date: December 8, 1958

Age: 47

Personal Power Colors: Turquoise and earth tones—loves cowboy suede and leather



JAKE **R**IDER

Astrological Sign: Sagittarius

Numerology Quotient: $12 + 8 + 1 + 9 + 5 + 8 = 43$ or $4 + 3 =$ Lucky 7

Extrasensory Specialty: Olfactory, smells trouble brewing, especially sulfur

Favorite Quote: "Let's rock 'n' roll, people!" (Jake Rider).

Height: 6' 2"

Eyes: Hazel

Hair: Dirty Blond (Style: Spiked Punk)

Occupation: Guardian Team Sharpshooter

Day Career: Guitarist, Warriors of Light Productions—also Production Manager

Special Skillz: Lead "Nose." Walks point with Shabazz.

Weapons of Choice: Rifle, shotgun, semiautomatic, anything with a trigger and hallowed-earth-packed shells in its magazine.

Background: Rider grew up in the Midwest, made his way to Arizona (with a pit stop in New Orleans) on a Harley at age eighteen; whiskey and women was his thing until he had his first encounter with the unseen during his cross-country trek. Hooked up with Jose Ciponte on a reservation, hung out there, and smoked peyote—convinced that he'd been hallucinating—until he was forced (in order to survive) to refine his skills and accept and learn the ways of the Guardians.



BIG MIKE

BIG MIKE

Real Name: Michael Roberts

Birth Date: May 1, 1954

Age: 51

Personal Power Color: Jewel green

Astrological Sign: Taurus

Numerology Quotient: $5 + 1 + 1 + 9 + 5 + 4 = 25$ or $2 + 5 =$
Lucky 7

Extrasensory Specialty: Audio, hears what the spirits whisper

Favorite Quote: "*Laissez les bon temps rouler!*" (Let the good times roll!)

(Note: Don't let this low-key southern brother fool you—he ain't slow . . . got turned out in New Orleans and turned out a female queen vamp, too! Yeah. Food. Women. That's Big Mike's thang.)

Height: 6' 8"—275 lbs.; no body fat

Eyes: Brown

Hair: Bald

Occupation: Soundman Technologist/Vamp Locator and Explosives Expert

Day Career: Soundboard Engineer, Warriors of Light Productions—also Music Director

Special Skillz: Sheer strength

Weapon of Choice: Holy water grenades and light cannons . . . Big Mike likes to blow mofos up.

Background: Raised in the church in small-town southern Mississippi, then Georgia was his home until he went into the service. Got caught up in the end of the Vietnam era on a Special Forces MIA extraction team . . . thought he was losing his mind, because he could hear what nobody else could. Got out alive, came home, sang in the church choir for therapy, counseled kids, did the big brother/mentor thing . . . until something stronger than him jumped him on the way home one night. Big Mike heard it coming; strength and military training got it up off him so he could escape—but the brother needed answers that only another Guardian could offer. Coincidentally connecting with Shabazz saved his sanity. Divine order was in effect.

JOSE CIPONTE

Aka: Wizard

Birth Date: March 7, 1968

Age: 37

Personal Power Color: Violet

Astrological Sign: Pisces

Numerology Quotient: $3 + 7 + 1 + 9 + 6 + 8 = 34$ or $3 + 4 =$ Lucky 7

Extrasensory Specialty: Olfactory and taste . . . ace tracker, Rider's shotgun



JOSE CIPONTE

Favorite Quote: "The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others" (Mahatma Gandhi).

Height: 5' 11"

Eyes: Brown

Hair: Dark Brown (Style: Urban Funk)

Occupation: Guardian Weapons Developer

Day Career: Percussion, Warriors of Light Productions—also Lighting Director

Special Skillz: Designing mad-crazy weapons disguised as stage equipment and special FX gear with J.L.—Wizard can sketch his butt off and draw anything he sees.

Weapons of Choice: Musical instruments converted into crossbows.

Background: His mother was Chicano, his father Creek Indian . . . they divorced when he was a baby. Jose lived with his mother in Mexico, then LA until he turned thirteen, when she agreed that it was time for him to learn the spiritual ways of his father's people. The decision was brought on by a series of spiritual attacks—his mother knew that it was a sign. Her son, Jose, had a hard path that only another spiritual warrior could teach him. His father had forecast that a Guardian would come to find Jose by way of New Orleans . . . one who shared his gift and would ride a loud horse and stand side by side with him in battles—Jake Rider.

JOSEPH LEUNG

Aka: J.L.

Birth Date: February 9, 1976

Age: 29

Personal Power Color: Aqua

Astrological Sign: Aquarius

Numerology Quotient: $2 + 9 + 1 + 9 + 7 + 6 = 34$ or $3 + 4 =$ Lucky 7

Extrasensory Specialty: Tactical, Shabazz's right-hand man

Favorite Quote: "The doors of wisdom are never shut" (Benjamin Franklin).

Height: 5' 9"

Eyes: Brown

Hair: Black

Occupation: Guardian Weapons Developer and Computer Technologist

Day Career: Keyboards, Warriors of Light Productions—also Set Director

Special Skillz: Designing mad-crazy weapons disguised as stage equipment and special FX gear. Personal best: sleight of hand, card sharking, card counting, and whipping every Guardian in the house, except Marlene (who is barred from all games of chance in the team compound).

Weapons of Choice: The nunchucks and light wand.



JOSEPH LEUNG

Background: Born in Laos, then immigrated to America as a part of the foreign adopt-a-child program. Received a solid education in the States—math basis and technology rich. But could never forget his birth family, who were soon brought over, and he was returned to his parents upon his insistence . . . and was also returned to poverty within the urban Asian community. In his spare time cutting school, he tinkered with anything electronic that could be scavenged or stolen. One night he was able to use one of his inventions to save his life. His mother, a gifted seer in her own right, sent him to find his path among the Guardians.

DANIEL WEINSTEIN

Aka: Dan

Birth Date: June 3, 1978

Age: 27

Personal Power Color: Silver

Astrological Sign: Gemini

Numerology Quotient: $6 + 3 + 1 + 9 + 7 + 8 = 34$ or $3 + 4 =$ Lucky 7

Extrasensory Specialty: Tactical, a newbie Guardian—a very reluctant one

Favorite Quote: “The only real valuable thing is intuition” (Albert Einstein).

Height: 5' 11"

Eyes: Blue



DANIEL WEINSTEIN

Hair: Blond

Occupation: To be determined . . .

Day Career: Business Manager, Warriors of Light Productions—also excellent at PR

Special Skillz: Team Peacekeeper, at present

Weapons of Choice: Slingshot and learning to use explosives

Background: Born in suburban Pasadena, then Ivy League educated . . . the last thing in the world he expected was to be stalked by vampires and forced to become a Guardian!

FALLON NUIT

Personal Power Color: Black

Numerology: 666

The two faces of Fallon Nuit remind us that vampires are masters of illusion. They can show you a very seductive side of themselves . . . but, then, there's always the side of them that humans should never forget—the deadly side.

Master Vampire Nuit, once of council-level descent, made by Dracula, many hundred years old, is now rogue to the Vampire Council for violating dark balance-of-power policies. The Vampire Council incarcerated him in his most recent New Orleans lair because his activities drew too much attention from the human world. But a fluke of fate released him in a black magic ritual. Nuit used this opportunity well and mounted a formidable army made up of a wicked demon alliance . . . from this hybrid alliance came his forces to overthrow the Vampire Council—thus was created something darker than the Vampire Council itself: Fallon Nuit's Minion.



FALLON NUIT

MINION EXCERPT

Chapter One

Nighttime, Summer, Philadelphia

Hunting vampires was a bitch.

Fury rippled through Damali as she glanced around the dark alley. It didn't have to be all this. She and her squad should have been kicking back somewhere after their gig. Lord knows all any of them wanted to do was flow with their music, improve it, tune it, and develop new cuts for their audiences. But, noooo. Some vamps had to flash fang in a club full of innocents, just to let her know they were in the house and didn't care if a Guardian team was, too. Okay, fine. Tonight, like too many nights recently, it was on.

Damali listened beyond the steady drone of the air-conditioner compressors that wafted down the vacant alley. The low hum resonated through her as she tried to get her bearings. Humidity hung about the Guardian-huntress team like a thick cloak, making it difficult to breathe. She glanced at her squad. Their clothes had begun to stick to them just that fast. Nervous perspiration was also a probable cause. Extra adrenaline was a good thing. Her ears strained to detect anything abnormal while her team's footsteps echoed against the gray, rounded cobblestones as they walked in formation.

From the corner of her eye, she saw a rat scurry behind a Dumpster. Others on her team had seen it, too. Everybody had clutched their weapons tighter, and the muscles in their arms had tensed.

But there should have been more noise coming from the club

and the streets beyond the alley; more sound. Damali tilted her head. Something was wrong. Then it hit her. No security. Not even the cops were out there. But that didn't account for the eerie absence of sound. The human vampire helpers had obviously been there to create a diversion, and had gotten any witnesses out of the alley—but that still didn't answer the sound question. When she heard Big Mike's footfalls stop behind her, Damali glanced over her shoulder at him and listened harder.

"It's too quiet," Big Mike remarked as the team cautiously paused in the alley before advancing.

Shabazz just nodded, flexing his right hand and rolling his shoulder. "You know when it's dead like this, trouble's brewing. I don't like the vibe out here. The hair on the back of my neck is standing up."

"I don't like it, either," Jose agreed, breathing deeply and closing ranks tighter while they all surveyed the dark, narrow back street. "I'm tracking a scent. Coming from that direction," he added with a nod.

"Sulfur." Rider sniffed the air, then quickly hocked and spit on the ground in disgust. "I hate the taste of that shit. I'm just glad it's not raining. Rain makes it worse."

"Time for the Twenty-third," Marlene said, glancing at the Dumpsters, darkened doorways, and then up to the fire escapes that hung above them like huge, blackened skeletal remains.

Damali nodded and started walking again, her team resuming their original formation. "*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil . . .*"

One by one the members of the team picked up strands of the psalm, advancing slowly as their voices became one low harmonic chant. Dense night surrounded them, the transparency of the air almost becoming a thicker texture that made it feel like they were trudging through wet sand.

Shabazz abruptly stopped, forcing the group to come to a halt behind him. "Wait," he whispered. "You feel it?"

"Like walking through the swamp," J.L. said. "But you can't see anything."

"It's too quiet—you can't even hear the club music inside, or traffic," Big Mike murmured. "We're in a zone."

Damali stepped forward and spread her arms out, her walking stick in one hand, and splaying her fingers of her free

hand to feel the nothingness. They were in some kind of silenced area or cocoon. It was too freaky, and way too dangerous. Something could snuff them out without a sound being heard by anyone but them. "They've got us in some sort of sound bubble. Vamps don't have that ability. This is something different."

"Vamp . . . and demons," Marlene said.

Demons and vamps didn't travel together. Plus, demons were fixed to locations . . . like a house or a building or within a host body they'd possessed, unlike vampires that could freely move about as long as there was no sunlight.

Damali wanted to say, "That isn't possible," when Big Mike opened his vest, taking out two vials attached together on a long leather cord. He raised his arm above the heads of his teammates, swung it in a hard circular motion until the two objects at the end of the tether became a blur, and said, "Then let's light this joint up."

He hurled the vials before the group; they exploded against the cement with two small pops of broken glass, spraying holy water and suddenly igniting the asphalt. The flames shot high with a whoosh, covering the cobblestoned ground around them as though a river of gasoline had been lit at their feet.

"Jesus H. Christ!" Rider said as he followed the path of the fire.

"Down!" Damali yelled, as the flame suddenly stopped twenty-five yards out from where it began and disappeared into the street vents, which gave way to a screeching, frantically flapping cloud of movement. "Bats!"

Hundreds of the flying vermin darted around their heads with beady, glowing red eyes and menacing fangs, diving at the team in a high-pitched aerial attack.

"It's too fucking many of them to shoot! They're moving too fast!" Rider shouted.

Damali and Marlene swung wildly with their walking sticks, to keep the swirling mass from descending on the group, while J.L. and Jose spun in erratic circles, trying to get a clear shot at the multiple enemies smaller than the stakes their crossbows held.

"Save your ammo. Don't fire. It's probably only one giving the illusion of many," Shabazz said, cool control lacing his or-

der. "Wizard, J.L., lights on. Damali, Marlene, cover 'em. UV lights up—and back that bullshit up. Now!"

Jose and J.L. worked feverishly to free the halogens and Fresnels in their duffel bags, hooking them immediately into the battery packs slung over their shoulders, and then sent beams into the fluttering black mass.

Immediately the cloud dispersed, then reconstituted itself into one form, and then separated into multiple forms just beyond the flame, yards away. The eyes of the beasts glowed red within their slits. Huge fangs protruded from the creatures' deformed mouths, stretching gray, death-pallor skin over their overpacked jaw lines. Their limbs seemed elongated, unnatural, and yellowing, hooked claws turned their hands into razor-sharp weapons. And the sounds they made . . . then their jaws unhinged. *What the hell* . . . These were not normal vampires!

THE BITTEN EXCERPT

The lair in St. Lucia

"Tell me your darkest fantasy," she murmured against his ear, gently pulling the lobe between her teeth.

Carlos smiled with his eyes still closed, too exhausted to do much else. Damali sounded so wickedly sexy, but why did women always go there—dredging for answers to questions that they really didn't want to hear. "I don't have any, except being with you."

"Tell me," she pleaded low and throaty, her tone so seductive that he'd swear she was all vamp.

He stroked her still-damp back, his fingers reveling in the tingling sensation her tattoo created as he touched the base of her spine, hoping she'd let his love be enough to satisfy her.

"You're my fantasy," he finally said to appease her when she became morbidly silent. "You're this dead man's dream come true, baby."

Damn, this woman was fine . . . five feet seven inches' worth of buff curves packaged in flawless bronze skin, a lush mouth, brunette locks that kissed her shoulders, and a shea-oil scent that was slowly driving him crazy. It always did. He breathed in the fragrances held by her still-damp scalp: vanilla, coconut oils; and then there was also the scent of heavy, pungent sex hanging in the air.

"You always smell *so good*," he murmured, kissing the edge of her jaw. He could still taste her on his mouth when he licked his lips. "Hmmm . . ."

"I know you have to eat," she said in a husky tone against the

sensitive part of his throat, her tongue trailing up his jugular vein, causing him to tighten his hold on her.

"Yeah, I do . . . in a few," he admitted quietly, now too distracted to go out hunting.

The way she tilted her hips forward—ever so slightly, a tease, an offering, just a contraction of the muscles beneath her bronze skin—fought with the hunger and was winning. They'd been at it all night, and he glimpsed the moonlight that washed over her through the deck opening.

"What's *your* darkest fantasy?" he said smiling, turning the question on her.

Damali brought her head up to stare into his eyes with a mischievous smirk. "My darkest fantasy is fulfilling yours."

He laughed low and deep and slow. "Yeah?" He raised an eyebrow in a challenge. "But I don't have any really dark fantasies . . . this is all I need."

"Liar," she said, chuckling from within her throat and planting a wet kiss on his Adam's apple in a way that made him swallow hard. "I bet I know what it is, even if you won't tell me."

She was rocking against him harder now, although she hadn't allowed him entry. She had his full attention, his awareness of her engaged. The teasing sensation accompanied with her well-placed nips along his chest made him suck in a hard breath between his teeth.

"This is working just fine," he murmured, tracing her sides and finding both of her breasts to gently cradle.

"But there's always more," she whispered, lowering her mouth to roughly suckle one of his nipples.

"Curiosity killed the cat," he told her, arching, trying to penetrate her without success.

"But satisfaction brought her back."

"Tell me what you want," he murmured hot against her breast, before pulling a taut nipple between his lips.

"I've already told you," she said in a rasp, moving to allow him to slip inside her, then contracting around him before withdrawing.

"C'mon, baby," he said, feeling his voice tighten with the contraction. "Right now, I'm—"

"Getting too hot to think about it?" She laughed and mounted him with a hard lunge that forced a groan up from deep inside him.

"Yeah . . . something like that." His lids closed of their own volition, his eyes rolling toward the back of his skull—the sensation was so gloriously sudden.

"Then don't think about it," she whispered, moving away, but then coming back with quick jerky circles before plunging down again.

"Oh shit, woman . . ."

"I know, baby," she murmured, her motions becoming more driven, but then backing away so that only the tip of him was within her drenched, slick valley. "But let me see if I've guessed it right. What would a master vampire's deepest fantasy be? A possible throne-level council member, at that?"

Her hard shudder and the rhythmic squeeze of her inner thighs against his hips was practically his undoing.

Her skin was covered with a light sheen of perspiration, and she slid against him like water flowing over rocks, liquid fire motion, hips undulating in a slow, rolling current, with eddies that spontaneously spun, lurched, took him in to the hilt, then washed him ashore, leaving cold air to knife at the hot surface that had been ejected from her body. His tightening grip would each time be enough to summon his return to her warm, wet center, only to be cast ashore by her fickle tide again and again, until he flipped her on her back and was done playing.

"Enough." There was no nonsense in his tone. He was beyond games as he stared into her eyes. Her scent bathed him, made him shut his eyes tight as he breathed in deeply and entered her hard. *"That's what I want."*

His fingers tangled in her velvet-spun locks, and her arches finally met him in a rhythm they both knew by heart—no stopping, no more teasing, just hard down, uninterrupted returns until he felt his gums give way to the incisors he could no longer hold in check, no more than he could hold back the inevitable convulsion of pleasure that was about to rip through his groin.

Nuzzling his throat, her fingers wound through his hair, and he was surprised by the force of her pull, that her fingers had made a fist at the nape of his neck, and that one of her palms slid against his jaw to push his head back, her breath on his throat in the way he'd always imagined. Trembling with need, the sensation was so damned good . . . if only . . . she could . . . just once . . . *Oh, baby . . .*

Then she suddenly shifted her weight, her legs a vise, and rolled on top of him. Her strength came from nowhere. It happened so quickly. A sharp strike as fast as a cobra's tore at his throat, making him shut his eyes harder, his gasp fused with a groan that transformed into a wail, and the pull that siphoned his throat sent the convulsion of ecstasy throughout his system, emptied his scrotum until his body dry heaved, made his lashes flutter from the rapid seizure, where every pull from her lips erupted hot seed from him into her, sheets gathered in knots within his fists before his hand again sought her skin, shards of color ricocheted behind his lids while he cradled her in his arms, stuttering, "*Don't stop . . . take it all.*"

His body went hot, then cold, minutes of unrelenting pleasure—her hold indomitable, a physical lock of sheer will, as she moved her hips in a lazy rhythm, ignoring his attempt to rush her with deep thrusts and staccato jerks, his voice foreign to him as it reverberated off the walls of the lair, echoed back, and taunted him . . . a master vampire, done for the first time, by what could only be a female vamp. A *master female*. One conjured from his darkest fantasy, riding him with more than skill, precise slow torture that he couldn't stop, even if he'd wanted to.

Winded, siphoned, turned out, he could barely open his eyes—but he had to. Which one of them had taken Damali's place, stolen her form? Damn, his territory had some shit with it, but never in his wildest dreams would he have imagined it to be like this. If Damali ever found out . . . And how did this female get in here? Where was D?

She smiled, looking down at him, and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

"Who made you, baby?" Dazed, that was all he could ask.

"You did," she said, chuckling low, and pressing an index finger over one of his streaming bite wounds to help seal it before stemming the flow with a soft kiss. Then she slowly licked her finger and smiled before sealing the other so he wouldn't entirely bleed out.

"There was no denying that fact. Carlos blinked twice, staring. "Damali?" Two inches of fang glistened crimson in the moonlight within her lovely mouth, and a thin red line of blood had dribbled down her chin between her breasts.

THE DAMNED EXCERPT

Damali sighed with frustration as she went back into her house. She walked through the small dwelling and slid her gun across the weapons room table. This whole life was crazy. She peered around what should have been a cozy den or family room. A dag-gone crossbow was mounted near the door, hand grenades and semis on a desk. An Isis dagger held by a wooden stand lay in wait where a letter opener should have been if things were normal. Every man on the team bugging in one way or another. The sisters seemed to be holding their own, for now, but she wondered how long that would last.

Damali raked her hair and laughed sadly.

She opened the fridge and stood in the dim light it cast within the darkened kitchen, hoping something good would strike her, as though just looking at the shelves might materialize whatever her palate craved. Her hands were on her hips, her brow knit in deep thought. She had a refrigerator full of food and didn't want a danged thing in it.

Damali left the refrigerator door open as she went to the back door and flung it open wide. She went back to the fridge to study the shelves. She smiled and closed her eyes. Carlos, naked, in bed, right now, no drama, no attitude, not drunk, vaporizing her one cell at a time. Yeah, that was definitely what she wanted. She licked her lips as her mouth went dry, the mental sight of his lit second tattoo on his base, one of his sweet spots, and therefore hers. Caramel. She laughed. *Oh yeah*, she practically breathed out, *that tasted real good.*

Damali shook it off and slammed the refrigerator door. She

caught a glimpse of something flashing past the deck and smiled. *Stop playing and come inside, Carlos.*

She paced out to the back of the house, stared up at the moon, completely understanding why werewolves howled. Her focus was singular as she briefly closed her eyes again and inhaled sharply. Carlos was still in her nose. His near-apex scent haunting, teasing, making her hands tremble . . . and he was three sheets to the wind, out here acting crazy.

She opened her eyes and a tall, dark male form was in the shadows just beyond the house lights. She placed her hand over her heart and held on to the deck rail. "Oh wow, baby, I thought . . ."

Damali sniffed again and the stench of rotting flesh hit her, just before the shadowy figure moved like lightning from behind a cactus and toward her. Gangrene-pitted flesh hung from a contorted, skeletal face. Eyes too big for the sockets glowed a blackish-green like withered, rotten olives. Half of the creature's head looked like it had been bashed in, the other half was gone, and tattered, filthy clothing hung from its gruesome body. But the claws at the ends of its long, gnarled fingers, along with the twisted fangs protruding from its hideous mouth, made her know it was deadly and demon. What the hell . . . Damali felt herself go from aroused to pissed in two seconds flat. Damn! Couldn't a sister get a moment of peace?

She whirled around and ran into the house, glancing over her shoulder once. Her peripheral vision caught something rushing, fast behind her. The weapons room the guys had created was her destination. There was a heavy thud on the deck porch. It was coming in her house!

The crossbow by the door was the closest thing to her. She grabbed it, cocked it, and leveled it toward the window. The moment she went deeper into the room to go for a 9mm she saw it speed by the opened window in a blur.

Damali's gaze shot around the room, following the sound to get a bead on the creature's current location.

She heard a thump overhead and jumped. It was on the roof. Shit! Damali stayed in the center of the house in the hallway, watching as it scampered across her skylight.

Damali dashed back to her weapons room, but the thing leered at her through the bulletproof glass block window and

screached. Screw going near the window for the Glock. The Isis dagger was closer. In one deft swipe it went into her back jeans pocket as she backed away from the window and held the crossbow readied.

A few seconds was long enough for her to see that the creature's face was mangled, dripping, red flesh, no skin—as though an Amanthra serpent had swallowed it whole and puked it back up. She'd seen those half-eaten, soul-damned humans before in the Hell feeding zones. The chest and abdomen were also torn open, and it stunk of sulfur. It presented yellowish-green dripping fangs, upper and lower canines. Were-demon signature of foul sulfur stench combined with heavy wet-dog odor was as strong as Amanthra on it. Its head had been half blown off, obviously by a shotgun cartridge, and the sucker moved way too fast to be what it was, mere demon food.

But why hadn't it come in? Damali stalked along the corridor leading to the kitchen, hugging the wall, her weapon before her. The prayer barriers and sea salt lines over thresholds and windowsills had obviously kept it back. They'd done the interior of the new house, not the perimeter, assuming the hallowed ground around it was enough. It should have been! What was this thing?

It didn't matter what it was. This creature couldn't be allowed to escape. The fact that she hadn't felt it before it manifested really worried her.

As she crept toward the back door, she could sense it waiting for her. She kicked the screen door open; it rushed the door. She fired her crossbow, taking dead aim at the thing's chest. It just looked at her and scooted to the left side of the house. She looked at the crossbow and set it down slowly. Okaaaay. No response to a silver stake in its chest? Her mind quickly scavenged for information. Demon food—the heart was the first thing eaten out. No heart meant nothing to stake. But it still had flesh, open wounds, where purified, prayed-over sea salt could catch and burn it, ignite that sucker.

No time to lose, she rushed to her cabinets, grabbed a bag of anointed Red Sea salt—shrapnel, to slow it down—then dashed to her weapons room, snatched up a semiautomatic filled with hallowed-earth rounds, and went hunting.

As she ran through the house, the creature's ugly face

popped into each window, following her moves. She ran out onto the back deck, unafraid. This low-level wannabe demon thing had actually tried her, the Neteru! Didn't it know she'd smoked master vamps and had been to Hell and back? The bitch had actually tried to break into her house! She was too angry to feel fear.

Red Sea salt in one hand, semi in the other. It leaped down from the roof to the ground just beyond the deck rail, and she hurled the opened bag to sprawl holding salt at its feet, instantly raising her weapon and squeezing off death rounds.

Damali yanked her weapon down as the thing squealed and began to smolder. But she noticed the bullets hadn't affected it. The creature was melting from its feet up, turning into a puddle of black liquid ooze as it screeched. Then she saw its face in earnest as it began to transform back into what it looked like before it had died and had been fed upon in the lower realms.

She stumbled back until her spine hit the house wall. Her foster father? "I thought you were dead, you child-molesting bastard!" she screamed, running forward and blowing off the creature's head. "Inez's family saw your ass in Hell! Time to go back!"

Raw emotion kept her weapon firing even after the thing had no head. Gaining her wits quickly, she saw that the head she'd blown off just rolled around in an angry circle snapping and snarling, while the body went into a black puddle and within moments disappeared into the ground.

Damali dashed back into her house, grabbed a handful of salt, and flung it at the spinning head. Oddly, it began to smoke and disintegrate, too, but not before looking her squarely in the eyes.


"You can't keep us down there," it hissed. "We're all coming back!" Then it dissolved into black muck and was gone.

Shaken, Damali's attention jerked to the distance. The Guardians were scrambling. Gunfire had alerted everyone. *Stay home. I'm coming to you!* she mentally shouted to Marlene. *I don't know how many more are out here. Find Carlos, and bring him into the house—now!*

Furious at the invasion, Damali ran down the steps to stand near the spot that had withered the already-dry grass. The crude oil-like stench still lingered. She squatted, the Isis dagger now in one hand, at the ready.

She splayed her other hand wide over the black sludge. This didn't make sense. She could feel subterranean movement, quick dashes like things fleeing, moving between levels that they should have been blocked to. Demon food was on the move, but their captors were not? From everything she'd been taught and had seen down below with her own eyes, all original demons, the ODs, as Carlos called them, Lilith's spawn, the Lilim, or Lucifer's direct-made entities, fed on scum souls like her foster father's on every level and had them on lock within carefully guarded zones. The damned made up 30 percent of Hell's furnaces, and their rot fed the Lilim like fossil fuel. It kept the ODs fed and able to stay subterranean, out of harm's way. Why would their food be topside? How had the damned gotten loose?

Damali stood and jogged around the side of the house toward her Hummer. It was time to have a meeting.



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