



The Forbidden

The Vampire Huntress Series Book Five

She felt like she was flying, the images whirred by her so fast that Damali had to shut her eyes to still the vertigo it produced. Her skin crackled with an electric-like charge, and her breath was stolen as she landed on her feet with a thud. Instantly on guard, she glanced around, frantic. Where was she, how did her white hospital gown and hair wrap get replaced? She patted her side searching for her Isis in reflex, slowly remembering where she'd left it.

Damn.

But the swift swipe of her side also told her that she had of fighting gear. Where the heck had Marlene blasted her?

It took her a second to pull it together. Problem number one—it was dark. Not a good thing without a blade. Damali glanced down at her outfit. Okay, sure, Marlene was pissed, but all black, after what they'd just been



through? Leather pants, a halter-top, and steel toe black boots? Intense worry made her vision keen toward her environs. What if Marlene's jettison had been intercepted and she was standing in the middle of a layer of Hell?

She walked forward slowly. There was a river behind her, old industrial complex area. Before her was a wide street, but no traffic. Real bad sign. Had to be the point in the night when the clubs closed and sidewalks rolled up and partygoers went home. Just after the hunting hour.

Restaurant lights behind her on the long stretch of riverfront were dim. Massive buildings were black, nary a light in a window. A bridge loomed in the distance; its architecture seeming like an eerie blue dinosaur skeleton. The hair stood up on her arms. No, Marlene wouldn't have sent her *here* to hide.

A neon club marquis lit. Damali stopped walking and folded her arms over her chest. *Club Egypt?* She stared at the interesting urban hieroglyphics that had been spray painted on the sand colored exterior of the building. Last she'd heard, the big war was going down in the Middle East—what, did she look crazy? Just walk in there unarmed?

Then she slowly unfolded her arms. The only thing that she could imagine to be strong enough to pull her out of a light jettison wasn't supposed to be named, but was supposed to kick off some serious shit in that region of the world. Damali stared at the sign.

She glanced skyward. Okay, true, she'd had her issues with The Light, recently... even a momentary lapse of faith. But surely she was gonna be left ass-out like this, was she? She didn't have a problem doing what had to be done, even if she died trying. But to go up in the joint with nothing?

She saw movement in the doorway of the club, and her gaze hotly scanned the ground. Old industrial area meant a bottle, brick, an abandoned piece of metal; something had to be lying around. It might not kill what was laying for her, but she could let it know it had been in a sho' nuff fight.



As she narrowed her gaze to see further, a street sign caught her attention. Delaware Avenue? Instantly she scavenged every mental piece of data her mind held about The Dark realms. Delaware Avenue drew a blank, as did her search of the ground. If she had time on her side, she might have been able to get a train track out of the cement and tar. But that was the problem; she could sense there was no time.

“Fuck it, then,” she muttered, crossing the wide boulevard and walking toward the club with purpose. She wasn’t no punk. They had already kicked her ass. She’d gotten them good, too. Fine. Bottom line was, if she were in Hell, standing on a corner wringing her hands wasn’t doing any good. Tonight was as fine a night as any to die. She just had to be sure to take plenty of them with her.

When she got to the door, a huge bouncer stopped her. “You got ID?”

ID? Was he nuts? She looked him up and down, allowing her gaze to rake him for fangs. The big burly brother looked like he was straight out of the motherland, his even blue-black complexion nearly gleaming and blending into his black muscle shirt and jeans. It seemed like he’d been stuffed into his clothes, and he was a definitely problem if he dropped fang on her out here. Then again, as big as his ass was, he coulda been a were. Who knew, who cared, at this point? “Y’all need to stop playin’,” she said, her patience gone. “You called me, what you want?”

When he didn’t answer immediately, her hands went to her hips. “Is there a cover charge, or what?”

She shook his head no and smiled. “Naw. Not for you, sis.”

Oh, pullease. She studied his smile. He hadn’t fanged-up on her. Part of her was disappointed. She was in a really bad mood. Human helpers were always frontin’. She brushed past him when he moved his mountainous girth out of the doorway.

The purple haze of lights made her squint, but she was glad that she didn’t have to walk down



a long, dark corridor. Such as it was, the interior seemed fairly normal. She glanced around and the place was half filled. A wide, highly polished wood dance floor had people free-styling on it. The music was thumping. The DJ was all right. The bars were loaded. Grouping of people were seated at scattered round tables and taking up available seating on purple and dark hued mini-sofas. Her radar opened, but she couldn't feel a demonic presence. Very weird.

Damali carefully made her way to the bar. Maybe Marlene had just thrown her somewhere that she would fit in and be safe? Figuring it all out was getting crazier by the moment. Nothing made complete sense.

She perched herself up on a high brass and leather stool and kept her gaze moving. When the female bartender came toward her, she remembered—no cash.

Okay, think fast. If she were in a human establishment, she'd have to use some street skills to get a drink. There were plenty enough brothers sipping at the rail to make that a non-issue. Damali smiled, playing the odds. If she was in demon territory, it wasn't about drinking anything anyway. She just wanted to test for the million-dollar question. If the sister asked her would she want her shot with a little color, then she'd know.

Damali openly appraised the tall, older woman who came up to her. Girlfriend looked good. Damali would give her that. Had to be a vamp, though. It was the way she created a hypnotic effect as she advanced, almost like she was walking toward her in slow motion. Totally mesmerizing until it seemed like her flawless skin nearly glowed.

Damali stirred the cobwebs from her brain. Yeah, this was a vamp. She was doing a gold metallic boostier, holding her double-Ds up like trophies—not that they needed the lift. They were magnificent on their own. A gold-filigreed waist chain that moved ever so slightly above her tight, gold lame pants as she walked ensconced her flat belly. Her complexion was of burnt cinnamon, but



her eyes smoldered dark like her shoulder-length braids. The gold serpent arm bracelet that she wore seemed as though it were alive and clinging to her sleek, muscular upper arm like it were hugging a tree limb.

Damali's assessment put the sister near thirty-five to forty years old, but girlfriend's eyes held the depth of the ages in them. They stared at each other cautiously.

"What you having tonight?" the bartender asked with a smile.

Damali studied her mouth. "What you serving that's top shelf?"

The bartender's smile widened. "Sis, I don't roll like that. I've got a man, okaay."

Thoroughly shocked, Damali sat back. She didn't know what to say. "Well, shit, so do I."

"Don't we all," a deep, sexy female voice said near her ear, making Damali pivot in her chair and bristle. "But if you're out of cash, and angling for a free drink, name your poison."

"Back up off me," Damali said slowly, watching the very tall Aztec-looking woman slide into a barstool near her. Girlfriend hadn't made a lunge, and had only tossed her long French braid over her shoulder and sighed. Still, she didn't like these odds. Female vamps were treacherous. She could feel them moving in on her quietly as the men slid down to make room for them.

One by one the chairs filled in around her. She glanced at the bartender, then the tall, older woman who was a fly ass fifty, serving royal blue peacock and black stilettos.

"Pour this chile a Jack Daniels," the woman beside her said. "My tab."

"This ain't no bargain," Damali said, accepting the drink with her eyes and not touching it. Another older sister had slid into a chair on her right. Her dark face seemed vaguely familiar, and her intense black eyes had that same knowing quality the others possessed.

She flipped her hand to dismiss Damali's open assessment. Sister was rockin' so much ice that the diamonds were practically blinding. Pure confidence radiated from her, almost like a heat wave.



She was serving red stilettos that bordered on being ‘come fuck me’ pumps. The red pants suit, killer. Everything about her aura demanded respect, even if she might have to kill her.

Damali raised her glass to them. Her gaze surveyed what she quickly counted as eight to ten women. All older. All of varying hues and dressed to the nines, so confident and cocky that they hadn’t even worn good battle shoes... All of them, obviously, professional assassins that could be patient and wait to do their hits. “Well, I have to hand it to you, ladies. You sure know how to try to take a sister out in style.”

The one in red chuckled and sipped her martini slowly. “Too dramatic.” She looked down the bar at the others. “She what man trouble will do. Make you simple.”

Tension coiled around Damali’s spine. Fury ate at her tender insides. She picked up her glass and poured it slowly in the woman’s lap. “Yeah. It’ll do that. So, let’s get this party started.”

She’d expected the instant lunge, and had mental placed her reach to the bottles and bar tools. She’d expected the cool sister to jump up. At least one of her girls should have flinched. But instead she just looked down at the stain and the liquor running down her shapely leg, and dabbed it with a finger, tasted it, made a face and shook her head.

“See, that’s youth,” she said in an even tone. “You don’t do that tacky mess in public. You take it to the ladies room.”

Damali was off her stool. “Any time.”

“Now would be good,” the bartender said, clearing it with one lithe move to stand before Damali with a sly smile. “Shall we?”

“It’s your house,” Damali said through her teeth. “You lead the way.”

Martini glasses, champagne flutes, and rocks glasses were set down calmly in unison as the women flanking the leader stood.



“Baby-girl, do you have any idea who you’re up against?”

Damali stepped back further, one hand on her hip, the other pointing out her complaint. “No, bitch, do you?”

It was the first time she saw a flicker of rage cross their faces. The woman in red cocked her head to the side. “What did you call me?”

Damali wasn’t sure if it was the tone of her voice or the level of shock held within it, but something very strange gave her pause. Within seconds the tall, older sister was up in her face.

“Take your ass to the bathroom before I embarrass you out here in public.”

What? Damali looked at her like she was crazy. The dance floor had cleared. Several bouncers had come into the open area, but didn’t move. The woman snapped her arm out and pointed hard in the direction toward the back of the club. Damali balled up her fist, preparing to sucker punch her. But then the woman did something Damali never expected. She simply turned on her heels and strutted forward, her head high with her shoulders back.

Curiosity was jacking with Damali’s senses. Had all the female vampires just calmly walked to the ladies room, or was she hallucinating? There was a silent dignity about them that didn’t fit. Not to mention, they should have all been throwing down, right through here. Not marching toward the bathroom like offended church ladies. If they hadn’t attacked, that meant one thing—they needed information. But what?

As she cautiously followed their regal promenade, Damali worked the puzzle in her head. Carlos had to be part of this. Maybe they were really worried about where their esteemed Councilman had gone. Yeah... that had to be it.

The sister in red swung open the heavy door, almost yanking it from its hinges and making it slam against the wall. Bright fluorescent light greeted them, Damali entering the tight confines last.



She made a quick assessment. No windows. All white metal stalls and tile with pink accent borders. The pink was disorienting. In a vamp joint? Then she stopped as they stood before a huge mirror and cast a reflection, just like she did.

She opened her mouth and slowly closed it.

“That’s right, damn it!” the woman in red said. “You’d better get a grip and know who you’re talking to. I’ll have you know I’ve run empires before you were even thought of, sister!”

“Chica, this is bad,” another said, shaking her head. “We gonna have to kick your ass now, for real.”

“Aw, ladies,” another tall beauty said. “You know that’s not why we brought her here.”

The bartender stepped forward and offered her a fist pound. “We’ve got bigger problems.”

“All right, Eve,” the sister in red said, giving Damali a hard glare. “This is your territory. School her fast before I snatch a bone out her narrow behind.”

Damali’s attention went from one woman to the next. Did one of them call the sister serving drinks, Eve?

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Long story, baby. But hey, you know how this goes. You find Mr. Right, fall in love, get your head twisted around by some other fine bastard, then have issues. Feel me?”

Damali couldn’t stop gaping.

“Take a walk with us,” the one pointed out as Eve said, moving toward the mirror. “You game for some insight?”

From some strange place in her soul, Damali found her head nodding in the affirmative. She came nearer to the woman than was probably advisable, as Eve’s hands touched the mirror and melted into it like it were water. “We had to strip your blade from you, hon, until you could learn to use it right, because what’s coming from you—you can’t fight like you just did out there.”



The others nodded.

“You will get your ass beat down if you go after her like you just did, hear?” the woman in red said, obviously still salty about her dress. “Lilith will fuck you up good, if you don’t watch your back, and no man is worth all that.”

Damali’s eyes were so wide that she couldn’t blink. Then someone behind her pushed her and she was alone in a vast, stone enclosure.

Angry as a wet hen, she fell forward into a place that had sepia hued marble walls. The color surrounded her and she was on the landing of a massive staircase. Towering oblong windows allowed in the breaking dawn, and an infant’s coo made her look up to the top of the next landing.

Instinct propelled her forward. Bounding up the wide, slippery steps, she took them two at a time, and then stopped as she neared the child and saw the cross cut on it’s finger. Immediate panic tore through her as she recognized the tiny brown infant that had big, frightened eyes. It was the baby from the Australian Master’s castle.

Damali began backing up as the baby slowly grew, aged, and became a weathered old man with snow-white hair. He smiled a black, toothless grin, his leathery face dotted with white paint, making her remember the circle of Aborigines. He pointed to his chest to keep her from running away, showing her the markings of the six seal that he guarded. The white matrix of paint on his bare chest glowed golden for a moment, and then he flung a sash of white cloth from his waist over it, making it return to normal, and a walking stick appeared in his hand.

He nodded and then bowed, motioning to her with his stick to follow him. Although he didn’t wait as he proceeded, occasionally he glanced over his shoulder still smiling, almost mocking Damali for being wary and keeping her distance.

Once she reached the top of the stairs he pointed with the stick to a wide hallway. A glass-



like wash of violet light spilled across the marble. Impatient, he clicked the stick on the ground three times and stomped his rusty bare feet hard, waving her forward, and then disappeared.

She keened all her senses, straining to use her third eye, to feel vibrations, to hear, all to no avail. Where were the sisters from the bathroom?

Unable to gather sensory information, she began walking forward, feeling amazingly light as each footfall lifted her slightly off the floor. Soon the glasslike purple rays covered her as she entered its full beam, and instantly the mere intent of moving forward rushed her to an open atrium filled with swirling golden white light and women's voices.

Damali squinted as a large opalescent table came into view, and seated before her were the eight women. Four were sitting to each side of an empty, high, Kemetian throne carved in alabaster, with a falcon winged sun disc bearing the Ankh symbol of fertility within it. She recognized Nzinga instantly this time. The red siren's get up had completely thrown her off. Then she saw the Amazon sitting to her right, and dropped to one knee. She'd failed the ultimate test. Oh, dear God, she had offended the Neteru queens!

She bowed her head, ashamed to look upon them. She couldn't breathe. She knew where she was. She'd been summoned to the Council of Neterus, the table of the Queens of old, beyond the chamber of spirits called the Holy of Holies within the pyramids. Maybe she was dead and this was judgment day.