

# THIS TIME

---

AZAAA DAVIS





## PRAISE FOR THIS TIME

*"I have few words for this story:*

*Characters....GREAT. Realistic, strong, powerful...loved them.*

*Story...Interesting. Azaaa did a FANTASTIC job writing her story.*

*World building...well done. I was in the story the entire time, and I was sad when it was over. Keep writing Azaaa!*

*I highly recommend this story!." — Goodreads Book Reviewer, ★★★★★*

*"I love this book! In an industry and genre that is notoriously whitewashed, it's refreshing to read a book centered around a POC character (and not one that is painfully stereotypical)." — Goodreads Book Reviewer, ★★★★★*

*"This Time was a debut novel I couldn't wait to read. Nadira Holden is an MC that holds your attention right from the start, and keeps you involved in what's happening. Interesting twists and turns keep you on your toes right*

*through out the book. A must read. I cant wait for the second one!*— Amazon book reviewer, ★★★★★

*“I don’t even know where to start. The authors writing is superb. Her characters are not all lovable but all are well developed. The plot is complex and original. The world the author created is grim, full of betrayal, intrigue, some backstabbing, and a lot of power struggle. It is incredible how the author tackles preconceived notions, prejudice, hypocrisy, and indoctrination.”*— Amazon book reviewer, ★★★★★

*“There was never a dull moment in this story and the pacing, with the twists and turns, kept me flipping the pages wondering what was going to take place next and hoping that Nadira would be able to handle the next blow. This Time was action packed with a fabulous plot and had a strong finish which would definitely have any reader looking forward to a sequel.”*— Goodreads book reviewer, ★★★★★

**ALSO BY AZAAA DAVIS**

**Nadira Holden, Demon Hunter series:**

Book #1: This Time

Book #2: That Night

Book #3: These Moments (coming soon)

Nadira Holden, Demon Hunter Series Boxed Set (coming soon)

**Forest of Fangs and Claws series:**

Book #1: Her Sin (coming soon)



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Azaaa Davis is an American author of urban fantasy and paranormal romance novels.

She fell in love with reading as a high school freshman and continues to read, write, and draw today. Her background in social work helps her portray realistic characters in otherworldly--and sometimes terrifying--situations. A New York native, Azaaa currently lives in New Hampshire (USA) with her husband and daughters.

She debuted with *This Time*, A Nadira Holden Novel, in 2018 about demon hunters, family ties and the magic of love. Azaaa is working diligently to finish writing more fantasy novels while raising her daughters. Thank you for showing an interest in her stories!



This Time

Copyright © 2018 Azaaa Davis

ASIN: B07F7X4HT1

Cover illustration by cover artist Zei Llamas;

<https://www.deviantart.com/zeiruch>

Editing services provided by editor Michelle Rascon; <https://www.editorrascon.com>

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the copyright holder.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.



*For my daughter,  
Who has added immense meaning to my life.*



**THIS TIME**



**N**adira woke up encompassed in emptiness. It was as if she were in a void with no light or sound to give her a clue about her location. The air was musty, and her throat was scratchy. Nadira coughed.

“Hello?” she croaked, triggering more dry coughing. She cleared her throat and tried again. “Hey! Can anyone hear me?”

Nadira felt a solid surface along her back and behind her head and legs. She understood she was lying somewhere. Nadira tried to touch her surroundings and could barely move her arms before they hit the cushioned ceiling mere inches above her. As she continued to move, her elbows hit the cushioned sides, and her knees hit the ceiling. Feeling surrounded, Nadira realized she was in an enclosed space. Taking a deep breath, she tasted stale air. Some kind of crawlspace or trunk was her best guess.

After a long night of sleep, Nadira expected to feel ready to tackle another day. Summer was the peak of training season, and Nadira was looking forward to a few weeks of scrimmages that would allow her hunters to show off and make her look

good as team leader. Instead of feeling refreshed, her body was sore, her head ached, and her stomach was empty. She felt a weakness and discomfort that only happened when she mistakenly slept for far too long. *But, what am I doing here?*

She tried to keep her breathing even and decided to feel around with her hands for a doorknob or latch. Behind the cushion that surrounded her on all sides, she felt a more solid barrier, like wood. Was someone playing a cruel trick on her? Nadira's racing mind landed on Melissa—the girl that hated her success in class and on the training mat. Nadira usually ignored her, and all the other annoying cohorts. But, that didn't stop them from whispering about her and occasionally playing pranks.

“Let me out!” she screamed with all her might. The sound was hoarse, almost a growl. Nadira hit the wooden ceiling as hard as she could. No response. No one ran away in fear or came closer to open this padded, wooden cage. Her breathing was no longer controlled. She practically hissed, her breathing was so rapid and shallow. *Breathe deep*, Nadira commanded.

This couldn't be Melissa's doing. It wasn't her style. Besides, Melissa was preoccupied lately with Devon, her new boyfriend. One of Melissa's flaws was that she couldn't multitask, especial when a guy was involved. After ruling Melissa out, Nadira asked herself if this was a training exercise. Countless times, Nadira and her team experienced grueling trails designed to test a hunter's lethal effectiveness against monsters. But, she was far beyond her student days of trick interrogations and unexplained battle simulations. At the very least, there would have been some whisper about her team getting tested. Nadira concluded that this couldn't be a training exercise either.

Her shallow breathing was the only sound she could hear. It caused the air to become hot. Her heart raced again as she

considered the awful possibility that an enemy captured her overnight. Although she should, she didn't remember going to bed last night. Actually, she didn't remember anything . . . Nadira's hands started to shake. Cold sweat made the fabric of her nightgown stick. She felt like a disgusting mess. She was never a mess. She was strong and focused. She was a warrior.

*Think, Nadira commanded herself. Someone has you trapped in a cold, dark place.* For a second, she considered staying put and waiting for a rescue. That second passed quickly. Nadira preferred to rescue herself. She also considered preparing for the next time her enemy came to check in on her. Once, she escaped from a car trunk by fighting her way out when the vehicle stopped. The trick was to listen for your moment, and time it just right. Yet, somehow, she didn't think she had enough air to wait around for anything other than death.

She was not afraid to die, no demon hunter was, but she wasn't ready either. It was simply not her time. With that thought, Nadira ripped and tore at the ceiling of her confinement. Self-discipline and skill helped, but her genetic makeup—unique to Children of Orion—gave her the brute strength needed to destroy her cell. Silky cushy fabric gave way to wood. Wood chips, chunks, and splinters finally gave way to solid dirt.

She was panting, already exhausted. She wasn't sure how many minutes when by, but the solid dirt indicated that she still had a long way to go. She couldn't see her hands in front of her, but she could feel the cuts and bruises she was inflicting on herself in her effort to escape. Nadira's hands were bloody and cramping from the repeated motion. She kept digging. Ignoring pain and discomfort was something that all demon hunters were taught. *I can do this.*

She took a moment to pull her nightgown over her face as a makeshift mask. With her eyes closed, she kept at it. As the hole

got bigger, more dirt slid into the box she was in. The weight of the loose soil on her face, chest and upper body was suffocating in its heaviness. She was at the point of no return now that the last of her air was escaping. Yet, Nadira didn't give in to panic. Focused, she kept digging and pulling herself upward while breathing as best she could with her face covered.

Nadira lost track of time—not that she knew what time it was when she woke up in this nightmare. Her mind was buzzing with a single thought. Survive. Nadira chanted to herself in an endless loop. She got sloppy with her arm movements, with her pulling and wiggling. However long she'd been clawing her way to freedom was too long. She paused, taking a few more shallow breaths through the cloth that was acting as a mask. She wanted to stop, to regain her strength, but she ignored her fatigue. Reaching up yet again, she pulled more dirt down. This time she felt nothing around her fingertips. Finally, there was space!

With renewed determination, Nadira pried and hoisted herself up, kicking her legs as if she was swimming through the soil. Her hands first, then forearms. Next, her head, and lastly her shoulders escaped imprisonment. Immediately, she ripped her nightgown away from her face and took deep breaths of the fresh, crisp air. With a bit of tugging and wiggling, Nadira's waist, then her hips, her legs, and lastly her feet became unburied. She collapsed next to the hole she crawled out of and looked at the night sky. In the cool wind, fallen leaves rustled gently all around Nadira. She was panting and filthy, covered in dirt from head to toe. But, she was *free*.

Only when her breathing was back to normal did she move. Sitting up, she was reintroduced to her headache. It forced her to move at an even slower pace. She noticed her hands first. They were a bloody mess. Great. She won't be holding a



weapon anytime soon. The second thing she noticed was the long, soft pink dress she was wearing. It was far from the sports bras and shorts she normally wore to bed. She was filthy, homeless looking, but all in one piece and healthy enough. No time to wonder who changed her clothes, or who bothered to style her dreadlocks—formed by constantly twisting her naturally curly hair until the thick twists became permanent—with white ribbons.

Looking around, she saw that she was in a cemetery. Her sigh of relief was shushed by the wind carrying the sound away. Nadira felt safe for now, knowing she was free and unguarded. Of all the awful ways to kill an enemy, why this horrible yet passive method? To bury someone alive was a sadistic, cowardly and lacking in honor. Only one answer came to mind.

“Demons,” she growled.

Nadira used the large stone next to her for balance as she stood up. The darkness, the quietness, and the chill made her think it was deep into the night. Clouds moved across the sky. Moonlight peeked through, lighting up her surroundings. As she continued glancing around, she noticed a tombstone is what she was leaning against. Upon closer inspection, Nadira saw that it was *her* headstone.

*NADIRA HOLDEN*

*1971 to 1993*

*Beloved daughter and friend*

A FEW UNWELCOMED tears escaped from her eyes and traveled slowly down her cheeks. Someone went through a lot of trouble to mess with her. Her lips curled, baring her teeth. Her

jaw muscle tightened. Her molars ground against one another. Nadira wished she could remember more, but between the exhaustion, hunger, and dizzying headache, her last few days were pretty foggy. Carefully, she stepped away from her open grave. With no better ideas coming to mind, she decided to head home for warmth, security, and hopefully a few answers.



NADIRA WAS ABOUT HALFWAY across the cemetery, trying her best not to bump into any headstones or tree roots. She'd already slipped on moist leaves and hidden tree roots a few times. She was also too tired to feel guilty about the crushed flowers or kicked over photographs. Innocuous items left on the headstones by loved ones were now obstacles. Looking down and brushing off soil, she paused when she heard hushed whispers ahead.

Now that she was still, Nadira was able to focus a bit more on her surroundings. In front of her was a small building of white stone about ten feet high. While her line of sight was blocked by the mausoleum, she knew two people were on the other side. With a quiet sigh, Nadira resigned herself to a little awkwardness and started moving again, intent on getting past them to the gate just a few yards ahead. She walked past the mausoleum and then she passed the two people leaning against it. At that moment, Nadira heard two distinct and disturbing sounds: slurping and moaning.

Curiosity won over prudence, and she glanced to the left. She took in the sight of two men; both dressed for a night out on the town and both very pale. One guy was older, early forties maybe, leaning against the building with his head tilted back, exposing his throat. He had on shiny black shoes,

black slacks, and a stylish navy-blue button up shirt that was undone. She noticed a ring on his finger and an expression on his face that was equally dazed and scared. The other guy was younger, maybe in his mid-twenties like her. He gave Nadira a scornful look, and she blushed in embarrassment at interrupting what seemed like a lovers' tryst. She looked away.

It was none of her business what two people did at night. So what if it were two guys feeling each other up in a public place. So what if only one of them wore a wedding band. So what if one guy looked scared and the other guy looked aggressive. That slurping sound meant something intimate was going on that she did not need to see. Except . . . their lips weren't bruised, and both of their pants were zipped up and belted.

Damn it. Of course she would stumble across a possible vampire feeding. Demons seemed to favor werewolves and vampires when they adopted a corporal form to better navigate the human world. Bloodsuckers, whether young or very old, hungry or recently fed, were stronger and faster than the average human. Good thing Children of Orion—elite demon hunting warriors—were trained since childhood to fight against evil.

This vampire's potential victim did not stand a chance of leaving the cemetery alive unless she intervened. Demons rarely keep their victims alive and often left their kills for anyone to find. Children of Orion spent a third of their efforts cleaning up monster kills before any mundanes—unsuspecting humans—found them and asked way too many difficult questions.

"If you know what's good for you, you'll stop and go," Nadira said in a calm, dangerous tone she often used when addressing her adversaries.

“Piss off, corpse bride!” the demon yelled back from about four feet away. “Or you’re next!”

She could see him struggle for control of his urges as his eyes flickered from a natural brown to an unnatural yellow hue. The eyes you see looking back at you when you stumble upon a cat or raccoon at night. That was one way to tell if you’ve encountered a demon. Looking beyond him, Nadira could see that the older guy was now holding the side of his neck and gasping in pain as dark red liquid seeped between his fingers. Whatever trance he was in had worn off, and now he could feel the pain from the vampire bite on his neck.

With all the bravado Nadira could muster, she got into her fighting stance: feet apart, knees slightly bent, arms up and fists formed. She took two deep breaths to calm and center herself. She was still dirty and fatigued, but fighting demons was in her bones. It was what she had been trained to do. Children of Orion were born to this calling and had just the right genetic makeup to give them extra oomph on the battlefield. Time to slay.

The vampire became enraged by her interruption and audacity. He rushed her, hoping for an easy tackle and bite. Nadira turned away gracefully from his outstretched arms. Once she was directly behind him, she grabbed his shoulders and dragged him onto his back. He rolled away quickly as she stomped into the empty space where his neck was. Her left foot was grabbed roughly by the demon, and she was off balance in an instant. She fell hard on her right hip and arm, feeling a jolting pain shoot down her arms. Her right side burned with painful tingles.

Nadira kicked out swiftly with her free foot. On the second try, she landed a kick to the side of his face. His responding growl of pain and anger would have terrified any novice, but

she had heard far worse. He dragged her across the ground toward him by her left foot, which he still had trapped in his steel grip. From above Nadira, he smiled in a way that made her go still with fear. She vaguely heard stumbling, running and cursing behind her as the human she was attempting to rescue ran off to safety.

Alone and in a vulnerable position, she tried to block out the pain and fright in an attempt to clear her head and think. But before any useful thoughts about freeing herself were formed, the vampire started raining blows to her face, chest, and abdomen. She was losing the fight.

*Why didn't I run the other way? He'll eventually lose steam. Just hold on.* But, she couldn't. Her arms were up, and she rocked from side to side to block the punches, but there were too many of them, and they were coming too fast. Her mind was becoming foggy, her vision blurry. Nadira could taste her own blood. She refused to plead for mercy; with demons, it was a waste of time. They were heartless and cruel, power-hungry seekers of their own pleasure. She had been taught that they used humans for one of three reasons: food, sex, or as mindless minions.

While Nadira didn't cry or beg, she couldn't help but choke and groan in pain. Things were losing focus as the beating continued. The black spots she saw in her vision grew until she saw nothing else. Vaguely, Nadira felt herself act on instinct. With strength she did not know she possessed, she somehow managed to grab the vampire. As if she was underwater, she recalled her actions but in a blurry disjointed way: her hands landing on the vampire's shoulders in a powerful grip, him trying to jerk away unsuccessfully, him falling on top of her as she pulled him closer, her mouth opening wide and her body making a forceful gasp.



NADIRA'S EYES FLEW OPEN. Somehow, she lost track of time. She noticed the vampire was mere centimeters from her face and instinctively punched him with all her strength. He dropped like dead weight into a heap to her left. She rolled to her right and hopped up as quickly as she could. He still hadn't moved. She kicked him to be sure he was not faking unconsciousness. He wasn't.

Before anything else could interrupt her, she quickly chanted the Latin words with clear intent.

*"Patentibus."*

This, along with biting her thumb until it bled and letting a few fresh drops land on the ground, activated the magic that surrounded everyone every day. As commanded, the magic created a temporary tear in the natural veil that separated this world from the demon world. Her blood ensured that the tear was temporary. She rolled the unconscious monster into the tear and watched as the tear sealed itself moments later.

The tear was a barely visible line of shimmering light, with hints of purple, white and blue fading in and out. She felt the tug of it against her skin, the veil's soundless, sucking wind that sucked objects toward its center. The sight still gave her chills. As a child, she used to imagine that tears in the veil were the mouths of hungry beasts expecting to be fed. This would scare her into not wanting to fall asleep at night. The veil was, according to her lessons, innocuous and silent. Only when naturally occurring or summoned incorrectly were tears unpredictable and deadly.

With the demon, the tear in the veil, and the victim all gone, she started walking again toward the gate she saw ahead. Nadira had already spent way more time in this cemetery than

she ever wanted. With surprise, she realized that she was feeling a lot better: steadier, clearer headed, and generally stronger than when she woke up in the coffin.

How could she have come so close to losing a fight against a single vampire? Why did he stop hitting her? Did she really faint? Maybe the demon switched from beating her to doing other things when he noticed she was passed out. That was something she couldn't handle right now, and she literally tried shaking the disturbing thought from her head.

“Just get home, Nadira,” she said out loud.

**S**tanding outside the cemetery, Nadira said, “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

Her words were rushed and slid together. She placed a hand on her chest in an attempt to tame her racing heartbeat. Her eyes widened when she recognized the Tremont River up ahead. Now she knew she was still in town and not in the middle of nowhere. Thank goodness.

Smiling, she crossed the street and began walking along the esplanade, happily taking in a whiff of the stinky, sluggish river. She was in her hometown of Peppermill in upstate New York, and this river was the natural border on the West side of the city. It was too late for public transportation, not that her devious captors were nice enough to bury her with her wallet. Also, taxicabs were pretty hard to come by in this part of town. With another deep inhale, she picked up her pace determined to get home before dawn.

While most kidnapped victims would simply be happy to be alive, the embarrassment of her situation was starting to sink in. Of course she wanted a warm welcome as her father



and peers expressed relief at her safe return, and maybe even admiration for her ability to save herself. But, she knew that what waited for her would be a far cry from a cheerful reunion. Instead, she imagined her father's disapproving glare, the head shakes and frowns from her teammates, and the merciless teasing from the others. She was an elite hunter and yet she managed to get caught and buried alive. Worse, she couldn't even explain how it happened.

Traveling through the southwest side of Peppermill, she took in the landscape comprised of warehouses, factories, mills and a sprinkle of low-cost apartment buildings. While she never lived in this neighborhood, she certainly chased a few demons through here in her teenage years. In those days, all she wanted was to see how fast she could run and how hard she could hit. This time, she walked at a brisk pace with her head down trying to avoid another altercation.

Her family split their year between living here in the fall and winter and living at the Child of Orion training facility during the spring and summer. This allowed them to be accessible to extended family and to keep up appearances in polite society during the holidays. For those all too brief colder months, she had a father that she saw almost daily and grandparents who came by to visit them.

She enjoyed deliciously unhealthy food, attended family events, and spent the afternoons with neighborhood friends in their homes or at the local mall. It was the time of year they took family portraits and mailed out holiday cards saying all was well. Her only task during the colder months was to learn more about mundane life. She learned how to ride a bicycle, and later how to drive a car in the fall. She attempted to learn how to sing and play musical instruments during the winter but was never very good at it.

She would hang out with her peers who all thought she went to a fancy boarding school. Experimenting with her self-expression, she got to wear whatever she wanted when she was home including makeup and jewelry. Her father was lenient with her activities when they were away from the training facility. Through observation of her neighborhood friends, she learned about their passions and stressors, about mass media, and how much they knew and believed in the paranormal.

Once, her father said to her, “You should go out with them. It’s necessary. Your time here is just as important as it is in training at the facility. It’s more than learning about the world around you. I need you to feel! Human connection is essential. It’s what we’re all fighting to protect.”

Her father’s big, warm hands gently gripped her shoulders. She could never forget that moment because it was one of the few times he ever touched her.

“Every warrior,” he continued to say, “needs true motivation. During the difficult times ahead, a sense of duty will only take you so far.”

It should have felt like a long, tedious walk across Peppermill to her house, but it went by quickly due to her renewed strength and eagerness for a bath. She passed through three or four neighborhoods filled with houses, stores, apartment buildings, and shopping plazas as well as open areas with parks and gardens. Peppermill was a small city, the typical design of urban commercial life in the center surrounded by a picturesque residential exterior. Some considered it a sleepy, suburban town compared to New York City. Locals knew that Peppermill had its own nightlife that suited those happy to have something to do nearby just fine. Most townies survived without traveling fifty minutes or so for the attractions of the city that never sleeps.

She noticed a few new stores and apartment buildings as she traveled northeast to her neighborhood. Even more noteworthy, she noticed the change in fashion of the people she saw out and about tonight. Men wearing tighter pants than she remembered, women carrying smaller purses instead of large handbags. Nadira tried her best to blend in and not draw attention to herself. She also tried as best as she could to clean herself up on the walk across town, but she still had a persistent layer of dirt covering her from head to toe that only hot water and soap could get rid of.

She tried to figure out what day it was to gauge how long she was held captive. If it was only hours, she might get away with heading straight for her bedroom. If she was extremely lucky, no one would know about the evil souls that bested her tonight. But, she had a hunch that she had been missing for days. There was no measure for the great lengths her people would go to find her. Since Nadira wasn't able to learn the date without talking to a stranger, she remained unsure of her reception.

*Home, sweet home*, she thought as she walked up to her house about forty minutes later. On this quiet side street, all the houses looked similar and included decent yard space, a driveway, and a two-car garage. At this time of night, her house and all the others were understandably dark and quiet. She had lived in the same moss green ranch-style house her whole life.

After standing in front of her house in contemplation for long enough, she finally cleared her mind of all her anxious thoughts and rang the front doorbell. *Come what may*. Without her house keys, she stood there feeling stupid as she relied on a light sleeping member of her household staff to get out of bed and let her in her own home.

After a couple of minutes of silence, her anxiety gave way to

impatience. Nadira raised her hand to ring the bell again, but before her finger could touch the illuminated white button, the front door swung open. What greeted her caused her eyes to expand rapidly. There was a handgun shoved in her face. Instinctively, she ducked to her lower left and swiftly kicked at her opponent.

“How dare you raise a weapon to me!” she said in outrage.

After jumping back to avoid being kicked in the abdomen, the young woman who opened the door inquired, “Wha’do you want?”

The armed woman looked like she was in her late teens. She wore a black and green uniform typical of Children of Orion guards. However, Nadira noticed that the young woman’s outfit looked more sophisticated: a snugger fit to the uniform and an uncluttered utility belt loaded with smaller gadgets and weapons. Nadira also noticed her eyes. The young woman’s eyes were a familiar bright green, but other than that she did not recognize her—not her slim frame, straight black hair, or fair skin tone.

“Don’t you dare point a weapon at me,” Nadira replied as she walked forward seemingly unthreatened by the gun now repositioned to point at her chest.

The young woman looked at her quizzically with one brow raised and her head tilted. After a moment, Nadira saw her eyebrows lift, and her mouth make an “O” shape. The teen hastily took a few steps back.

“I . . . thought you were gone. Na-Nadira?” she asked hesitantly and in a hushed tone.

As if saying Nadira’s name out loud broke a spell, the young woman became jittery and started talking way too fast.

“Come in! I’m Jaime Liu. Here I am making the rounds and the doorbell rings. No one uses the front door, let alone rings

the doorbell. I can't believe it's *you*. People are going to *flip!* How — No, don't answer that yet! I'll go find someone for you to talk to!"

Jaime lowered her weapon and holstered it as she rambled on. The young woman was practically doing a pee dance as she tapped on a device clipped to her utility belt for a moment.

"I couldn't have been gone that long," Nadira said. "The questions can wait until after I've had a shower at least."

She punctuated that statement with a glare. She was far too impatient for this conversation. She stepped across the threshold and allowed the front door to close behind her quietly. She looked ahead at the three entryways in the foyer that lead to other parts of the large house. After only two or three steps forward, Nadira heard stomping as the foyer filled with three other guards each coming from a different entryway. They all had the same modern green and black uniform on, and all three had their stun batons drawn. Her jaw dropped at the sound of their weapons becoming active.

*Zing.*

"No way. Move!" Nadira said while shaking her head.

Was this a prank? Either way, this was quickly becoming their last chance to walk away uninjured. She could tell that one of the guards recognized her, but the others did not. Those two were staring her down while radiating hostility as if she were an intruder. The third one held a shakier stance, visibly conflicted about detaining her. She noticed Jaime walking away, leaving through the hallway on the right that led to the library, conference room and her father's office. They were seriously holding her here until whoever Jaime summoned could deal with her. But, this was her home and not how a recently abducted person should be treated.

After walking home alone, dirty and upset, the last thing

she wanted to deal with was a group of stubborn guards that didn't recognize her or care that she was the daughter of the household they were protecting. When none of them moved out of her way as she commanded, she narrowed her eyes, curled her fingers into fists and thought, *screw this*.

The guards looked at each other and fidgeted when they saw the battle-ready look in her eyes. But without a direct order, Nadira knew they couldn't let her pass.

Uncharacteristically, Nadira smiled. She flew into action. She quickly charged the guard to her left, knocking him hard into the wall behind him. She heard him groan in pain. Nadira jabbed her left elbow into his stomach and used her right fist to punch him with all her might. While these guards are highly trained, the genetics of the Children of Orion gave them an advantage in battle.

She saw the other two guards rush toward her from her peripheral vision. At the last possible moment, she slid to the side and out of their way allowing them to barrel into the third, already injured guard. Having used their momentum against them, all three guards turned toward her as they quickly recovered from bumping into one another. The dirty looks they gave her spoke volumes.

She noticed that none of them had attempted to use their stun batons or sheathed daggers against her. Now that she was warmed up she didn't want to stop fighting. Nadira was still amazed at her speed and strength considering how injured and exhausted she had been from crawling out of her own grave and fighting a vampire just an hour before. How did she recover so quickly when she was weak enough to faint? Whatever the cause of her renewed speed and strength, she was inclined to use it.

One by one, she took the three guards down with brutal

kicks to their ankles, knees, and hips. When they dropped to their knees, her swift and accurate jabs to pressure points at their forearms, collarbones, and temples had them falling to the floor like dominoes. A small smile of satisfaction crept across Nadira's face as she looked at the small pile of disabled men. She heard approaching footsteps and turned around. The young, female guard named Jaime was back and with company.

Nadira expected to see her father, sporting a frown and sweater vest. Instead, she saw a confident and authoritative looking stranger standing next to Jaime. His intense gaze made her feel uncomfortable, and the smile Nadira wore slipped from her face. She relaxed her stance and stood tall facing them.

His eyes looked familiar to Nadira. They were a dark brown, similar in color to her eyes and unlike Jaime's bright green eyes. He must have been forty-years-old or so with a few gray hairs sprinkled throughout his full, wavy, shoulder-length brown mane. He towered above both women at about six feet tall, much taller than her five feet four inches or Jaime's five feet seven inches. He also had a sturdy build of lean muscle evident by the fit of his shirt. Unlike her long pink dress or the guard uniforms everyone else was wearing, he wore polished brown shoes, dark gray pants, and a long-sleeved white dress shirt. The combination of familiar eyes and unfamiliar faces in her own home created a deep valley of discomfort within Nadira.

"I'm sorry I doubted you, Jaime," the man said with his deep voice.

His eyes were now full of wonder as he continued to stare at Nadira. His voice was electrifying to her, resonating within her, and warming her for some inexplicable reason.

"I remember her from my studies and the portraits we all memorize. Nadira Holden, legendary demon hunter, gone since

ninety-three,” Jaime replied as she looked Nadira over with fascination.

“Huh?” Nadira asked, interrupting their little conversation. Before she could think of something smarter to say, the older gentleman took command of the room.

“Nadira,” he said looking directly into her eyes. She saw a warmth in those eyes that she would recognize anywhere.

“Le-Leo?” Nadira asked hesitantly as she shook her head in disbelief. She saw him nod back confirming that this older gentleman was somehow Leonardo Walker, her best friend and first love.

Leonardo announced to the entire room, “This was not a drill, although Nadira Holden is not a danger to us.”

He made a point to make direct eye contact with each person.

“You are sworn protectors of the Children of Orion and our facilities. You must be ready at all times to fight in defense of headquarters and our mission. One thing was proven tonight, more training is needed,” Leonardo paused, allowing his words to sink in.

“Return to your posts,” he commanded, dismissing the guards.



“I can only imagine the questions and concerns you must have, Nadira,” Leonardo said in a reassuring tone. “Follow me into the library, and I will tell you what I can.”

He gestured for Jaime and Nadira to walk in front of him. Jaime led the way, Nadira followed with Leonardo walking behind them both. After walking through a few light blue hallways, they reached the library. It was a large, high ceiling room with floor to ceiling shelves filled with books of all sizes and colors. A few books looked brand new, but most were dusty and yellowing with age. The bookshelves covered two of the walls, and the third wall consisted of floor to ceiling windows. In the center of the fourth wall, framed by two cushioned window seats, was a glass door leading to a garden outside.

The fourth wall of the room was painted a deep red and covered in framed portraits of high-profile demon hunters and generations of the Holden family. By the wall of portraits, there was a huge mahogany desk and an equally impressive chair. The other set of furniture was new to Nadira: a large confer-

ence table in the center with eight matching chairs. The rest of the room they walked into was open and spacious.

Jaime hovered near the conference table. Nadira sat on one of the window seats, giving herself plenty of distance from these two people—one she barely recognized and the other she didn't trust. Leonardo tilted his head in acknowledgment of the distance she was trying to create. His choice of seating was more remarkable. He dared to take the director's chair, her father's seat.

"Really, Leo?" Nadira blurted out. "Find another seat."

"As acting director, this *is* my seat," Leo stated while giving Nadira an assessing look.

He then turned his gaze to Jaime and requested, "Please have a seat. You'll be our chaperone. Nadira and I have history, and her current level of distress makes her even more unpredictable than usual."

"Understood, sir," Jaime said as she took a seat on one of rolling conference table chairs.

From Nadira, his comment was met with a much-deserved eye roll.

"Talk to me," she demanded in a weary voice. She knew she came across as demanding, but in truth, she was feeling lost and scared.

"The things I am about to say to you, Nadira, will not comfort you," Leo said. "But they are facts."

Nadira took a deep breath and mentally braced herself.

*Buzz-buzz-buzz!*

It was hard to believe, but that insistent sound came from Leo's chest.

"One moment," he said as he pressed his hand against his left breast pocket, then pull out a shiny black handheld device.

Once he tapped it with his thumb, the continuous buzzing

was replaced with a brightly lit screen. She couldn't see the small piece of tech well but watched his illuminated face. Leo's eyebrows scrunched together in concentration for a few seconds. He was silent, and only his eyes moved. He brought his hands to his face to visibly wipe away his frown. Then, he quickly powered down the device and put it back in his pocket.

Out of habit, Nadira wanted to check in with her friend by asking, "Bad news?"

She imagined running her hand through his soft hair and his responding sigh of comfort. But, this wasn't the guy she knew and loved. Everything was weird; freaky. Besides, this moment was about her, and her need for answers.

"It's been twenty-five years, Nadira. It's now 2018, October 20th," Leo said.

To Nadira, his voice sounded wonky, almost distorted. She forced herself to simmer her emotions and just listen.

"The war between demons and humans ended the night you died, and the secrecy of that war was exposed. Ordinary people now know about demons, and for the most part we all live in peace," Leo stated as a matter of fact while staring at her intently, assessing her reaction.

"I . . . died?" Nadira choked out in disbelief.

Being buried, the inscribed headstone, the brazen vampire feeding in a public place and the futuristic clothing were all adding up to something, but she wasn't ready to make that conclusion. She broke eye contact with Leo, and her eyes zeroed in on his breast pocket. *Proof.* While walking home, the sight of people calling, reading and what looked like typing on those handheld devices had confused her. People were using them openly and without regard for their participation in other activities such as driving, walking, or socializing with friends.

She remembered wondering when the devices had become popular.

“I’ve been *dead* for *years*? How? Why—” she struggled to get the words out.

Leo raised a hand, gesturing for her to stop. He started small, “We’re in your hometown: Peppermill, New York. This house, your childhood home, is now one of a dozen safe houses. No one lives here anymore. These houses are well maintained to keep up appearances, and each contains access by magic to one of our four facilities across the U.S. Because New York is a hub of demon activity, this safe house is used more than the others and is now the main access point to our headquarters. You are safe here.”

Nadira took a deep breath as Leo’s words sank in. As tempted as she was, she did not interrupt.

“In the 1990s, we were engaged in a series of escalating battles with the demon king, Zorulis. Do you remember?” Leo paused awaiting her response.

Nadira nodded slowly.

“Yes, like it was yesterday,” she replied, scrunching her face at the irony.

“We were always two steps behind him,” he explained, “and feared he was planning a massive attack. You were nominated to go into the demon realm for recon and to feed us good intel. Many worried it was a suicide mission, and we feared the worst when you went radio silent. But, after three weeks on the other side, you started sending us information.

“It worked. We soon discovered that King Zorulis was on the hunt for his missing daughter and that he believed she was in the human world. Finally, the demon attacks on adoption agencies, foster homes, and women’s prisons started to make sense. We were told that she would have been in her early

twenties by human count with black hair and green eyes. Orion's council decided that we should find her first to stop King Zorulis's destructive search and gain some leverage. We started searching for any trace of her but didn't have enough info on why she would be among mundanes," Leo stated.

Nadira remembered the eye rolls and head shakes that usually went along with the word 'mundanes.' It was C of O's way of referring to humans ignorant of magic, other realms, and the demons roaming this world.

"The demons," he finished saying with a sigh, "saw our search as evidence that we were holding their precious princess captive. They accused us of trying to cover up our tracks. And, that's when the battles started."

Nadira nodded once to Leo's unspoken question. Yes, she was listening and able to comprehend what he was saying. She even believed him. Nadira had this odd sensation as he spoke as if she were hearing a bedtime story. The picture he painted with his words was a familiar sight. Still, Nadira didn't understand why he said it all so dispassionately. The Leo she knew would be hugging her by now, brushing her dreadlocks away from her face and planting soothing kisses on her forehead. Instead, she felt alone.

"It wasn't until King Zorulis crossed over into our world that we started losing each battle. Things escalated quickly. You crossed over too and joined us at that foster home in New Jersey on that awful night. You arrived just in time to save me," he paused and gave Nadira a smile of gratitude.

"You went head to head with the king himself. You, in action—It was amazing! You delivered a fatal blow to that beast," Leo said.

Then he quietly finished with, "But, uh . . . before he died . . . he . . . he stabbed you."

Nadira felt relief as some of Leo's familiar compassion broke through. She died, and he cared.

"With him slain, the battle came to a standstill. Everyone began to retreat, and we were able to recover your body," he said.

Clearing his throat, he added, "You were given a proper burial. Nadira, your sacrifice that day saved us all."

Leo took a moment to nod gently at her from across the room. Then, Leo dropped eye contact, and his knuckles went white. His whole body trembled as he continued.

"Unfortunately, the demons had one more pre-planned attack and it was their most devious action to date. With a fabricated narrative, they exposed themselves and us."

Leo let out a disgusted chuckle as he said, "Video recording of battles emerged. Highly edited clips were used to portray them as victims on the verge of genocide, and us as murdering, xenophobic zealots! Imagine!"

His hands balled into fists as he continued. "They held their most innocuous forms and humbly requested protection from the U.S. government. I don't know if it was misplaced compassion or veiled greed at the prospect of accessing magic. Either way, here we are, twenty-five years later, bound to abide by a peace treaty with demons."

The silence stretched and grew until the vast room felt full and suffocating. She still had a hundred and one questions. However, it was too overwhelming for her to receive any more information. Nadira stood up and paced. Three steps in one direction, a quick about-face, and six steps in the other direction. After another minute or two of pacing, she started to think that she was accepting the unacceptable all too easily. This wasn't happening to her. It was too awful to be true.

"How are you able to operate, to protect people, if demons

are pretending to be the victims?” Nadira challenged, hoping to catch him in a lie.

Nadira’s returning anger was a welcomed distraction from the sadness and vulnerability she felt. She embraced the heat of her emotion, clung to it like a warm security blanket.

“Technically, we don’t exist anymore,” Leo explained. “The tradition of demon hunting has been outlawed. All known Children of Orion had to vow never to kill again to receive a pardon for past crimes from the U.S. government.”

With a deep sigh, Leo gestured to Jaime. “Jaime here can fill you in on all the details of the treaty later. Just know that while our hands are tied, we have not forgotten our mission. We intervene when and where we can, discreetly.”

“As for your father . . .” Leo said.

“Don’t.” Nadira looked away, begging, but Leo kept talking anyway.

“He disappeared six days ago, and local detectives are looking into it.”

Hearing those words stopped Nadira’s pacing. She flinched slightly as if struck because she knew only something terrible would allow anyone other than her father to sit in that chair.

“This isn’t right!” was all that Nadira could manage to say as she shook her head repeatedly. She wasn’t sure what upset her the most: not remembering that she died, finding out that demons have won, or that her missing father was most likely dead.

“You’ve been given a lot of information to process, and more questions will continue to emerge. But, it’s late, and you should have some time to recover,” Leo said.

As he stood up slowly, he continued. “Jaime will arrange for a room, meal and shower. She will be your contact person

while you are here, so please do not hesitate to ask her for anything you may need.”

Hug me, damn it! Seeing that he hadn't budged, she wrapped her arms around herself in an effort to compose herself.

After giving her one last long lingering stare, Leo proceeded to walk out of the room.

Jaime stood a second later and nodded to Leo as he made his exit. She had been so still and calm during his avalanche of terrible news. Nadira took a hard look at Jaime but was too tired to make any assumptions.

“Is my room available, or is it just another room filled with boxes?” Nadira asked, feeling like a college student might when visiting home for the holidays to discover that their parents repurposed their bedroom.

Jaime took a moment to tilt her head and tap her a finger to her lip in thought before answering, “Yes. Follow me.”



NADIRA DID NOT HAVE the energy to protest being escorted through her childhood home. They quietly walked through several rooms of the large house. They arrived at the back of the house where the three bedrooms were located. Jaime walked Nadira to her old bedroom, even opened the door and turned on the lights. Nadira let out a deep sigh of relief she didn't realize she was holding when she saw that the room remained as unchanged as most of the house. It seems someone was tasked with airing it out and dusting occasionally.

“Shower. Rest. I'll getcha some food and clothes,” Jaime said with a yawn and a gentle smile. “You'll feel better tomorrow. I'll



pick you up in the morning for a checkup and a tour,” she said while yawning again. Nadira couldn’t help doing the same.

“I’m sure by the time we both wake up, there will be a few people eager to meet with you. Good night, Nadira.”

Nadira was too numb to respond, and so she just nodded in acknowledgment of Jaime’s words. She heard Jaime’s retreating footsteps and thought she heard her whisper, “It’s good to have you back.”

Still unable to cope with all that she’d heard in the past hour, she decided to focus on her physical needs. She walked straight into the adjoining bathroom for that hot shower she wanted from the moment she crawled into the twenty-first century. In ninety-seconds, she was naked and adjusting the hot water. The moan that escaped her lips as the first few drops touched her skin could not be suppressed. She just stood there for ten minutes or so allowing the dirt to wash away. Nadira wished that the trauma and all the uncertainty could slip away as easily.

She tried to keep her mind clear and focused on the present, on the sensation of water flowing over her skin, on the smell of the aloe and cucumber bath wash she was using, on the sounds of running water. She felt her muscles relax and her mind ease. She took deep breaths, allowing the steam to relax her further. Her hands were still damaged from crawling out of her grave, so she carefully washed her hair with a sandalwood scented, oil-based conditioner.

Half an hour later, Nadira stepped out of the shower feeling much better. She could almost pretend everything was fine, except her father was missing, her teammates had grown up and created new lives, and—two and a half decades later—she was somehow still twenty-two-years-old. Her fate was to not belong.

Nadira wrapped herself in a fluffy, navy-blue towel and headed back into her adjoining bedroom. As promised, there were clothes on her bed and a full meal tray on her bedside table. She quickly sorted through her clothing options, and out of habit settled on a white sports bra and loose gray sweatpants for bed. The rest of the clothes were tossed onto her brown leather reclining chair on the right side of her bed by the bay window. She took a big leap backward and landed softly on her queen-sized bed with a bounce. For a fleeting moment, she was able to enjoy the childish action.

Sitting up, she ate slowly as she glanced around her room. For a young lady, it was a barren room, but for a Child of Orion, it had plenty of frills: fancy pens on her writing desk, an ornate elephant table lamp, and a single poster depicting a beautiful sunset over the ocean. Classic fiction and non-fiction books were piled on her other bedside table. Her room was big yet cozy with its teal painted walls and soft green curtains.

She only allowed herself to focus on tangible items like the grilled cheese sandwich she reached for. Nadira began enjoying her meal, which also consisted of tomato soup and apple slices. With a clear mind, she did her best to appreciate the delicious tasting soup she was sipping, the incredibly soft cotton sweatpants she wore and her drying hair that clung to her nape, shoulders, and chest.

Clinging onto one of her lifelong routines, the last thing she did before bed was braided her long dreadlocks into one loose braid—ensuring that her hair would be manageable in the morning. There were a few persistent thoughts that broke through her defenses even though she tried hard not to worry. Will she wake up in the morning? Is this all a bad dream? Is she still dead?

**DISCOVER WHY NOT EVEN DEATH CAN  
STOP HER.**

Click here to continue reading *This Time*.

