



## Night's Honor (Elder Races Book 7)

By Thea Harrison

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## **Night's Honor (Elder Races Book 7) By Thea Harrison Bibliography**

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## Editorial Review

### Review

**Praise for the Novels of the Elder Races:** “A dark, compelling world. I’m hooked!”—J. R. Ward, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author “Harrison delivers an epic story of myth, mayhem and love that is sure to keep readers satisfied and breathing fire!”—*Fresh Fiction* “Thea Harrison is a master storyteller.”—Christine Feehan, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

### About the Author

A debut author at the age of nineteen, **Thea Harrison** had sixteen romances published under another name before she took a break to collect a couple of graduate degrees and a grown child. She’s back with the Novels of the Elder Races, a new paranormal romance series.

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## ONE

### *Vampyre’s Ball, New Year’s Eve*

Cautiously, Tess peered at the crowd through a side stage door. She might be able to control her behavior, but her body told a different story. Her mouth had dried out, her heart pounded and her palms had turned clammy.

All the monsters were beautiful. Vampyres loved beauty, and they were some of the most celebrated in all of the Elder Races.

Charismatic and elegantly dressed in black tie and couture gowns, Vampyres filled the banquet-style great hall. Some sat at large round tables in the middle of the floor, but many stood and mingled. Human attendants wove through the clusters of glittering creatures, doing the bidding of their patrons.

Most of the attendants were dressed in subdued, discreet clothing, but there were a few standouts, such as the dark haired woman wearing a diamond collar that flashed with brilliant fire. Barefoot, she wore a silk, champagne-colored sheath dress. The paper-thin material of the dress was short, barely covering the woman’s ass. Sapphires studded her leash, the end of which hung negligently on the slim wrist of her Vampyre patroness.

The redheaded Vampyre wore a black velvet evening gown and a haughty expression. She never glanced at her collared attendant, who shifted and turned to keep flawless pace with her patroness, rather like a well-trained dog. As the pair faced Tess, she saw that the collared woman wore a small, private smile. She didn’t look abused, and her creamy skin appeared flawless. If anything, she looked like she enjoyed being on display.

To the sides of the great hall and up on a mezzanine level were more private areas where the most powerful of the elite could lounge in comfort. Any Vampyre who was anybody of note in the Nightkind demesne attended the annual Vampyre’s Ball, even the Nightkind King himself, Julian Regillus.

Tess checked the number on her ticket. When she had joined the candidates, the line had gone out the back

of the building and down the alley, but she'd finally made it inside. Now there were only three people ahead of her.

A new candidate took the stage. She had a California-girl style of beauty, tall and leggy with long, blonde tresses—yes, tresses—that had been styled to fall in thick waves around her perfect heart-shaped face and slender shoulders. Green eyes sparkled with a coquettish vivacity as she slipped off a short, red dressing gown. Totally naked, she spun in a circle on five-inch, nude-colored stiletto heels. Taking the microphone from the human, middle-aged emcee, she began a catwalk strut across the stage while she talked.

“Hi everybody, I hope you're all having a wonderful evening! My name is Haley, and I'm so excited to be here with you tonight! I'm twenty-one years old, and I'm working on my bachelor's in sociology at Berkeley. . . .”

This was like an X-rated version of *America's Got Talent*, except with Vampyres.

A tension headache began to throb behind Tess's right eye. She hadn't thought she was a prude, but the other woman had just disrobed as casually as if she were about to step into a bathtub in her own home. Haley was the same smooth honey tan all over. Nothing jiggled or dimpled anywhere. Her breasts looked like perfect, gravity-defying circles glued to her slender torso.

Now, those couldn't be natural.

Tess glanced down at herself. Not that she was going to strip down for anybody when it was her turn to take the stage, but even with her clothes on, it was perfectly clear that everything about her was horrendously average.

The best thing anybody could say about her body was that she was fit, and even then, she did jiggle in a few places. Her straight, dark hair was cut into a sensible bob, but she was two weeks overdue for a trim. She wore faded jeans, black shoes with flat heels and a black sweater, mainly because it was the only outfit she had left with her that was still clean.

The Vampyres continued with their conversations. Not a single one in the crowded hall looked at Haley. No one lifted a bidding paddle.

Tess turned her attention to the mezzanine level. She could just see the Nightkind King's strong, rough profile as he talked with the monster sitting opposite him. The Vampyre with him appeared to be a young man, with nut brown hair pulled back in a simple ponytail and a pleasantly nondescript, mild-mannered face.

His appearance couldn't be more of a lie. Xavier del Torro was one of the most notorious of all the Vampyres, a feared hunter famous in all of the Elder Races—and famous among humans as well—and Julian's right-hand man. Neither del Torro nor the King glanced at the stage.

Haley worked hard for her allotted two minutes. Her routine was polished, professional and raunchy, and it left the onlookers in no doubt. Clearly she was ready and willing to do anything to become a Vampyre's attendant. When the buzzer sounded, she swept up her discarded robe and exited stage left with a bright smile and a cheerful, Miss Universe pageant-style wave.

The next candidate walked onto the stage with quick, jerky movements. This one was a man in his forties dressed in a department store suit. He looked tense and so uncomfortable, Tess's muscles clenched with empathy. She could relate.

When the emcee handed the candidate the microphone, he cleared his throat, pulled out a photo and held it in the air. It wavered visibly in his unsteady hand. In the photo, a girl grinned at the camera, her head tilted to one side.

“My name is Roberto Sanchez, and I am here on behalf of my beautiful daughter Cara. Cara is fourteen years old, and she is in the hospital. She has childhood leukemia. She was in remission for three years, but now the cancer has returned. Please, I am begging you—someone have mercy on her. If you would only agree to be her patron, you could help to heal her. She’s a good girl. She can work hard for you, if only she felt better. . . .”

Tess winced. Sanchez was breaking several of the rules that had been handed out on cards to those candidates who had been lucky enough to get a ticket and now stood in line, waiting for their turn on the stage. All medically based petitions must go through the visa application process at the Bureau of Nightkind Immigration.

The annual Vampire’s Ball on New Year’s Eve was an occasion to make a different kind of petition altogether, a kind of massive job screening process where Vampyres of standing might choose to take on human attendants to add to their households.

Supposedly the relationship between a Vampire patron and his human attendants was a mutually beneficial arrangement. The attendants assured the Vampire a steady blood supply in addition to working to support the household as a whole. In return the Vampire offered his protection and assured that the attendant would have a safe, secure place in which to live, and a long, healthy life. There was even an outside chance that a candidate might become a Vampire himself one day.

Both opportunities were rare. According to the website FAQs that Tess had read, the Nightkind demesne in the United States received over ten million visa applications a year from humans hoping to be turned, while the number of newly created Vampyres each year was the tiniest fraction of that and strictly controlled by the Nightkind demesne working in coordination with the CDC headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia.

Probably Sanchez had already applied for a visa for his daughter and had been turned down. Clearly desperation had pushed him onto the stage.

Just as it would push Tess, when it was her turn.

The next few moments were excruciating, and not just because of the rawness of Sanchez’s pleading, although that was bad enough.

The worst was that the Vampyres did nothing.

*Nothing.*

Nobody moved to interrupt Sanchez. The emcee did not order security to remove him. Nobody turned to look at the pleading man or raised a bidding paddle. They all acted as if he did not exist.

A sickened anger tied her stomach in knots. This was horrendous, degrading, and it didn’t matter that cold logic said there could be no good way to handle candidates like Sanchez, or that his petition had been doomed from the start. The number of visa applicants was overwhelming to begin with. If the Vampyres gave into one Sanchez who broke the rules, they would never be able to stop the flood of others.

She didn’t know what was worse—their show of indifference or the humans who chose to abase themselves

onstage.

And I'm one of them, she thought. She wiped her face with a shaking hand. How in God's name could I have ever thought this might be a good idea?

Scratch that, I never thought it was a good idea. It was my only idea.

The reason was simple. When you pissed off the devil, you ran out of options real fast.

The buzzer sounded. With agonizing politeness, the emcee escorted Sanchez off the stage, and the next candidate came on.

The person behind Tess elbowed her with a hiss, and she eased the stage door closed to step into the wings. Her blood pounded in her ears, and her shaking breath caught in her throat. This was far worse than any kind of normal stage fright, magnified as it was by anger, revulsion and fear.

As if from a long distance away, she heard the buzzer sound. And again.

When it was her turn, she stepped forward and waited just behind the curtain for her cue. If she held herself any more rigidly, she felt like she might break into pieces.

The emcee walked toward her with a practiced smile and a sharp, disinterested gaze. Holding out a hand, he beckoned to her. She walked forward into a flood of hot lights, stopped at the X taped on the floor and faced the crowded hall. Her cold fingers curled automatically around the microphone when it was shoved into her hand.

The lights on the stage had turned the Vampyres into shadowy figures that made them seem even more menacing. She wanted to scream at them, or laugh at the absurdity of the whole scenario.

Instead, the intolerable tension fractured and she iced over with a clear, clean anger. None of them would listen to anything she might say anyway.

Not bothering to raise the microphone, she said in a calm, flat voice, "My looks are entirely forgettable, and I'm smarter than almost anyone here."

Screw them, if they weren't able to see what advantages there could be in any of that. Screw all of them.

• • •

On the mezzanine floor, one of the Vampyres turned from his conversation to look down at her.

He raised his paddle.

• • •

Blinded by the bright lights shining in her face, Tess couldn't see if her words had caused any reaction. She only knew she wasn't going to stay on the stage for one more moment. She had to go somewhere quiet to try to figure out her next move. Pivoting, she strode to the emcee "Where's the exit?"

Giving her a strange look, he walked with her to the opposite edge of the stage, where another young woman in an aide's uniform waited in the wings. Plucking the microphone out of Tess's hand, the emcee moved on to the next candidate.

Despair weighed down her limbs until she felt as if she were moving through water. She asked the aide tightly, “How do I get out of here?”

Like the emcee, all of the servers and aides at the Ball were human. The woman gave her the same strange look as the emcee had, incredulity mingled with envy, and darkened with the faintest tinge of resentment. “I know candidates can’t see it when they’re on the stage, but you’ve been selected for an interview.”

Tess blinked. She couldn’t have heard that right. The words didn’t make any sense. “Excuse me?”

“Someone wants to interview you.” The aide checked the screen of her iPad then rapidly input something with a stylus. “Go down the hall to the back staircase, then up to the second floor. Remember, one flight up is the mezzanine level. The second floor is two flights up. Your interview will be in room 219. He’ll be with you shortly.”

He.

She was almost getting used to the slightly nauseous tension that clenched her stomach. “Who is it?”

Even as she asked, the aide turned away to beckon the next candidate offstage. As the woman stepped into the wings, she clutched at the aide’s hands. “This is my sixth year auditioning. How did I do? Did someone ask for me?”

Tess turned away. The only way she would find out who wanted to talk to her was by going up to the room. Feeling dazed, she went down the utilitarian hall and walked up two flights of stairs.

The building was old. During the California gold rush, it had been one of San Francisco’s premiere hotels, but it had been partially gutted and renovated in the 1920s to be used for the Vampyre’s Ball.

Away from the glittering elegance of the main ballroom, the building showed its age. Still, the upstairs was a little better than the hallway backstage. There were a few touches of faded glory, in the scratched and peeling gilding on the stairway railings, in the worn carpet, and in the crown molding at the edges of the ceiling.

The upstairs rooms had once been hotel rooms. As the thought occurred to her, she clenched both hands into fists.

Relatively few Vampyres reached enough prominence to support a household of attendants, but when they did, they set their own rules for what happened in their domain. She had heard rumors that in some households, attendants provided more than just blood and assigned work. They also traded sexual favors in return for the kind of lifestyle that a wealthy Vampyre patron could offer.

Even if an attendant never gained the opportunity to be turned, regular bites from a patron boosted a human’s natural immune system, and they could live as long as a hundred and thirty years. There were reasons why Haley had gone naked onto the stage, not least of which was the opportunity to live more than half again one’s own natural life span and to die in one’s sleep of old age.

Room 219 was tucked between others in the middle of the hall. As soon as she gripped the door handle, her muscles locked up and she stood frozen, unable to make herself step into the room and yet not able to walk away, while rapid-fire thoughts snapped at her heels like feral dogs.

This “interview” could be another version of the casting couch scenario.

If there’s a bed in the room, that’s it, she thought. I’m out of here.

I think.

Stop being histrionic. Sex is merely a biological function. People have been trading sex for survival for thousands of years. You're not a fourteen-year-old virgin. You've had sex before, and guess what? While none of your partners had been memorable enough to stick around, it wasn't the end of the world. Death is the end of the world.

Think of the devil you left behind. If you leave now without exploring all your options, you've got to find another way to protect yourself from him. And the whole reason why you're here in the first place is because you haven't found another way.

Just remember—if you're going to choose to trade sex for protection, make sure you get an agreement in place beforehand.

Suddenly angry at her own dithering, she yanked the door open and stalked inside. It wasn't likely that sex would become part of any discussion anyway. Not with the Vampyres' love of beauty, the glut of gorgeous people readily available to slake any appetite, and her own average, forgettable looks.

The unoccupied room was entirely bare, except for a utilitarian, conference-style folding table, four chairs, and two unopened bottles of Evian set at one end of the table.

No bed, and no monsters. Yet.

She exhaled a shaky breath and stepped inside. The same worn carpeting from the hallway covered the floor, and the crown molding in the ceiling's corners looked cracked and in need of repair. The closet was empty, and the bathroom appeared as if it hadn't been used in a long time.

With the hallway door closed, the air felt too stifling as the demons in her head crowded the room. She had too many phantoms populating her imagination, and too many nightmares in her memory. Dragging over one of the folding chairs, she propped open the door to the hallway. Then she took a seat at the table facing the open doorway.

Traditionally, the position was the seat of power in the room. It was a small thing to take, although she didn't fool herself for one minute. She had very little power in the upcoming exchange. She had very little power at all, which was one of the reasons why she found herself in such a god-awful mess.

Opening one of the bottles of water, she sucked down half the contents in a few gulps. As she screwed the cap back on the bottle, a slim, elegantly dressed man walked silently into the room.

Xavier del Torro.

The bottle slipped from Tess's nerveless fingers and fell to the floor.

The killer that stood in front of her wasn't especially tall, perhaps five foot ten or so. His long, lean body, along with an erect posture and an immense poise, served to make him seem taller. Seen up close, he looked as if he had been turned in his midtwenties. He could still embody the illusion of youthfulness, with eyes that were somewhere between gray and green, a clear-complected skin and refined features that somehow missed being either conventionally handsome or delicate.

His turning had been a famous event in history. A younger son of Spanish nobility, he had been a priest until the Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition tortured and destroyed a community of peaceful Vampyres near his home in Valencia. The Vampyre community had included del Torro's only sister and her husband.

After the massacre, or so the legend went, del Torro walked away from the Catholic Church and approached Julian, who turned him into a Vampyre and set him to cut a swath through the officers of the Inquisition. The ten years that followed were some of the bloodiest in Spanish history.

“Good evening,” said the Vampyre. He was quiet spoken, yet his beautifully modulated voice penetrating the silence in the room was shocking. “You are Tess Graham, correct?”

As he spoke, he turned to move the chair from propping open the door.

She said, “If you don’t mind, I would like to leave the door open.”

He straightened immediately, left the chair in place and approached the table. Everything he did was utterly flawless in execution, no gesture wasted. He moved like an animal, with complete fluidity that showed just how useless the open door was as a precaution, and how silly and fragile an illusion of safety she gleaned from it.

Open door or not, nothing would stop him from doing anything he wanted. He could rape and torture her, and drain her of all of her blood, and there wasn’t a single Vampyre who would lift a finger to stop him. Or very many who could stop him, even if they wanted to try.

Cold sweat broke out over her skin. Heat from a nearby vent blew along the back of her damp neck. The small sensation felt almost violent.

Del Torro pulled out the second chair on his side of the table and sat. When he settled into place, he went immobile—truly immobile, not the mere human equivalent. He didn’t breathe, didn’t blink. His formal black suit seemed to absorb the light, and his shirt was so white, it almost looked blue.

He was perfectly immaculate in every way. Somehow it should have made him look lifeless, like a mannequin, but it didn’t. His presence was so intense the air itself seemed to bend around him. She grew hyperaware, not only of him, but of herself too—the tiny shift of her torso as her lungs pulled in air, the muscles in her throat as she swallowed, the hand she clenched into a fist and hid underneath one arm, in case it provoked the relaxed predator in front of her.

She remembered the water bottle and bent to retrieve it from the floor. Even that small, prosaic movement seemed fraught with excess compared to the silent, composed figure sitting in front of her.

How old was he? She was no history scholar and knew almost nothing of the Spanish Inquisition, but she was fairly sure it had gone on for a few hundred years before it was finally abolished, so he had to be at least four centuries old and was probably older. How many people had he killed in his lifetime?

She had no idea what she was going to say, until it came tumbling out of her mouth. “What happened earlier with Mr. Sanchez was unspeakable.”

Del Torro’s gray-green gaze regarded her gravely. “You refer to the candidate with the sick child, yes? Unfortunately, she was much too young to become an attendant and she was never a viable recipient for a visa—it’s against the law to take blood from children or to turn them into Vampyres. Those situations are always difficult, and there is no good way to handle them.”

“But nobody did anything.”

The Vampyre inclined his head in acknowledgment. “In the past he would have been taken from the stage, yet that policy caused its own outcry. In the end, it was deemed best to allow those like Sanchez the same

dignity as any other candidate, although of course we can't ignore regulations and choose any of them, no matter how sad their story."

"*Dignity?*" The word shot out of her with quite a bit more force than she had intended. "Do you think there's any dignity in that auditioning process?"

One of his slim eyebrows lifted. Amidst his stillness, that slight gesture seemed like a shout, but when he spoke he sounded as calm and unflappable as ever. "An individual has as much dignity on that stage as she chooses to have, Ms. Graham. Take yourself, for example. You went out there and did exactly what you intended to do. Those who cared to pay attention did so. Nothing more, nothing less. Nobody promised you anything more than that."

He was right, of course, although she did not like him for saying so. They were Vampyres, not a social service agency.

With effort she tried to rein in her careening emotions, while more truth spilled out of her mouth. "I'm sorry, I don't know why I'm so angry." She tried to smile but her facial muscles felt so stiff, she gave it up almost immediately. "Believe me, I'm quite aware that this is an odd and counterproductive way to start an interview."

"You're frightened," he said. "For some people, fear quite naturally turns into anger."

His voice had gentled, and that might have been the most shocking thing that had happened all evening. Embarrassment burned in her cheeks. Nothing was going like she imagined it might. She thought about denying what he had said, but of course that would be stupid. He could hear her accelerated heartbeat and no doubt smell her fear. Sitting here fully clothed, she still felt as naked as if she had stripped just as Haley had.

"I'm curious." Del Torro cocked his head, his all too discerning gaze dissecting her. "Why are you here tonight, when it clearly distresses you so? You do not carry the scent of illness, nor do you appear to have any interest in Vampyre kink. What do you hope to gain from an attendant-patron liaison?"

Vampyre kink.

She hadn't expected him to be so blunt, and her cheeks burned hotter.

"I need a job. The Ball was this weekend, so I got in line along with all the other candidates." She paused. Technically, all of that was true. She was running low on cash, and she didn't dare access the money in her bank accounts. But if he pressed her for any more details, she was going to run into some rocky ground very quickly. She had to turn the question away from herself, perhaps back onto him. "If you don't mind me asking, what about you? Why did you request an interview with me?"

Any other person she had ever met would have gestured or shown some flicker of response. Del Torro didn't. He just looked into her gaze steadily. His eyes were clear, intelligent and revealed absolutely nothing.

"Your defiance intrigued me, as did your claims. What skills would you bring to a liaison—that is, assuming you would agree to one?"

Was he actually considering her for a position, or merely satisfying his curiosity? He had no tells. He was utterly impossible to read, and his restraint of manner all but unendurable. She felt completely at sea and caught on a hook, and while she twisted at the end of a line, he slowly reeled her in.

As she tried to let go of some of the tension in her aching muscles, she found herself studying him, looking

for any kind of flaw. When she discovered a thin, white scar at the corner of his mouth, she stared at it. Whatever had caused the scar had to have happened before he had been turned. It should have made him seem more human, but it didn't.

"I can speak Japanese, French and Italian," she said. "I can also read French and Italian, along with a bit of Elvish, although I can't speak that with any fluency yet. I like languages, so I'm working on that. And I have degrees in accounting and computer science. I have experience with managing money, and I can build a firewall like nobody's business. My skills may not be flashy or sexy, but I'm very good at what I do."

The skin at the corners of his eyes crinkled slightly. If she hadn't already been staring at him so intently, she would have missed the subtle expression. "I disagree. Competence is quite sexy."

She blinked. He had brought up sex twice in the last five minutes, but the utter dispassion with which he spoke left her with no room for misunderstanding. He wasn't flirting, simply asking questions and stating facts as he saw them.

Still, she had no idea how to respond. Before she could decide, he asked, "How are you at breaking through firewalls?"

Of everything they had discussed so far, this was the one question that didn't surprise her. Still, she hesitated as she decided how to answer. Most people didn't really understand firewall security, or the fact that you didn't actually break through a wall.

In the end, she chose to keep her answer simple. "I'm good at that too."

"How good is good?"

"Very." She had done more than her fair share of hacking in her teenage years, and she let the certainty fill her voice. "I also don't promise anything I can't deliver."

His eyelids lowered. "Are you willing to do other things, besides accounting and computing?"

Involuntarily, she flashed to an image of them naked in a bed, with him bending over her, his normally composed, self-contained expression filled with fire and white, sharp fangs descended.

Something powerful welled up inside, although she had no idea what it was. Her emotions were already in a chaotic uproar, while he still wore the same, dispassionate expression.

Was he needling her to see how she would respond, or was he trying to find out how far she would go to get the position? She felt like she stood at the edge of a cliff, and her next step would send her hurtling into air.

Would she trade sex for safety, if he asked her to?

"That depends on what you ask me to do." Her voice turned taut. "Some things are off-limits. I won't be complicit in hurting innocents, and I won't stand by and watch it happen. Among other things."

If anything, his voice grew gentler. "I should have been more specific in my question. Your skills in accounting and computer programming are intriguing, but I maintain a small household by most standards. My attendants serve in different capacities and do a variety of different things."

"What kind of things do you have them do?" Everything inside of her stilled as she waited to hear his answer.

“Think of it, if you will, as an intentional community,” he told her. “Each person is required to give blood, of course, but there are other duties that must be done for the good of the community. While I have no need for food, everyone else must eat; therefore Jordan, one of my attendants, is the cook. Another one, Angelica, looks after the house. When I have guests, I require that their needs be looked after. Raoul is in charge of security, and so forth. Most of these are not professional duties, but still they must be done.”

Was that all?

Dragging air into her constricted lungs, she said, “I see. Yes, of course, I would be willing to take on duties like that.”

His eyes narrowed. His expression turned severe, and suddenly she could see the age hidden underneath his apparent youthfulness. “No doubt, you will have heard some Vampyres require sex from their attendants. While that is true, I am not one of them. I might require difficult things from my attendants from time to time, but I do not put people who are under my care in such a position.”

It took her a moment to absorb what he said. Then the rigidity left her body as her muscles slowly unlocked. “Thank you for telling me.”

Moving two fingers, he brushed the subject aside in one beautifully economical gesture. “Do you have experience with firearms or other weapons?”

This time she didn’t hesitate. “No, but I’m strong, I have good hand-eye coordination and I’m willing to learn.”

He nodded. “Have you ever taken or wanted to take drugs?”

“Yes,” she said. “And no. Once I tried pot in college, but I didn’t like it. All it did was make me paranoid and hungry, and I don’t like to eat when I’m scared.” Again, she tried to read his expression and failed utterly. “Is that a problem?”

The severity vanished from his expression, and one corner of his mouth quirked. “No. If you were a habitual drug user, that would be a different story. Drinking from a source that has been polluted with heroin, meth, or other hard drugs can have a debilitating effect on a Vampyre.”

She shook her head. “I have no desire to repeat the experience with marijuana or to try any other drugs.”

“Very good. Do you have any dependents?”

She shook her head again. “No.”

“Magical ability?”

“Sadly, no,” she said. “I can telepathize, but that’s it.”

She had no idea if her answers were gaining her any ground, or if they counted as marks against her, but a Vampyre of his Power and age would definitely have truthsense, and she didn’t dare do anything but tell the truth.

Finally he fell silent for a few moments as he studied her. “There’s only so much information one can gain from these interviews. The truth is, becoming an attendant can be a surprisingly complex and delicate process, while it calls for a tremendous commitment on both sides. Some people cannot make the transition

to that kind of lifestyle even when they want to, or for one reason or another, they are a poor fit for a Vampyre's household. There is no shame in any of this. It's merely a process of discovery."

"I'm sure you're right," she managed to reply, while her chest grew tight again. Was he getting ready to turn her down? As horrible as this whole experience had been, she couldn't blame him if he did. While the opportunity to become an attendant might be rare, she hadn't exactly shown any enthusiasm for it.

Oh God, she thought. If I don't get this job, what will I do?

Then he said, "I can see some ways in which you might be of some use to me. I'm willing to offer you a trial period of one year. If, within that time period, we have not worked out a tolerable arrangement that suits us both, we will each be free to sever the relationship."

Her mouth dropped open, and she almost blurted out, "Why?" But she managed to catch herself before it escaped her lips.

He raised his eyebrows. "Do you find this acceptable?"

## TWO

Xavier watched with patient interest as Tess's mouth opened and closed several times.

She said, her voice strangled, "You're offering me a chance, just like that? You don't want a second interview, or—or references?"

Some kind of interesting, complicated emotion lay behind her question. Maybe she had a checkered employment history, or she had gotten fired from her previous job. Briefly, he considered asking for her resume and references, just to see how she handled the request, but the fact was, he didn't care if she had been fired. People got fired for a wide variety of reasons, and something that a previous employer might have seen as a weakness could be the very trait he was looking for.

Besides, nobody gave a prospective employer bad references. They only gave references for people who would say flattering things about them. Through the years, he had seen people game the interviewing system in every way imaginable, while the truest test of a person's mettle could only come over time.

Also, this young woman could have no references for the kind of things he wanted from her. He would need to find out for himself what she would be capable of doing, or what she would even want to do. For now, it would have to be enough to avoid frightening her any further.

He told her, "As I said, there's only so much that can be learned from the interview process. By the end of a year, we will both know whether or not we're able to create a successful liaison."

Her expression turned thoughtful. "I suppose a year for someone like you is not very long."

"Quite true. A trial year is a standard offer. Most Vampyres offer it to prospective attendants."

His truthsense was well developed. He knew she had been telling the truth about her skills and attributes. She was smart, good with finances and clever with a keyboard, although she had hesitated just long enough to intrigue him. What had she refrained from saying? He filed that away to pursue another time.

And she did have some kind of moral code. It had been a long, long time since he had considered anything sexual as an issue of morality, unless the sex involved coercion, outright force or some other kind of imbalance of power.

She, however, had clearly been uncomfortable with the thought of engaging in sex as part of the position, and she had been quite serious when she'd said she would not be a party to harming innocents.

She had also been telling the truth when she'd been onstage. She believed her looks were entirely forgettable, and in some ways they were. She had none of the glossy good looks that so many Vampyre attendants had, or that most Vampyres themselves had, for that matter.

But she did have her own quiet kind of beauty. Her brown hair shone with healthy chestnut highlights, and there was real intelligence in those large, dark eyes. Her narrow face had a precise, strong bone structure with a wonderfully aquiline nose, and her mouth was delicately shaped and sensitive.

Many modern eyes would pass over her in search of more flamboyance and color. Hair dyes had grown complex, and eye color could be intensified or changed altogether. Even Vampyres could sport golden, sprayed-on tans if they so chose, and muscles and breasts could be surgically augmented. People had grown used to the fact that virtually everything could be enhanced or altered.

An intelligent person with quiet looks could be very useful to him.

He considered the negative side of the scale. Her poise was abysmal. Intense emotions played across her face, and her rapid heartbeat sounded like thunder in his ears. That would have to change, of course. She would need a lot of work to realize any of the raw potential he saw in her, but the only way to shape a fine tool was with patience, attention and care.

He waited while she thought things over. "Thank you," she said. "Yes, I would like to try."

"Excellent." He straightened the cuff of one sleeve. "I will expect you at my estate tomorrow evening at sundown. You will be very busy for the next few months, so arrange your affairs accordingly and bring what you will need for an extended stay."

"I—yes, of course," she said. "Where's your estate?"

"On Pirate's Cove, across the Golden Gate in Marin Headlands. The number you gave on your candidacy application—is that a cell phone?"

"Yes." Her dark eyes watched him with equal parts wariness and fascination.

"My secretary Foster will text you directions. When you turn off the main highway, the road is narrow and winding, so the drive takes longer than you might think. Be sure to allow plenty of time in daylight."

"That won't be a problem—"

Julian strode into the room. Xavier watched the blood drain from Tess's face before he turned to face his old friend.

The Nightkind King was the kind of man that took over a room the moment he entered it. He had rough, weather-beaten features, with lines at the eyes and the corners of a stern mouth, and a dark, penetrating gaze that could cut like a laser. Flecks of silver sprinkled his short, dark hair.

When Julian had been human, he had been a general during the Emperor Hadrian's rule, at the height of the Roman Empire. He was broad across the chest and shoulders, flat through the abdomen, and he carried the heavy, powerful muscles of a man who had spent his life as a soldier. Life had been brutal in the Roman army, and when he had been mortal, he had not aged particularly well. He had been in his late thirties when his sire, Carling, had turned him, but he looked ten years older.

The formality of his black evening suit highlighted his rugged looks, and despite the sophisticated, hand sewn suit and the five-hundred-dollar razor haircut, he gave the impression of a wild, shaggy wolf, watchful of everything around him.

With one keen, lightning-quick glance at Tess, he assessed and dismissed her, then turned to Xavier.

*I see you're still playing with your new pet.* Julian's telepathic voice was like his physical voice, deep and rough, like a shot of raw whiskey. *When are you going to be done?*

Xavier regarded him, perfectly relaxed. *In just a few moments. We're almost finished now.*

*Good. We need to head back to Evenfall. The Light Fae delegation is already waiting, and gods help me, Tatiana sent Melisande. Plus, all twelve council members have confirmed they'll be in attendance for the meetings over the next couple of days.* Julian glowered at him. *I'd rather be trapped in a pit of snakes.*

Xavier closed his eyes briefly. Having all the Nightkind council members under one roof was going to be bad enough, but Melisande and Julian had had an explosive affair in the late 1990s that had ended famously. Badly. If the Light Fae Queen had sent her eldest daughter to conduct treaty negotiations, she was either punishing Melisande for something or she was seriously annoyed with Julian. Or both.

*Understood,* he said.

Unexpectedly, Julian turned his attention back to Tess. He rested his broad, scarred hands on his hips, which pulled his black jacket away from his torso. *That reaction of hers isn't all for me. You do realize she's scared to death of you.*

*Yes, I know.* Xavier would not add to Tess's distress by looking at her.

*I don't get what you see in this one. Are you really going to take her on?*

He gave an infinitesimal shrug that only Julian would catch. *It says something interesting about a person when they don't let their fear dictate their actions. That's what she's doing. We'll see what else she has to her. Over time.*

Julian spoke aloud. "Better you than me. I got ninety-nine problems, but finally, a bitch ain't one. I'll wait for you outside."

As the Nightkind King strode out of the room, Xavier looked at Tess. Her gaze had gone wide and shocked.

He was unsurprised. Julian tended to have that effect on most people. He had always been rough and a bit antisocial, and over the last two hundred years, as his sire turned more and more unstable, he had grown even more so.

She said, "Did he just reference that song by Jay Z—?"

Xavier gave her a level look. "That will be all for now, Ms. Graham. Thank you for your time. Good night."

• • •

Having been politely and yet thoroughly dismissed, Tess left the building and walked down the street to the parking lot where she had left her blue Ford Focus.

Her hands and feet felt numb, and a disbelieving part of her was convinced none of it had actually happened, until her phone beeped five minutes later. She pulled it out of her pocket and checked the display. As promised, it was a text message from Xavier's secretary, with directions to the estate.

That was fast.

Pocketing the phone, she tucked her hands under her armpits and picked up her pace. She had left her jacket in the car, and while it had been sunny and warm all day, the temperature had turned considerably chillier. The Bay Area enjoyed mild weather throughout the year, but it could get very cold at night, especially in the winter.

While she had been inside, thick clouds had rolled over the city and now lowered overhead, promising rain. Shivering, she unlocked her car, climbed in and shrugged her jacket on.

The night was already half over. She didn't know when sunset was this time of year, but she couldn't have more than eighteen hours to get through before sundown tomorrow.

Everything in San Francisco had been more expensive than she had bargained for, including parking for the Vampyre's Ball. While she had over a hundred thousand dollars in her checking and savings accounts, she didn't dare access those funds. All she had in cash was twenty-six dollars and eighty-five cents, and she was low on fuel.

She needed gas to get across the Golden Gate Bridge to her destination in Marin County. Thank God there weren't any tolls driving away from San Francisco.

After she put fuel into her tank, she should have enough left over to buy a cheap sandwich. It wasn't enough food, especially after a sleepless night, but dealing with hunger for one day was the least of her worries. Presumably, she should be able to eat well soon enough.

Now she needed to find somewhere safe and well lit, where she could wait out the rest of the night.

Even as she tried to think of somewhere to go, a couple walking toward her caught her eye. One was a ghoul, with gray skin, gaunt features and overlong fingers. The other was a female Vampyre, who angled her head and looked at Tess with intent interest as they walked toward another car.

Tess's skin prickled, and she glanced around. There was no one else within sight.

While it was illegal to feed on humans without their consent, who would know if the Vampyre chose to satisfy her hunger? The Vampyre was fast enough to attack and be sated before anyone could catch her. If she was old enough, she could even obscure her victim's memory, and keep her description out of the hands of the police.

And even if this Vampyre chose to be law-abiding, San Francisco was the heart of the Nightkind demesne, and home to many different creatures. There were other predators here that roamed the night, and some would not choose to be so law-abiding. This was an elegant, expensive and dangerous city.

Chewing her lip, Tess started the car and pulled out of the lot. She couldn't afford a hotel, so she needed to

leave the city. Once she reached Marin County, she could find an all-night restaurant and drink coffee instead of buying food. When daylight came, she could find somewhere unobtrusive to park and take a nap.

She made her way by trial and error through the city to the Golden Gate Highway. The traffic was as intense as rush hour in daylight. Lights shone everywhere and in some places it looked as bright as day, a deadly illusion that could lull the unwary into thinking that the lights indicated safety.

Reaction set in as she pulled into the line of traffic to cross the bridge. This whole thing was as insane a gamble as anything she had ever taken, and she wasn't a gambler by nature. Only time would tell if it would pay off.

She didn't have to show up at Xavier's estate. She had a day to think of other alternatives, other places she could hide. Right now, she was exhausted from stress, her mind frozen, but she still might find a way out of this.

Xavier surprised her. He hadn't seemed so bad for a monster. Then she remembered everything she had ever heard about him and shuddered. Still, he seemed like her best bet for protection.

In terms of raw Power, nothing and no one, not even Xavier, could stop the creature she was running from. Malphas was a first-generation Djinn and quite literally one of the world's most Powerful creatures.

He was also a pariah, an outcast who lived outside the laws of his own kind. As far as she knew, the Djinn didn't police or monitor his behavior. A being of pure spirit, he could travel almost anywhere and breach any containment she'd ever heard of, and given enough incentive, he would have no qualms in doing so.

The only thing that might possibly stop him would be potential fallout from his actions, which meant political power, not magical Power. It had to become more uncomfortable for Malphas to pursue her than it would be to let her go, and that was what a position with Xavier might offer.

She was under no illusion about herself. As a lowly attendant, she wouldn't have much value to anyone, but if Malphas attacked her while she was under Xavier's roof, it would become a transgression of territory.

And that would matter. That might matter so much it could become an act of war.

Xavier was so highly placed in the Nightkind demesne that even a first-generation, outlaw Djinn would have to think twice about making him an enemy. The Djinn might turn a blind eye to Malphas now, but an official complaint from the Nightkind demesne could change their attitude.

Beyond the safety railings of the Golden Gate Bridge, the black waters of the bay glittered with reflected illumination. When she finished crossing the bridge, she looked for a late-night restaurant and a gas station.

Very soon, she found a 1950s-style diner located across from a gas station. After pumping twenty dollars of fuel into her tank, she crossed the street and entered the restaurant.

The place gleamed with chrome and bright colors. She took a seat, ordered coffee and watched out the window until pale streaks of color broke through the black cloudy night.

She felt hollow and light, her nerves jumping from too much caffeine and not enough choices.

Even after spending hours trying to think of another alternative, she knew she couldn't afford to turn down this opportunity. Just the fact that she had landed the position—or at least the possibility of a permanent position—was like winning some kind of infernal lottery.

What would it be like to give blood to a Vampyre?

A Vampyre's bite was supposed to induce euphoria for the human, but the very thought repelled her. That sense of euphoria was nature's way of lulling the victim into compliance, even to the point of death.

Vampyres were predators that fed on humans and viewed humankind as prey. Only the sheer numbers of humankind, along with all the other Elder Races, served to keep Vampyres in check and forced them to create laws that governed their own kind. There was nothing sexy or enticing at the thought of being considered food. She shuddered at the thought.

Finally she paid for her cup of coffee, thanked her patient waitress and left all of her change on the table for an inadequate tip. Her eyes were dry and scratchy, and her body ached. Stretching, she climbed into her car and headed for Rodeo Beach, just a few miles away.

Along with the money she couldn't access in her bank accounts, she had left behind comfortable, good quality furniture and what few mementos she owned in a spacious, stylish apartment. Now, for any practical purposes, everything she owned was in her car, a jumble of hastily packed clothes, and odds and ends.

One thing she had grabbed as she left home was a thick, soft throw blanket, since she knew she would be sleeping in her car. After pulling into the parking lot near the beach, she retrieved the throw and headed down the path to look for a likely spot to relax.

By the water, the world was wild and windswept. She could just see the tip of Evenfall, the palace of the Nightkind King, which was one of California's great architectural oddities. The massive Normandy-style castle sprawled prominently along the southwestern coast of the peninsula. The blues of the ocean stretched into infinity, while the green shoreline curved up to gently rolling hills that had been molded over time.

The threat of imminent rain had fled along with the night, leaving behind an uncertain, moody morning. A fresh, piercing wind blew away the cobwebs that had gathered in her head. After living in the desert for two years, the view seemed impossibly lush. If it weren't for the persistent fear that dogged her footsteps, she could have been very happy in that moment.

Wrapping the blanket around her torso tightly, she walked until she found a spot where the beach had eroded a niche into a higher point of land, and she settled with her back against the bluff, looking out over the water. The spot afforded some protection from the wind along with some privacy, and gradually, she relaxed.

Maybe being an attendant wouldn't be so bad. Normally, humans could only donate blood every eight weeks. Because a Vampyre's bite stimulated more than just the immune system, their attendants could donate more often, every four to five weeks, or even more frequently.

Still, it wouldn't happen every day, or even every week. If Xavier was as principled about not having sex with those under his authority, he must be adept at controlling himself, despite the euphoria his attendants must experience.

Unless he had lied.

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