



Deliver Me from Darkness: A Novel of the Paladin Warriors

By Tes Hilaire

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A STRANGER IN THE NIGHT...

He had once been a warrior of the Light, one of the revered Paladin. A protector. But now he lives in darkness, and the shadows are his sanctuary. Every day is a struggle to overcome the bloodlust. Especially the day Karissa shows up at his doorstep.

COMES KNOCKING ON THE DOOR

She is light and bright and everything beautiful—despite her scratches and torn clothes. Every creature of the night is after her. So is every male Paladin. Because Karissa is the last female of their kind. But she is *his*. He may not have a soul, but he can't deny his heart.

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Editorial Review

Review

"This is a solid and very readable mining of the "eternal warrior with only one mate" storyline. The novel tracks well, with the heroes and villains clearly defined. The author does a good job of setting up the world in this series starter." - *RT Book Reviews*

"A fantastic start to a new series!" - *A Bookworm's Haven*

"A stellar paranormal romance with very compelling characters, outstanding world building and an action packed plot that delivers." - *The Romance Reviews*

"An interesting mix of mystery, romance, and the supernatural. I could not get enough!!" - *From Me to You*

"Hilaire makes her words dance as she weaves a great fantasy tale that is a real pleasure to read." - *Long and Short Reviews*

"I knew from the first page that I had picked a winner with this book." - *Rage, Sex and Teddy Bears*

"Deliver Me From Darkness is awesome, action packed right from the very beginning" - *BookLoons.com*

"A fresh and interesting take on Vampires and Angels..." - *A Whole Latte Romance Reviews*

"A great start to a series. Plenty of options left for future books..." - *Reading Between the Wines*

"It's the gray areas between good and evil that become the focus of this well plotted and exciting paranormal romance." - *Debbie's Book Bag*

About the Author

Daphne Award-winning author and former Tennessee native Tes Hilaire doesn't remember how old she was when she wrote her first story, but she's pretty sure it had something to do with a boy and a girl and a happily ever after. Displaced at an early age to "the north country," her stories turned darker as she started creating whole new worlds to escape the harsh, upstate NY winters. Now back in the South, her stories remain edgy, exciting, and bring a hint of dark fantasy to paranormal romance. Best of all, no one ever has to shovel snow. For more, visit her website at teshilaire.com.

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Chapter 1

Shouldn't have opened the door. Roland instinctively knew the fragile-looking burden draped over Calhoun's arms was going to wreak all kinds of havoc on his well-ordered life.

To hell with the door; he shouldn't have answered the damn phone. Then he wouldn't have been swayed by the rare frantic tone in Calhoun's voice when he'd called begging for a favor. 'Course, even if Roland hadn't picked up the phone, Calhoun would have assumed Roland to be in at this time of the afternoon and come

pounding anyway. And yeah, Roland could have ignored that too, but doing so went against every ingrained fabric of his being. At least the being he'd once been.

This is what I get for remembering my manners.

"Thanks for this." Calhoun brushed by Roland, twisting so as not to bump the head of his precious cargo on the master bedroom door.

Roland grunted and moved into the bathroom in search of a towel. Best to keep his opinion to himself. Get that scrawny thing and your sorry ass out of here would not go over well.

Mumbling a string of curses, Roland yanked on the faux-antique glass knob of the teak cabinet and searched the handcrafted shelving for a sacrifice. All his towels were new. Everything in his loft was new. He liked new. Crisp, clean.

Unsoiled.

The tension in his shoulders crept down his back. With senses as heightened as his, any tainting of his personal belongings made relaxing difficult. It was going to take him weeks of cleaning and nighttime airings to remove the urchin's scent: like a friggin' garden...fresh-bloomed lavender, dewy mornings, and dirt. The dirt would only ruin his sheets, but the other smells had him spiraling down toward crazy.

Eyeing his choices, he grabbed one of the pristine white towels that didn't still have a tag on it and headed back to the bedroom. His efforts were wasted. Calhoun had already pulled back the sleep-rumpled blankets and was laying the filthy jumble of scraped elbows and dirty denim on Roland's clean sheets. Roland sighed and tossed the towel on the nearby dresser.

The bed was officially ruined. He hoped the cost of his newfound kindness would be limited to the bed. He hadn't even been here a week and his new sanctuary was being unsanctified. It had taken him months to find a New York City loft without any stains of violence, another to have it remodeled to his exact specifications, and still another to purge it of the stink from the contractors who had redone it. He suspected the lingering presence of this...girl...would take far longer to expunge.

"How long are you going to be?" Roland asked, trying to keep his displeasure from sliding into his tone. Calhoun was right; Roland did owe him a favor—a big one too. Roland just wasn't sure if this qualified. This wasn't big; it was colossal, and not only because of the cost of his Stearns & Foster.

Calhoun glanced up at him absently from where he'd been carefully tucking Roland's new, unwanted guest into the vast California king bed.

Damn. I loved that bed.

Calhoun blinked as if he had to think about what Roland had asked, his concentration obviously still on the woman currently soiling Roland's new silk sheets.

"I hope to finish by dark. If not, soon after," Calhoun finally said when he got his head out of his ass—or maybe that was his head out of his dick.

"Make it dark," Roland said, his breath hissing through clenched teeth in an effort not to inhale anymore of her scent. Not that it mattered. All he succeeded in doing was altering the girl's heady pheromones into candied sugar on his tongue.

And this was why he didn't allow humans, especially females, into his home. The seductive scents, the gentle whoosh of blood pumping, and the soft murmurs she'd make as she tossed and turned in his sheets. Roland fisted his hands. The call to rut, to feed, was like a rabid animal clawing at his insides. He'd kept that animal carefully caged, would keep it caged. Yet something of his internal trauma must have shown in his eyes. Calhoun's gaze snapped from Roland to the skinny slip of a girl he'd so lovingly tucked in bed, and then back to Roland again, his expression becoming increasingly alarmed.

Calhoun stood to his full height, which at a towering six foot five put him nose to eyebrow with Roland. The air in the room began to tingle. Roland could feel the gathering of power. See the aura shimmering around his supposed friend. That faint light singed Roland's skin.

Roland hissed, hastily giving ground until he was across the room and practically pressed into the panel that hid his walk-in closet. Fury mounted within him and he had to work hard to suppress the vicious beast from awakening. He would never hurt Calhoun. His best friend, the only one who'd stood by him, the one Paladin who'd seen enough humanity left in Roland to take the chance to try and save him...to let him exist. But even Roland had his limits, and even for Calhoun he would not quiver like some cowed dog in a shadowy corner.

"You're teetering on the edge, Calhoun," he snarled, letting the fire spark in his eyes to emphasize his words. It might burn him, but he could have Calhoun's throat in his hand before the Paladin could draw enough heavenly light to turn him to ash.

Calhoun stopped glowing, but even so, Roland could sense the barely contained power bubbling beneath the surface.

"Is this going to be a problem for you?" Calhoun asked, his eyes flint gray.

"No." Roland rubbed his face. The skin was tender, but no real damage. "But it's been days."

Calhoun took a step forward, a lion ready to lunge into battle. "You won't touch her."

"I never said I would," Roland ground out from between clenched teeth. "She's safe from me."

Calhoun's eyes narrowed to slits.

"Jesus, Calhoun. I haven't taken an innocent since—"

"Since when?"

"Since you came after me," Roland finished. A flash of memory: the red haze of the bloodlust, the loss of self. How many innocents had he taken? He didn't know.

"She's safe with me. Regardless of when you return," Roland said, then curled his lip in distaste. "I have some emergency supplies in the freezer."

Pig blood and Red Cross discards. Lucky for him he was immune to illness. Though sometimes he wondered if contracting some horrific disease would have been a better way to go than this interminable hell he lived.

The tension in Calhoun's body eased. He clamped a hand on Roland's shoulder. "Thank you. After this, I'll owe you one."

"Get back here by dark and we'll call it even," Roland told him, annoyance making his voice sound as if it were being dragged over gravel.

Calhoun chuckled. Turning back to the bed, he gave the slumbering girl one last long gaze. The softening in his eyes alarmed Roland. Calhoun was tough as nails. Hell, even his dry humor was rusty. What was she to him?

"She's special, Roland," Calhoun stated, his awed tone confirming Roland's fears. Calhoun was already half gone. "Take care of her."

"Special how?" Roland hoped Calhoun meant special in the gifted kind of way, not special in the till-death way. Humans and Paladin didn't mix. It was that whole mortality thing. "You said yourself that she passed out within seconds of showing up on your doorstep."

That's about all he'd gotten from Calhoun. Some woman had shown up at his door and passed out. Moments later the reason for her flight had become apparent as Calhoun's sensors all went off. Rather than face an army of Ganelon's underworld fiends, Calhoun had grabbed his new burden and abandoned ship. And come here.

Why here? Why not to Haven? And who was she that she'd attracted the attention of Ganelon's minions?

All questions for later, after the curly-haired chit woke up and Calhoun had gotten his hard-ass head back on his shoulders.

The sound of a throat being cleared distracted Roland from his unwanted guest. Calhoun glared at him, his face deadly serious.

Shit. Calhoun wasn't the only one whose head seemed to be misplaced. Had Calhoun replied to his question? He didn't even know.

"What?" Roland asked, going for casual over deer-in-headlights.

"I've never regretted not killing you that day," Calhoun said. "Not once. Just—just take care of her."

Roland could feel the shift in his friend's loyalties. Calhoun had stood through Roland's fall from grace and through the Elders' demands that Calhoun terminate his once best friend. But now? And for a stranger?

There were a thousand things Roland wanted to say in the face of Calhoun's silent betrayal. Instead he shrugged. "No problem. She'll be safe and sound when you get back. Not a single hair on her head disturbed."

With a last measured look, Calhoun left the room. A few moments later the outside door snicked shut, leaving Roland and his new roommate alone.

I should leave. It's not like I can't sleep on the damn couch.

Instead he found himself lingering.

What was it about the girl that held Calhoun's interest? Roland's gaze followed the tangled mane of dark chestnut curls spilling down over her neck to where her pulse fluttered erratically.

He frowned, a twinge of concern making him start for the bed, hand outstretched, before he stopped himself and lowered his arm back to his side.

Tired from her flight, no doubt. She definitely looked worse for the wear. The torn T and dirt-blushed cheeks

would not make her a fashion plate. He supposed she'd be pretty enough when she cleaned up. She had the petite build and angular shoulders of youth and a wealth of freckles to go with the illusion, but her fully rounded breasts, emphasized by the tucked blankets, and the slight crease between her eyebrows suggested she was older. Mid-twenties maybe? Still too young. Too innocent. Despite the dirt, this woman was pure as the stark-white, fresh-out-of-the-package sheets she was laying on.

Roland rubbed his hands over his face, noting the resulting sharp sting on the inside corners of his lips. Fuck. His canines had elongated. Calhoun must have known this would be a trial for him—he wasn't an idiot—but Roland doubted Calhoun understood he'd just placed before his fallen friend a feast of pure delight. A human, Paladin or not, wouldn't have been able to smell the scent of a virgin. But Roland could.

This was definitely a problem.

Swearing a litany, Roland forced his feet to move—out of the room.

Karissa was running—and not doing a very good job of it. The toe of her sandals caught in an exposed root and she stumbled forward, barely catching herself on a nearby tree trunk before she performed another face-plant into the rotted leaves covering the unnaturally quiet forest floor.

Chest heaving and fingernails clutching the rough bark, she chanced a glance over her shoulder. Still there, still searching, even if they hadn't spotted her yet.

She scooted on her butt around the tree, knowing that hiding was futile. Her pursuers' senses were too good for her to hope they'd move on past. Two demons and their pet imps. Why had she tried to outrun the bastards on foot?

It was her only option. More than the exhaustion that caused her heart to hammer like a hyperactive bass drummer, thoughts of congealing pools of blood and broken, twisted limbs kept her from finding the calm she needed to flash her way out of this mess. She needed to compose herself. Shut down the memories. Concentrate. If she could lose her trackers in the lengthening afternoon shadows of the park, then maybe she could also get to the top of one of those high-rises where she could see across the city and use the last bit of energy she had to make one final massive jump.

Good plan, right? Or at least it would have been if she could execute part one.

Blinking her eyes against another gruesome flashback, Karissa tentatively craned her neck to the side to peek around the massive oak trunk. The imp she'd spotted should have found her trail by now, but a quick scan of the area showed no visible signs of the beast.

She frowned, gnawing on her lip. Long seconds passed. The eerie silence broke with the first high-C warble of a nearby cricket and was soon joined by a chorus of others. Had she really lost her pursuers?

This would be where I get going while the getting is good.

Yeah, good idea.

Lower lip caught between her teeth, she took the first tentative step to her left...directly into the arms of a chameleon.

Karissa jerked upright, her breath tearing out of her lungs on a long scream. Arms and legs thrashed as she tried to free herself from the snare of the invisible arms entrapping her. The creature hissed, long and low. Had to get free. Had to run.

Oh God, what will they do to me?

Same thing they did to Papa.

On a choked cry of grief and fury, Karissa kicked out again. She might be going to die today, but she'd go down fighting. A door banged open, followed by a gruff "What the hell?"

Karissa stilled, blinking as she took in the dim bedroom. Not Central Park. The arms that had ensnared her? Silk sheets tangled around her limbs. The hiss? She shifted and slippery soft fabric whispered with the movement.

Just a dream. Only...

She zeroed in on the man shadowing the doorway. Broad shouldered, though not bulky. Still, he filled up the space enough to be imposing, especially with his dark hair, black clothing, and eyes that were...Oh, crap! Vampire.

She scrambled up, flipping off the side of the bed. Weapon, she needed a weapon. Her gaze darted around the room. Huge bed with sacrificial white sheets. Long, bare mahogany dresser. Bedside nightstand with cast iron lamp perched atop it. Yes!

With a yank she tore the lamp cord from the wall, brandishing the wrought iron base like a bat. Not much, but it would have to do. Too bad it wasn't wood. Wood she could have worked with.

"It's all right," the vampire said, his arms outstretched and low, palms down.

All right? she scoffed, swallowing the hysterical giggle that threatened to follow. What was he? Stupid? Being trapped in a room with a vamp and a bed and no route of escape was decidedly not all right. The question was whether he planned to rape her or feed from her first.

"Perhaps an introduction would set you at ease." The vampire stepped forward, right hand extended. "I'm Roland. And you are my...guest."

Guest? Hardly. Kidnap victim maybe. But of whom? Did this vampire want her for himself, or was he acting on orders from someone higher up? Maybe the same someone who'd sent the posse out after her. The same someone who'd...

She gulped back the lump in her throat. Escape first, grieve later.

A glance down had her blinking at the pale hand he offered. Odd. In her experience, vampires were skinny, malnourished things—unless they were master vampires. Those had more meat to them. This one held the stature and lean muscling to be the latter—not to mention the affluent digs—but the dark circles under his eyes didn't add up.

Disgraced master vamp, perhaps? Maybe he hoped to trade her for a reinstatement of his status.

She jerked her head up and took a step back. The glowing embers in his eyes fixed on her neck. Ditch trading her in; this one may have been a former master vamp, but he was a hungry former master vamp.

His lips twitched and he tilted his chin toward the hand that remained outstretched. "It helps if you set the lamp down."

Yeah, as if she'd help him get his hands on her.

She straightened, weighing the lamp with a slight jiggle up and down.

"Okay," she said, then tossed it at him.

The next moment she popped out, her molecules zipping along a plane that wasn't quite there and reforming at the last place she'd fixed her gaze—which was all of ten feet behind the vampire in his own hall, a hall currently tilting on its axis under her unsteady feet.

Darn it. The jump had only been twenty feet or so. Still, her stomach pitched in answer to the dizzying side effects.

Swallowing back the swell of acid threatening to rise, she blinked and scanned her surroundings. Right or left? Left seemed to be a complete dead end so she took the right and stumbled on uncoordinated feet into the room beyond. Before her a large loft stretched out—kitchen, dining area, couch, plasma TV—but no windows and no doors. Of course.

"Well shit," the creature mumbled from behind her in the bedroom. "He was right."

She didn't bother to ask who he was or what he was right about. Like she gave a crap. The location of a window to teleport out of, heck, a door to the outside would do. That's the only thing she wanted to know. Somehow she didn't think asking her host would procure an answer. Speaking of which...

She glanced over her shoulder. The vamp moved silently but with purpose down the hall toward her. A couple more seconds and he'd be upon her. She cast her gaze around for somewhere to go. There was another room beyond, but it was even darker than this one. Not much chance of windows there. Not like she had many other options available.

A new weapon might be nice though. She scanned the kitchen counters. No knife block. Damn, wasn't it her luck to find the one vamp that didn't indulge in the useless habit of consuming real food? But there on the island atop a stack of slit envelopes lay a small pocketknife. Yes!

In a second she'd winked across the room and had the knife in her grip. Using the counter to steady herself, she spun around to see how close he was. He leaned against the far wall as if he didn't have a care in the world. Not that he should. With no windows and no door in sight, she was effectively trapped.

His brow arched. "You think you can kill me with that piddly thing?"

No, but she could hurt him. "Vampires bleed too."

He sighed, resignation clouding his eyes. "Mind taking this discussion back to the bedroom? You've touched enough things."

Touched enough things? What was this? A hypochondriac vamp?

Not wanting to waste energy, she took a chance and darted for the archway and the room beyond. On her way she dragged her hand over the island to scatter his envelopes, toppled two stools in her wake, jerked the phone off its holder on the wall, and smeared her free hand over the intricate molding of the archway. Who

knew—maybe he'd freak out about the spread of germies and collapse in a foaming, raving fit on the floor.

Panting from the short sprint to the threshold, she took in the multitude of obstacles between her and the fireplace. A couch, end table, and the inconveniently placed armchair in front of the empty hearth. Behind the chair would be a basket of wood, right? Wood was good. A nice large splinter and she'd have a stake.

He swore behind her, drawing closer—though it sounded like he'd paused to right the stools.

She gathered her energy, her focus locked on the chair.

"Don't think about it. Not the chair. It's custom-ordered leath—"

She popped out, then moments later jerked back out of the netherplane with a sick twist in her gut—too many hops, too close together—and landed on the chair. It rocked beneath her and she had to plant her hands on the back to steady herself. The knife dug in, slicing a long slit into the leather.

"Fuck."

She glanced over her shoulder. He stood in the archway between her and the kitchen dining area, his hands laced through his shoulder-length black hair and his head tipped toward the high ceiling as if praying to God for patience.

Unlikely. Not only did he have all the time in the world—one of the quirks of being undead—but God wasn't going to answer the prayers of one of those creatures.

But how about spotting one of your daughters a splint of wood? Amen.

Or a flamethrower, she added. She'd settle for one of those.

Prayers said, she scrambled over the arm and looked behind it. No wood. The fireplace was gas. Of course. And since she wasn't MacGyver, chances of rigging an impromptu flamethrower were slim to none.

Thanks for nothing there, big guy.

Karissa expected the vampire to be hot on her heels. She was surprised he hadn't caught her already. But he stood in the same place, arms crossed over his broad chest, a look of long-suffering on his ruggedly handsome face as he watched her flounder around behind the ruined leather chair. Colin Farrell goes Goth.

What was she thinking? Handsome? Vampire? He must be trying to enthrall her. Only she didn't feel the things her papa had said she'd feel if she'd been enthralled: no loss of self, no hungry yearning to please her master. No way in heck did she have any inkling to please the bastard studying her from under those dark slash of brows.

She frowned.

He smiled.

Oh no...she didn't like that look.

"Lights off," he said with a devilish gleam in his midnight eyes.

The room went pitch-black.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Evelyn Blow:

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Brandon Macdonald:

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