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# ALL THINGS EXCEPT BLOOD

KALLYSTEN



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**BY**

**KALLYSTEN**

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Dedication:

With my heartfelt thanks to Margaret and Sigrid for their help and support.

## ALL THINGS EXCEPT BLOOD

### Prologue

Eyrin rarely waited so late in the afternoon to feed. Patience had never been her strong suit, especially when hunger and lust were both troubling her, and she was slowly growing restless. Earlier, she had closed the book she had been trying to read and observed the faces around the common room until she could have drawn all of them from memory alone. Now she wanted Ian to arrive so she could get on with her day.

She could have chosen someone else, of course. A few humans had entered the common room even as she waited, and some had approached her. She had declined their offers with a polite smile and returned her gaze to the doorway, seeking Ian. Yet as time trickled away, she couldn't help but wonder whether she had been wrong in thinking today was his turn to come to the lair. A youngster could have taken his place in the cycle, or an elder given up hers, disrupting the usual schedule. Or he could have simply been ill, and have traded his time with someone else.

The reasonable thing would have been for her to feed from the first human who passed the door and be done with waiting. Ian would be disappointed, certainly, if he finally arrived, but it might also teach him not to come so late. After all, why should she care if he didn't get what he expected from his visit to the lair? She had no explanation to give to anyone, and certainly not to him. Whom she fed from or took to her bed was no one's business but her own, and—

“My lady?”

Startled out of her internal ramblings, Eyrin looked up to find a snowy bundle in front of her. She had noticed other humans shivering as they had come in, others standing by the fireplace before they left again, but she hadn't realized the weather was so bad. It was atypical, so late in the winter.

“You're here later than usual,” she commented as she watched Ian brush the snow off his coat and unwrap the scarf woven around his neck and face. The wild curls framing his smooth face made him appear younger than he was, but his broad shoulders and the bold look in his dark eyes as he looked at the world around him belied that impression.

“The snow—” he started to explain, but she didn't let him finish.

### *Kallysten*

Standing abruptly, she gripped his hand and pulled him after her toward her bedchambers, muttering the whole while about him catching his death in the cold. Humans were so fragile, a gust of snowy wind had them toppling over.

The flames still danced high and bright in the fireplace, but she threw in some dry branches. Tiny showers of sparks rose, crackling.

“Get closer to the fire and undress,” she admonished Ian. “Get warm. How long did you walk in the snow?” She stepped back and leaned against her bedpost to watch him as he shed his clothes.

“Only a couple of hours,” he replied, drawing a chair closer to the fire for his clothing. “It was cold before that, but not bad. The wind—”

His words ended in a soft gasp when Eyrin ran a single finger up his spine. His skin wasn’t as cold as she had feared. In any case, she intended to warm him soon enough.

“Are you too tired to make your offering?” she asked, sotto voce. “I could find you something to eat while you rest if you wanted.” The tip of her finger was still her only contact with him. It traveled over his shoulder as she moved around him, and it was now lazily sliding over his collarbone.

“I’m fine,” he assured her, maybe a little too fast. “I am ready.”

Even though it was his wrist that he was offering her, his words took a whole different meaning when Eyrin glanced down. His cock was hardening, bobbing lightly under her gaze. With a grin, she took his wrist and gently led it to her mouth. She could feel his body tense in anticipation of the bite, but she was careful—always—and if he shuddered when her fangs pierced his skin, she was sure it was less from pain than from excitement.

She took slow, shallow pulls on his blood. Her hunger demanded more, faster, but it would end too soon if she obeyed her instincts. This way was more exciting, both for him, if his straining dick was any indication, and for her, as she watched the flush spread over his body. It was with regret that she stopped drinking and carefully ran her tongue over the puncture wounds to help them heal. She thanked Ian with two kisses, one on the inside of his wrist, right over the renewed scars, the other on his lips, brief but searing.

Getting out of her clothes took no more than seconds; sliding in bed with Ian, barely any longer. The sheets were cold at first around them, but Ian’s warmth quickly spread as they reacquainted themselves with each other. Eyrin was still learning his body, which spots to caress with her lips, which to stroke with a finger or her palm, but

### **ALL THINGS EXCEPT BLOOD**

he always responded beautifully to her touch, always tried to respond in kind even if she preferred guiding his hands on her.

If it hadn't been so late, Eyrin would have taken her time and teased Ian and herself by refusing to let him enter her until she had brought him to the edge and back at least a couple of times with her hands or mouth. But as it was, she would have too little time to play.

Her leg hooked over Ian's, she pushed him onto his back, rolling with him so that she lay on top of his body. His mouth immediately sought hers, his hips pushing up to press his cock harder against her belly, but she evaded both attempts by sitting up astride his thighs. Ian hissed when her hand curled around his dick but he remained still, or as still as he could be when she was touching him like this.

She had been thinking of him, of taking him inside her again all afternoon; reality seemed more than a touch better. She lowered herself on him slowly, as slowly as she had taken his blood earlier, and for the same reasons. To feel him stretch her, fill her with warmth and strength always made her forget she didn't need to breathe.

"Eyrin..."

She wanted to smile as he murmured her name, and stopped herself by leaning down to press her lips to his. He never said her name unless they were in bed, and when he did it gave her silly ideas such as being able to feel the sun on her skin where he touched her.

The first roll of her hips took Ian by surprise and he groaned. He accompanied the second one by arching up into her and pushing his tongue into her mouth to play alongside hers. On the third one, his hands found their way back onto her body, cupping her right breast where she gave him enough room by resting on her forearm or sliding down her back to cup her ass.

Having not seen one another for weeks, they kept things slow, making the reunion more intense to delay what their bodies were crying out for. Yet soon enough, they had to yield. Sitting up again, Eyrin increased the rhythm of her hips, rising higher on her knees, bearing down onto Ian more fiercely with each thrust. Taking hold of his hands, she led one to the apex of her legs and he flicked the bundle of nerves there with his thumb almost feverishly. The other hand she led to her mouth, and kissed his palm before drawing the inside of his wrist to her lips. She trailed a fang over it, barely hard enough to leave a mark, only piercing when the frantic beat of Ian's heart warned her that he was about to come. He cried out his pleasure, arching up one last time to meet her, and she groaned hers the next second, collapsing on top of him, her body trembling as she rode the waves of her orgasm.

### *Kallysten*

The heat of his body was all around her, under her, inside, and she could almost have believed the heartbeat against her chest was her own, long forgotten as it may be. Sliding off his body and to the side, she watched him; eyes wide open, breathing ragged, he was quite simply lovely.

With a pained groan, he rolled onto his stomach, getting closer to her in the process. She took the opportunity to rest a hand in the middle of his back. Warmth and slight tremors greeted her. Lovely indeed.

"I should go," he said after a while, his murmur half-muffled by the pillow and totally unconvincing. "The snow was calming down but it's still a long walk. Night will fall and—"

Her quiet laugh stopped him. "The sun will have set by the time you get out of this room, Ian. And I'd better get ready myself or the Master will have me scrubbing the stables."

Stretching her arms above her, she sat up and pushed the covers off both their bodies. Ian started protesting, but his complaining died off as she walked over to the fireplace and picked up the pot of warm water that stood to the side of the hearth. He had rolled onto his back again and she could practically feel his eyes on her backside as she poured steaming water into her washing basin. She might have stretched her limbs more than strictly necessary while she ran a wet cloth over her skin, grinning when a small groan escaped him.

She only turned back toward Ian after she had dried herself with a towel, and couldn't suppress a shiver at the lustful fire in his eyes. If there had been time, she wouldn't have minded putting his renewed erection to good use. Ian was young, still, barely over twenty years of age, but he had learned fast. He would make a village girl very happy some day.

"I need to go get my orders for the evening," she said, shaking her head slightly at the detour her thoughts were taking. "Be ready ten minutes from now, no later. I'll take you back to your village on my way to the hunt, or find someone who will."

With brisk gestures, she braided her hair, tying it off with a large ribbon that hung just above the curve of her ass. She could feel it brush there as she slipped her clothes on, as light as a caress from Ian's hand. His touch was stronger, when he stood and came to her as she was preparing to walk out of the room, but not by much. His hands on her hips would have held a fluttering bird with no more force.

"I..." he started, and blushed brightly as he hesitated. "I am glad I could give my offering to you again."



### **ALL THINGS EXCEPT BLOOD**

It wasn't the way he had meant the words, but Eyrin couldn't help teasing him by resting her palm against his cock. Trapped between her hand and his stomach, it twitched hopefully even as Ian shuddered.

"I'm glad of it, too," she smiled, leaning in to press a chaste kiss to his lips.

He tried to deepen the kiss, his hips pressing forward into her hand, but she stepped back and evaded him.

"Be ready in ten minutes," she repeated her admonition on her way to the door, throwing a last smile at him when she slid her cloak over her shoulders. She almost missed his last words as she closed the heavy door behind her.

"I'll miss you."

Shaking her head at his foolishness—and her own—she walked to the common room, her stride determined even though she would have much rather spent the night in the lair with Ian than gone out to hunt in the snow. Time would seem long, until his next visit.

## *Kallysten*

### Chapter One

The sun had just been peeking over the horizon when Ian had left the village, and it was high in the sky now that the Master's lair appeared in the distance. It was a long walk, but one that Ian, and all the villagers, accomplished willingly when their turn came. It was an honor to fulfill this responsibility and offer blood to the Master and his Childer.

Children too young to take part in the rotation often pestered the adults with questions about what it felt like to present the gift of blood, whether it hurt, and when they, too, would be allowed to go to the lair. Older villagers who had grown past the giving age were often heard claiming they were still fit enough to perform their duty.

To Ian, vampires had always been a little frightening. He had not been one of those who asked endless questions and listened in awe, and instead it had been with some trepidation that he had taken his first trip to the lair. More than five years had passed since that day already, but he remembered it as though it had only been a week earlier.

The road was the same, the dirt packed by the countless feet that had traveled on it, but it didn't seem as long as it once had. The trees, that first time, had been bare, the leaves shaken off by a cold autumn wind that had kept him shivering until he had reached the lair and the roaring fires inside it. Today, everything around him was green, full of a late spring life that perfumed the air and made it thrum with energy. He remembered how, that first time, he had almost turned away when reaching this same twist in the road, and had only continued when reminding himself of the shame he would bring upon his family by shirking his duties. Now, he almost wanted to run these last few hundred yards, simply to be there sooner, and have a few more moments to spend in Eyrin's company.

Just thinking about her made him smile. There were beautiful women in Ian's village, some of whom easily smiled at him and tried to start a conversation whenever they saw him. However, while he knew that soon he would have to court one of them, or let one of them court him, none of them made him smile like Eyrin did.

The Master had chosen her from Ian's village so long ago, the grandchildren of those who had once known her, now had grandchildren of their own. Yet she remained, in all the villagers' minds, one of theirs. Thanks to her, to her acceptance of becoming a

### **ALL THINGS EXCEPT BLOOD**

vampire, they remained safe, protected from the demons by the Master's clan. They all spoke of her fondly, even those who had never done more than see her in the lair, easily recognizable from her long, dark red hair. The legend said that her hair had once been brown, but had turned red when she had first taken a blood offering from a human. Ian always smiled, when he heard that tale retold in hushed tones to wide-eyed children. He knew better than to believe the story anymore. He had asked Eyrin about it once, and she had laughed, half amused, half incredulous, when assuring him her hair had always been this color.

He had sought her, the very first time he had come to offer his blood. The pact's rules said that he might make his offering to a particular vampire, or let any vampire choose him instead. The one thing that had sustained him, on those last few hundred yards before he had reached the lair, had been the thought that it was someone from his village who would take his blood. Somehow, the idea of it had been soothing, but not as much as her smile, or the quiet words of comfort she had given him before piercing the inside of his wrist. He had returned to his village grinning like an idiot, already counting the days until he would see Eyrin again. He'd been fifteen years old, and besotted with a vampire ten times older than he was.

He had seen her four times a year, since then, and had managed to offer her his blood every time, save for two, when he had arrived to the lair late enough that she had already fed from someone else.

That was why he had taken the habit of departing with sunrise, to reach the lair as early as he could. It also gave him the chance to spend more time with her, talking, sometimes playing Stones and Water on a board of finely polished wood with game pieces he had sculpted himself. She had taught him to play, and although he wasn't as good as she was, he won often enough. For years, she had regarded him as a child, until, almost a year earlier, he had tired of it and reminded her he was old enough to marry and have children of his own. He could still see in his mind the shock etched on her face when he had ended his speech with an awkward kiss pressed to her lips. She had taught him to kiss better, the next time he had returned. She had taught him about more than kisses.

Ian's body was tense in anticipation when he reached the lair at last and pushed the wooden door open. The building was angled in such a way that sunlight never passed the door to threaten the vampires inside, and the small openings high on the stone walls were covered by light fabric for the same reason. Some light still shone through, complemented by candles and torches all around the lair, but Ian had to blink a few times once he had closed the door again until his vision adjusted to the apparent darkness

### *Kallysten*

inside. There was enough light to read by, and some vampires were doing just that in the common room, heavy volumes resting in front of them. But after the bright sunlight from outside, the lair always seemed darker than it really was.

Fingering the wreath of tiny flowers he had woven as he walked, small enough that it would fit on Eyrin's wrist, Ian advanced into the common room where vampires and humans usually met. His eyes ran over the dozen faces there, but of those that turned toward him with eagerness, none was Eyrin's.

He felt a pang at that. Could she have fed already, and retreated to her bedroom? Could she have taken the human she had fed from with her, as she had taken Ian a few precious times? He knew better than to ever ask if she had other lovers. It didn't mean that he never wondered.

He swallowed around the lump in his throat and approached the closest vampire, a woman who had just released the arm of a villager. He waited until the fellow human had bowed and withdrawn before clearing his throat lightly.

"My lady?" he asked softly.

Head cocked to the side, she gave him a questioning look. "I already accepted an offering today, I am sure you saw as much."

"I did. I was just wondering... Would you know where Lady Eyrin is?"

Her face immediately darkened. "Resting," she said curtly. "Find someone else to make your offering to."

Common sense told Ian to do exactly as the vampire was suggesting—especially since it sounded more like an order than a suggestion. After all, it wouldn't be the first time that he had given his wrist to a vampire other than Eyrin, as disappointing as it might have been. However, it would be the first time since they had become lovers, and he couldn't imagine leaving the lair without at least seeing her.

"Please," he insisted. "I wish to speak to her. Could you—"

"I told you to offer to someone else," she interrupted him abruptly.

For a second, Ian thought he could see angry flames in her dark eyes. He couldn't understand what he had done or said to anger her so.

"Tiana, that's enough," a strong voice called from behind Ian, and the vampire immediately dropped her gaze, clearly chastised.

Turning toward the voice, Ian felt his breath catch in his throat. Eyrin had pointed the tall, fair-haired male vampire to him before. The Master. He had created all the vampires in the lair, and forged pacts with seventeen villages, swearing to protect them from demons in exchange for daily blood. Ian wasn't sure whether he ought to kneel, avert his gaze or bow. In doubt, he did the latter, murmuring a respectful greeting.

### ALL THINGS EXCEPT BLOOD

“Why do you seek Eyrin?” the Master asked.

Ian dared to look back at him. “I am from her village,” he thought necessary to explain. “I always make my offering to her.”

The Master’s eyes ran over him, lingering for a second at the small wreath Ian still held in his right hand, and a slow, cold smile curved his lips.

“Something tells me it’s not just blood you offer her,” he said, almost challenging, and Ian felt heat rise in his cheeks.

It wasn’t uncommon for vampires and humans to become lovers, nor was it frowned upon, but humans were always warned by their elders that for vampires, these affairs were about sex, not feelings. Ian knew as much, and he knew that Eyrin would probably disapprove of his feelings for her if she ever learned of them, just as the Master would if Ian betrayed himself.

Unsure what to answer, if anything—after all, he hadn’t been asked a question—Ian remained silent. After a few seconds, the Master nodded as though to himself, and uttered a cool “Follow me,” that left no place for hesitation. He led the way through the halls humans weren’t supposed to visit on their own, finally stopping in front of a door that Ian recognized as Eyrin’s. Ian was already reaching for it when the Master’s hand closed on his wrist, cold and unyielding.

“No need to knock. She will probably ask you to leave as soon as you walk in,” he said. “Don’t listen to her. She hasn’t fed from a human in three days and she *needs* fresh blood. You can tell her that I forbade my other Childer to share with her, and that I won’t either until she starts accepting offerings again.”

Even though he wanted to ask for an explanation, Ian merely nodded, trying to understand what was going on and why the Master would give him a message for Eyrin when she almost certainly had heard every word he had said.

Releasing his hand, the Master gave Ian a short nod and started walking away, but he stopped again before Ian had opened the door. “Do not stare at her,” he said, and now he sounded tired. “And try not to be scared.”

Frowning, Ian watched him go until he had disappeared in a nearby room. What was that supposed to mean? He had known Eyrin for years, why would he be scared of her now? And why bother with warnings if they were so vague?

With a shake of his head, he finally reached for the latch and pushed the door open, stepping in noiselessly. It was even darker in the room than in the rest of the lair, the only source of light coming from the dying flames in the fireplace.

“I wish you hadn’t come,” a quiet, muffled voice rose from the bed. “I suppose it’s no use to ask you to leave?”

### *Kallysten*

All Ian could see was that Eyrin had her back turned toward him. Approaching the fireplace to add some wood to the fire, he answered her on what he hoped was a playful tone.

“You wouldn’t want me to disobey the Master, now, would you?”

There were only small branches left in the niche by the fireplace and Ian transferred all of them to the fire before prodding it lightly with a metal prong. After a moment, the flames rose high and bright, the way Ian had long ago learned Eyrin liked them. Fire was dangerous to vampires, but she seemed to enjoy the heat enough to disregard the risks.

Turning back to face the bed, Ian could now see Eyrin’s form more clearly, although she still presented him her back. She was on top of the covers, fully clothed, curled on her side in an almost protective pose. She remained quiet as he observed her and tried to understand what was wrong.

“Will you tell me why you haven’t taken offerings in days?” he asked softly as he came to sit on the bed behind her. “I thought vampires couldn’t live without human blood.”

“We do need blood,” she replied after long seconds. “From humans, demons, or other vampires.”

“And you’ve decided not to take human blood anymore?” he prodded when she stopped, and ran a light hand over her shoulder and down her arm until he had reached her hand. The flower wreath slid easily onto her wrist. “Why not?”

Her body tensed beneath his fingers.

“Give me your hand,” she demanded harshly. “I’ll take your offering, and you will leave.”

Something tightened in Ian’s chest, making it hard for him to breathe. He had waited weeks to see Eyrin again, and now she refused to even look at him. The pain turned into anger, and his hand tightened on her shoulder as he pulled her backwards so he could see her. She resisted and evaded his grasp, sliding out of bed and retreating to stand in front of the fireplace. With her back to the flames, he couldn’t see her face, and he hated not being able to read her emotions in her eyes as he had learned to do over the years. What he did see however was how she limped.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she lashed out, her voice as ice. “You forget your place, human. You are here to offer your blood, and if you dare raise your hand on me again, you will be sent away and forbidden to return.”

Despite the rage in her words, her voice broke down on the last words to the point that Ian could have sworn she was crying. But it couldn’t be. Eyrin was a strong woman,

### ALL THINGS EXCEPT BLOOD

quick to laugh, witty, courageous. Why would she cry? Why would she hide in this room, and refuse the blood she needed?

“Eyrin?” he questioned hesitantly as he stood and took a step toward her. “Please, let me...”

When he advanced she moved back, and the flames suddenly cast light upon her face. Ian lost his voice even as he remembered the Master’s admonition not to stare. Yet how could he not stare? Eyrin’s once lovely face was now marred on its left side by four long wounds that descended from her eyebrow to her jaw, and continued, it seemed, on her shoulder if he was to believe the hint of flesh he could see above her tunic. Her left eye was gone; the right one was tearing up.

“Go,” she asked no louder than a whisper. “Go, Ian. Someone else will take your blood, someone who doesn’t look like—”

Refusing to listen, he walked to her. He evaded her hands when she tried to push him away, and wove his arms around her, pulling her to him until she stopped resisting and rested her intact cheek against his shoulder. He had a small idea of how physically strong she was and knew she could have escaped him easily if she had tried. Somehow, her acceptance of the meager comfort he could give her felt more important than the way she had tried to push him away at first.

“What happened?” he breathed, unable not to ask even if he could guess already.

For a long time, she was silent. When she finally spoke, her words were hesitant murmurs. “My group fell into an ambush, four nights ago. There were too many demons, and not enough of us. I gave the order of retreat, and...” She paused, and took a deep breath her body had no use for. “I wasn’t fast enough, that’s all.”

Ian had heard her speak of her fights and of leading others into battle; he had also seen her spar with other vampires. He had a small suspicion that ‘not fast enough’ actually meant that she had bought the rest of her group time to escape.

“Does it hurt?” he asked, his words quiet from being pushed past his too tight throat.

“Not much anymore. But I...” Shaking her head, she took a step back again, fully turning into the light of the fire.

The details of her wounds became clearer, but Ian managed not to flinch. He had seen what demons could do to a body before. An older cousin of his had thought he could hunt demons to impress a woman. The vampires had brought his body back to the village—or rather, what had been left of it. The village council had called for all villagers above the age of thirteen to come and look at what happened to the fools who

### *Kallysten*

thought they could fight demons. In comparison to what had been left of Thom, the wounds on Eyrin's face were nothing. And furthermore, she was a vampire.

"You'll heal, won't you?" he asked hopefully.

Her mouth twisted on a bitter smile. "By the time your grandchildren are old enough to offer their blood to me, those will be just lines." Her spread fingers hovered above the wounds, trembling a little. "But my eye is gone for good. Vampires are able to heal just about anything if they have enough blood, but they can't re-grow what they have lost. We get so used to the idea that we'll never change..." She turned to face the flames, arms wrapped around herself as though she were cold. Her voice dropped lower when she continued. "All the other Childer look at me and shudder at the idea this could happen to them. And humans will pull away when they see me."

"They won't," Ian interjected. "They will know this happened for their protection."

"They have already," she said, almost too quietly for him to understand. "That first day..."

She didn't finish, but Ian could guess the rest. Gently, almost hesitantly, he laid a hand on her shoulder and squeezed. "I'm still here. I'm not pulling away. And you're still beautiful."

Eyrin let out a quiet but sad spark of laughter. "Clearly, you're more blind than I am."

"You are beautiful," he repeated, squeezing lightly again, and hoping that she would understand how deeply he meant his words even if he couldn't explain it himself. "Take my blood. Heal."

She turned to face him, silent for a long time, her eye searching his face and looking for something, it seemed. She finally nodded and reached for his wrist, but a rush of inspiration made Ian stop her. He wanted to offer her more contact, and a closeness that would show she remained the same in his eyes.

Gently cupping her face where she wasn't injured, he drew her toward his arched neck. A ravenous look passed through her eye before she dipped her head and her lips touched his skin. Ian shivered, both at the intensity of her gaze and the softness of her caress. Her fangs slowly piercing his flesh made him gasp in pain. But soon the sensation became so powerful, so erotic that his body answered it as it always answered Eyrin's touch, and he unconsciously held her closer, as close as he could, wishing with all he was that the moment would never end.



## ALL THINGS EXCEPT BLOOD

### Chapter Two

A warm embrace and even warmer blood had never seemed so good.

When Eyrin had returned to the lair four nights earlier, stumbling on the first light of sunrise long after the rest of her group and with her own blood covering the entire left side of her body, her alarmed Sire had taken her into his chambers. With the help of Odela, his oldest Childe, he had bathed her, tended to her wounds, and given her enough of his blood that she had become drowsy with the sheer strength of it. She had fallen asleep in his arms, soothed by the repeated and reassuring murmurs that she would be all right.

It had only been when she had limped out of the room a full day later, after being offered more blood again by her Sire, that she had realized just how badly she had been wounded. A hush had fallen on the common room when she had entered it, and several humans had gasped in horror. It had finally dawned on her then that her left eye would not heal, and that the slashes on her face disfigured her enough to cause repulsion in those who saw her. Feeling sick and dizzy, she had stumbled to her room and locked herself in, refusing to open when Odela had come to comfort her.

She had remained locked for two days in the increasingly cold room, opening at last when her Sire had ordered her to do so. More reassurances had come that she would be fine, and she had been offered blood again, but none of it had been enough to pull Eyrin from her shock. She had wished she could have asked her Sire to hold her again, as he had that first night, but she hadn't managed to ask. She was supposed to be a fighter. Strong. With the single goal of defending her clan and the humans who were under her clan's protection. She couldn't let her Sire or anyone else see her as weak, even if she now knew she was. She had never retreated in battle before the ambush; now, she couldn't bear the idea of confronting simple stares.

But to be in Ian's arms, to accept the comfort and blood he was offering so freely, was better than anything she could have hoped for. He had seen her face, and he hadn't flinched back like the others. No scent of fear or disgust had come from him, and nothing but compassion had touched his eyes. His blood had never seemed so sweet or

### *Kallysten*

so strong. No human's ever had. It would have been easy to let herself be drawn in, revel in the blood and take too much of it.

Before she knew it, she was doing just that.

She stopped at once when she realized Ian's heart was faltering and, for a fleeting instant, almost thought she could feel her own pounding wildly in her chest as panic seeped in. Humans offered their blood to vampires; not their lives. She was sworn to protect humans to the price of her existence if need be. Instead she had thought of nothing but the hunger, and now...

"I didn't...I didn't mean to," she stammered, easing Ian down to the ground when his legs gave up on him. Kneeling next to him, she rested his head on her lap and pressed her hand to his neck, trying to stop the flow of blood.

He blinked slowly as he watched her, and opened his mouth to speak but she shushed him urgently.

"Don't speak. Keep your strength. You'll be fine."

To her own ears, the words sounded more like a wish than a promise. She didn't even want to know what they sounded like to Ian. A lie, more than likely. She had taken too much, and he was about to die, they both knew it. Unless...

She couldn't do it herself, she had no right to, she was only a Childe, but her Sire could. If she could only convince him before Ian died, he could save him.

She didn't dare leave Ian now or release the pressure on his wound. Her voice broke down the first time she called out but she swallowed and tried again, crying out louder.

"Sire! Please come!"

Wherever her Sire was in the lair, he had to have heard her; closed doors would not prevent any vampire to hear her. And indeed, within seconds her door burst open and her Sire entered, followed by several of his older Childer. They remained by the entrance even as he strode in, taking in the scene in front of him and, Eyrin was certain of it, understanding what had happened.

"I didn't mean—" she started, trying to convey her regret in her voice, but he stopped her with a shake of his head before putting a knee to the floor near Ian.

Ian's eyes were closed, she noticed with horror, but they opened again at her Sire's quiet request.

"You will die if I don't make you one of us," he said once Ian was looking at him. "Do you want me to do it?"

There was no hesitation before Ian's small but unmistakable nod. Eyrin wanted to cling to him still, but her Sire pulled him out of her embrace and closer to him. For a

### ALL THINGS EXCEPT BLOOD

second, his mouth was on Ian's neck, and Eyrin's fists closed tight enough to draw blood from her palms. Then he pulled back and brought his own wrist to his mouth before offering it to Ian's lips. The scent of her Sire's blood in the air was soothing, but at the same time an uncompromising reminder of what was happening. It was the first time Eyrin had ever heard a human heart stop beating and she felt a near physical pain at the loss.

She remained kneeling on the floor as her Sire stood with Ian's still body cradled in his arms and went to deposit his precious burden on the bed. Her gaze followed him still as he walked to the door and motioned the silent Childer out of the room. The dull sound of the heavy wood closing on them was almost ominous, but not as much as the storm in his glare when he walked back toward her.

"You know better than that," he snapped, his voice as thunder.

Eyrin lowered her head.

"How many years since I sired you?" he continued on the same tone.

"One hundred and fifty-six, my lord," she whispered.

"And in all these years, how many times did you see one of my Childer shame our clan—shame me!—and kill a human?"

She flinched at the word 'kill'. Something in her demanded that she let out the sobs she was barely holding back and beg for her Sire's forgiveness, but she refused to disgrace herself even further and struggled to remain as calm as she could.

"Never, my lord."

"Never. Because the first thing a fledgling learns is to feed from where?"

It had been more than a century and half, but when she closed her eye she could still see it as though it had been the day before. Her Sire had taught her to bite softly but without hesitation so she wouldn't hurt humans. He had also taught her where to bite, how much blood to take, and how to close the wound with a few careful swipes of her tongue. All those lessons she had forgotten in Ian's arms.

"The wrist," she finally answered, her voice almost failing her.

"And you killed him by feeding from where?"

That word, again, made it sink a little deeper what she had done exactly. She would have given her existence at that instant if it had meant that Ian's heart would beat again. He would certainly have a right to push a wooden stake into her chest when he woke.

"Answer me, Childe!"

Swallowing hard, Eyrin mumbled, "His neck."

### *Kallysten*

For several minutes that felt like as many years, her Sire remained silent. Wondering what he might be thinking, Eyrin opened her eye again and raised a hesitant gaze toward him. He didn't look as angry as he had sounded so far, but he seemed extremely tired. Squatting down next to her, he reached toward her face and she couldn't help flinching as he delicately traced her wounds.

"Something terrible happened to you." He spoke softly, his voice gentle now. "And I know it has been hard on you. But why, Eyrin? You knew better than to feed from his neck."

His calm words made the tears rise again. "Because he offered," she explained in a murmur, conscious that it didn't excuse her in any way.

Her Sire sighed and looked toward the bed. "Foolish, both of you." Standing again, he offered her his hand and pulled her up to her feet when she gingerly took it.

"What is his name?" he asked, his eyes still on the immobile figure on the bed.

"Ian."

"Ian," he repeated. "He's one of my Childer, now, but I don't think I would have chosen him. He was too young."

Eyrin bit her tongue not to answer and defend Ian. He was strong, she would have argued, loyal, and he learned fast. Saying as much was of no use now, though. Ian would have to prove himself to the Master.

"He's your responsibility," he added, his back to her as he strode to the door. "You will teach him to feed, and fight, and live with us."

She blinked, surprised beyond words. As far as she knew, the Master had given their first lessons to every single one of his Childer as a way to bond with them. That he asked her to do it for Ian felt like an incredibly difficult task. A task she didn't feel she was worthy of.

His hand on the latch, he turned to look at her. "Odela will be leaving in a few days, and when she does we will have the extra blood gift we now need. Until then, you will feed from humans, and Ian will feed from you afterwards."

She started protesting at that—she didn't feel ready to leave her room and confront the gazes that waited in the common room—but she belatedly understood that it was part of her punishment. Swallowing a heavy sigh, she nodded.

"You still need to heal, though," he added thoughtfully after a few seconds. "You may ask another Childe for more blood every other night. None of this would have happened if you hadn't been starving yourself."

She didn't reply. There really wasn't much that she could say, but the truth of her Sire's words was all the more bitter for her silence.

### **ALL THINGS EXCEPT BLOOD**

“Since it is so late already, he won’t be rising tonight,” he continued, and now it seemed he was talking to himself as much as her. “I will send a messenger to inform his village. Be sure to be near him and ready to offer him blood when he wakes tomorrow night.”

Again, she nodded; her Sire left. For a long moment her gaze remained on the now closed door, although she wasn’t really seeing anything. In her mind, the events since Ian had entered her room, his words and her own kept replaying in a loop as she tried to understand her mistake. There had been so many points at which she could have done something different, something that would have saved his life. Absently touching the woven bracelet Ian had slipped on her wrist what seemed like hours earlier, she fought back the tears coming up once more to her eye. How much had he lost, by her fault? The sun and its warmth. Fields of ripening grain and blooming flowers. His family, present and future. She had lost as much when she had been sired, but it had been her choice, she had accepted it before it happened. Ian had been given no such decision to make.

Would he ever forgive her?

Feeling numb, she slowly approached the bed. With dark curls fallen over his face, Ian seemed asleep. She wished she hadn’t known any better. She climbed on the bed next to him and lay down, careful not to touch him as though she might disturb his sleep and wake him. They had napped together a few times, resting after sex, but as Eyrin watched him now, so utterly still next to her, other memories haunted her.

She remembered a fifteen-year-old boy, wide eyed and a little fearful, who had been in awe when she had thanked him for offering her his blood. She remembered the flowers he had brought to her after that, fresh ones in the spring and summer, dried ones when the weather had turned cold, sometimes large bouquets and sometimes woven wreaths. She remembered playing with him, talking with him and laughing with him. Humans usually remained only long enough to offer vampires their blood, but Ian had been one of the exceptions. More than once, she had needed to accompany him back to his village after nightfall. She also vividly remembered, the feel his lips upon hers, the clumsy kiss he had surprised her with, once, and the first caresses they had shared.

She had known she would lose him, eventually, like she had lost other lovers over the years. It hadn’t saddened her, it was the natural course of his life, and hers. She just hadn’t realized it would be so fast, and of her own fault.

Time passed as Eyrin mourned Ian’s death, until she could feel the sun disappearing beneath the horizon with the familiar prickling sensation at the back of her neck. Throughout the lair, she knew, Childer were getting ready for battle; their Sire was

### *Kallysten*

in the common room, giving orders for the night, and if she had focused just a little more Eyrin might have been able to make out his words. She didn't try, though. She used to be one of his lieutenants, used to ride at the head of a group of other Childer to hunt down demons. She doubted she ever would again. She wasn't sure she'd be able to fight before a long time, but at the very least she had proved, to herself as well as to her Sire, that she was not fit to lead. Two errors of judgment in a few days had left her wounded beyond healing and cost a human his life. Who could tell how much more damage she would cause next time to her clan or to the villages it protected?

For hours, the lair was utterly silent, giving Eyrin the odd feeling that time had stopped, leaving her to contemplate the young man next to her and the consequences of her mistakes. Then, one group after the other, her fellow Childer returned, some of them quiet as they cleaned up and went to bed, others loud as they shared the fights of the night with one another. No one came to her door, and Eyrin did not seek anyone.

She must have fallen asleep, because when she roused next, the fireplace was cold and her senses were telling her the sun was high in the sky. That meant humans had to have arrived to give their offerings. She wished she could have forgotten that she would need to face them, but Ian's motionless form on the bed next to her reminded her all too clearly of what her Sire had required from her.

She waited until late afternoon to get out of bed, when the bulk of the humans would have left already. She took more time to clean up than was necessary, all too aware that she was only delaying the moment when she would need to leave the room. Carefully brushing her hair, she let it hang loose, drawing part of it to rest over her face. She touched Ian's hand with the tip of her fingers before walking out, to give herself courage. He would wake soon and be hungry; she had to be ready to offer him blood. It seemed like a fitting reversal of their roles.

The first thing she noticed when she entered the common room was the presence of her Sire. It wasn't uncommon for him to be there, far from it, but when he cast a brief look toward her, Eyrin had the feeling that he was there to keep an eye on her and prevent her from killing anyone else. It should have upset her that he would deem her unworthy of his trust, and a few days earlier she certainly would have complained about it. But at that moment, it reassured her. If she faltered once more, her Sire would be there to stop her before it got too bad.

A woman came to her as soon as she had sit down and offered Eyrin her wrist. Her hands were shaking when she gently took hold of it and brought it to her mouth. She never looked up at the woman's face, unwilling to see pity, compassion or horror on unknown features. She didn't take much blood at all before she released the woman and

### ALL THINGS EXCEPT BLOOD

thanked her, her head still bowed. Some part of her was incredibly afraid to take too much again. She caught her Sire's eyes as she was leaving, but where she expected approval, she received a small frown. Only when Odela caught up with her as she was reaching her door did she understand why.

"You didn't take enough," the older Childe pointed out. "How do you expect to heal and feed him if you don't even feed enough for yourself?"

"I didn't want to hurt anyone else," Eyrin tried to defend herself.

Odela smiled gently. "I know. But it doesn't change the fact that you didn't feed enough."

The gesture was familiar. Older Childer often shared their blood with younger ones who needed to heal, and Eyrin had been on either side of the sharing more than once. But she felt like a fledgling again when Odela pulled her to her neck and invited her to bite. The added strength of Odela's blood was welcome, of course, but with the first mouthful of it Eyrin flashed back to the previous day, to Ian's hands urging her closer even as she had killed him. She pushed back from Odela with a gasp and shook her head lightly when asked what was wrong.

"I should get back to Ian," she explained, not quite meeting Odela's eyes. "I have to be there when he wakes."

It was an excuse and they both knew it, but Odela let her go nonetheless. Eyrin was shaking when she reached the bed and sat at the foot of it, her arms wrapped around her legs in front of her. The silence was echoing in her mind, louder than it had any right to be, reminding her oppressively of the stillness of Ian's heart.

When his eyelids first twitched, she thought she was imagining things. But they moved again, and he drew a shaky breath as his eyes finally opened. He sat up on the bed, looking confused until his eyes fell on Eyrin. She still hadn't moved, unsure on what to say since she didn't know how he would react to her presence. The hesitant smile he offered her wasn't what she had expected; it tore at her heart just a little more.

"You must be famished," she said, her voice breaking. "Here, feed from me."

He weakly tried to protest when she thrust her wrist at him but she had little trouble shushing him. She remembered her first awakening well, and the incredible hunger that had only been sated when her Sire had given her his wrist. She felt even guiltier at the memory; because of her, Ian wouldn't have a normal relationship with their Sire. He wasn't even present for Ian's awakening, something she had never heard of.

"Just bite," she instructed when he seemed to hesitate. "Your fangs will come out. Then drink, take as much as you need to make the hunger go away."

*Kallysten*

She winced as her flesh was torn. Young vampires needed a few tries to learn to feed without inflicting too much pain. She would teach him, next time.

Just as she was thinking as much, he stopped feeding. She could see that he had trouble letting go of her, but after a few instants of hesitation, he did.

“You need to feed more,” she said at once. “That wasn’t enough.”

“Not from you,” he murmured, his voice a little rough.

The rejection felt like a slap and sharpened the shame and guilt Eyrin felt about what had happened. “I am sorry for what I did,” she blurted out. “But you need to feed more and I’m the only one here for that.”

Both his hands clutched at her wrist when she tried to push it closer to him.

“You were hurt,” he protested. “You still are. I can’t take your blood when—”

“I took yours,” she interrupted. “I took all of yours, or almost.”

His features reflected total incomprehension. “Eyrin, I—”

“I took your blood,” she repeated, unyielding. “And you need to take mine now.”

For long seconds, his eyes remained on her, his frown still as pronounced. She almost sighed in relief when at last he reopened the wounds at her wrist, a little more gently this time, and started pulling on her blood again.



## ALL THINGS EXCEPT BLOOD

### Chapter Three

Awakening as a vampire was nothing Ian could have imagined.

The hunger was beyond what he had ever experienced, and to be offered blood to calm it right away was certainly the best thing that could have happened. But through the hunger, he remembered. Eyrin had been hurt. Feeding him right now was painful, if he was to believe her tightly pinched lips. He had to battle himself to stop, had to battle the hunger and that very fundamental instinct to take blood, as much of it as possible, and worry about consequences later. But he did manage to release her wrist. He couldn't bear the idea that he was causing her pain.

But she didn't let him stop. She argued and prodded him on and in the end, a second instinct took over. He had to please her, in any way she asked, in any way he could. Something anchored deep inside him, in the same feelings he'd had for her before becoming a vampire, requested as much. So he did what she wanted, and drank, until his mind was singing with the power and taste of her blood.

With the hunger appeased, another need took precedence as he realized, belatedly, that his cock was hard and aching. He had been hard for Eyrin when he had first come to the lair, but this was different. He could taste her still on his tongue, could feel her, her strength inside him, could smell her soap and that scented oil she put on her hair and an edge of blood from her wounds. She seemed, at that instant, more attractive than she had ever been, and he had never wanted her as much as he did now. However, when he shifted on the bed to get on his knees and move closer to her, she pulled back. And when he reached for her with his hand, wanting only to touch her face, she scrambled off the bed.

"Why—" he started, but she didn't let him finish.

"I will show you the rest of the lair. Almost everyone is out hunting, but you can meet those who stayed behind tonight."

Before he had time to say a word, she had crossed the room to the door and opened it. Only then did she look back at him. Her hair still hung over most of her face, hiding her wounds and making her features harder to read. Unsure of why she was acting like this, Ian slid off the bed and joined her. He wanted to ask if he had done something

### *Kallysten*

wrong or broken a rule, maybe, but already Eyrin was walking away and all Ian could do was follow her.

The experience was intensely confusing. The two vampires he met looked at him with undisguised curiosity but were nice enough. They were both injured in some fashion, he noticed. When he asked Eyrin if that was the reason why they weren't out and hunting, she stiffened and confirmed his suspicions before leading him away. He had seen most of the lair before, but through his sharpened eyesight everything seemed different.

The near darkness wasn't hindering him, even at this time of night when the only sources of light were torches on the walls. He commented aloud on the scent of the torches, which he had never noticed before, and Eyrin tersely answered that it wouldn't bother him if he simply stopped breathing. The comment stung, as did all of her attitude toward him. She had never been as cold toward him as she now was. It was as though she had never talked to him before, as though he were a perfect stranger. Ian couldn't understand what he had done to upset her.

"Our Sire asked me to teach you how to fight," she said as they entered what she had called the weapons room, forestalling any question Ian may have had. "Most of us fight with swords. Go and pick one on that wall."

As Ian did as she had asked, Eyrin went around the room and lit additional torches until the room seemed almost too bright. He held the sword he had chosen in front of him for her to see. Ian looked at her and waited for a nod of approval or a comment on his choice. He got neither. Going straight to business, she instructed him on how to grip the hilt before directing him through basic exercises.

Ian had never held a weapon before, humans were forbidden to even own one. But he had seen Eyrin train with other Childer, and he had a small idea of what she expected of him. So he did his best, trying to follow her directions as well as he could, craving a word from her to let him know he was on the right path. She never met his eyes, never smiled, never praised him.

He kept hoping, as the night advanced, that Eyrin would soon be back to the charming woman he used to know, that she was only showing this terse side of herself because training him was far more serious than teaching him to play Stones and Water had ever been. But when morning came, he found himself alone in a cold, empty bedroom, and was distressed to realize Eyrin hadn't even touched him since he had released her wrist after feeding from her.

\*\*\*\*

"Again."

### ALL THINGS EXCEPT BLOOD

Eyrin's voice was cold, devoid of any feeling, and it was fitting her mood. She felt nothing as she watched Ian obey her orders and repeat the attack she had just explained to him. She was entirely focused on his execution of the movement, on the position of his feet, hands, shoulders and head. There was place for nothing else in her mind.

"Again. This time make sure to keep your shoulders level. You drop the right one and open yourself to a counter attack."

She noticed the way Ian's lips compressed into a thin displeased line, but he didn't say anything before repeating the movement again. He put more strength into the blow this time, and the sword made a swishing sound as it cut through the air so heavily that he lost his equilibrium and wavered.

"Sloppy move," a voice commented next to Eyrin before she could express the same sentiment. "Do that in a battle and you'll be lucky not to get your head sliced off."

Her arms tightening where they were crossed around her middle, Eyrin struggled not to turn toward her Sire. He had stepped on her blind side, and as focused as she had been on observing Ian, she hadn't noticed him. It wasn't the first time it had happened. She was still learning how to adjust to her new conditions, just as Ian was. He was adjusting far better than she was so far, even if he still made stupid mistakes like the one that had brought their Sire's attention to him.

"You did warn him that losing his head would kill him, Eyrin, didn't you?"

Standing as stiffly as Ian was under the calm reprimand, Eyrin finally turned to face her Sire.

"I did, my lord. He usually strikes much better than this last move could suggest."

The Master's eyes seemed unforgiving as he turned them to her, and despite the curtain of her hair carefully arranged to cover half her face Eyrin felt as though he were detailing her still healing wounds.

"'Usually' is not enough, Childe," he chided. "You should understand that better than most."

She dropped her gaze to the floor in front of him. The heavy stones wore the trace of decades and decades of feet learning to carry or evade an attack; she had never noticed it before. She had never thought either that anything or anyone in the lair could change, but she had been proved wrong.

"With your permission, Sire," she asked, daring to look up again, "maybe someone could teach Ian better than—"

He didn't even allow her to finish before answering with a stern, "No."

### *Kallysten*

“But I cannot spar with him,” she tried to explain. The admission of weakness burned her lips, but it was necessary. “My leg won’t allow it, and my vision makes training him difficult, let alone fighting against him. He would learn more from one of your better fighters. Simon, maybe, or Leane.”

The Master considered her for so long, Eyrin thought she had convinced him. But in the end, he shook his head.

“Your body is healed enough. I want you back out and hunting as soon as possible. How do you expect to relearn how to fight if you don’t even try?”

She was about to protest but he stopped her with a severe look. “Your duties to our villages did not end when you were wounded, Childe. You will resume hunting when Ian joins us. And it won’t be in more than ten nights.”

There was a note of finality to his words and Eyrin knew better than to argue any more. She inclined her head submissively; when she looked up again, he was gone.

“Do you hate me that much?”

Ian’s quiet question reminded Eyrin of his presence and she turned to him warily. She had almost forgotten he was there as her discussion with their Sire had shifted from his training to Eyrin’s.

“I do not hate you,” she replied dismissively. “Pick up where you stopped. That last attack *was* sloppy.”

Ian didn’t move. His face was set on a stubborn expression that Eyrin had often seen on him when he refused to admit defeat as they played Stones and Water.

“If you do not hate me,” he asked, still very quiet, “why does it pain you so much to teach me? Why were you trying to get rid of me?”

There was a hint of pain in his voice, and Eyrin hardened herself not to let the guilt take over again. She had done her best. He had no right to demand more from her than she could give.

“I taught you all I can. Others could do better than I do, now. And the more you will know, the safer you will be in ten nights when you go out and hunt. Now do that last move again.”

For the past week, Eyrin had been working Ian hard, teaching him from late in the afternoon to the early evening, then again through the night after a couple of hours of break. He had obeyed each and every one of her commands, and been the most studious learner she could have asked for. The shock of seeing him turn his back on her and walk to put the sword back on the wall stand left her speechless.

“We’ll work on that again tonight,” she managed to call after him as he left the room without looking back.

### ALL THINGS EXCEPT BLOOD

She bit back a sigh with some difficulty and went to the swords rack and picked one slightly longer but slimmer than the one Ian had used. Stepping in the middle of the room, she assumed the same position he had held moments earlier and slowly executed the same movement she had been teaching him. Her left leg throbbed when she leaned on it and she gasped. To show pain at all was bad enough, but Simon had chosen that instant to walk into the training room and Eyrin cursed softly. The polite thing would have been for him to pretend he hadn't noticed, but Simon had never been one for conventions.

"You can do the same thing without resting on your injured leg if you shift your hold on the sword and strike higher. It's more effective, too."

Looking at him icily, she shifted out of position. "I do not remember asking your opinion," she snapped.

He shrugged on his way to pick up a sword. "Maybe you didn't," he conceded. "But our Sire asked me to help you and your protégé. Although it looks like it'll be just you right now."

This time, she didn't manage to hold back her sigh. This was not at all what she had hoped for when asking her Sire to let others train Ian. She could recognize that Simon was one of the best fighters amongst the Childer, but she could barely stand him. Training with him promised to be torture.

"Ever thought about cutting your hair?" he said idly as he took place on her right side where she could see him. "It'd still cover your face but it wouldn't swing enough to be a distraction."

She didn't reply to that. It sounded like a good idea, but she wasn't about to admit it to Simon, not when he was looking so smug.

"Ready?" he asked, and without waiting for her answer he demonstrated the attack he had suggested when entering the room.

Eyrin reproduced his movement, her teeth clenched so hard they hurt. Ian should have been there to learn this too. She would have to teach him this attack later that night. By then he would have calmed down, she supposed, even if she didn't understand why he had been so upset.

## Chapter Four

Leaving the bedroom that he had occupied alone since becoming a vampire, Ian glanced down the hall that led to Eyrin's room for a second. There were several unoccupied chambers in the lair, and Ian had come to believe that she had given him the one farthest from her own room on purpose. It made sense, seeing how she did all she could to spend as little time as possible with him. Now that Ian could accept human offerings of blood, it meant that he only saw Eyrin to train, and even for that, more and more, she relied on other Childer.

In the past, on the rare occasions when he had fantasized about what life would be like if he ever became a vampire, the main part of his daydreams had been Eyrin's constant presence at his side and in his bed. The reality was far enough from what he had imagined to make him wonder, day and night, how he could possibly have displeased Eyrin. Not understanding was driving him insane, and he had decided to try to get help. There was only one source possible.

He walked into the common room and quickly found the man he needed, sitting near the main fireplace with a Childe whose name escaped Ian at that moment. Swallowing heavily, Ian approached the two men and gave a small bow.

"Sire? May I talk to you?"

The Master gave him a long, piercing look before nodding at the Childe who had been playing Stones and Water with him, asking him to leave them for a moment. Once he had departed, Ian sat in his chair and he looked at the game board somewhat resentfully. He used to enjoy trying to best Eyrin, but she had refused to play ever since he had awoken as a vampire, insisting that there were more important things for him to do.

"Eyrin is avoiding me," he said quietly. He knew the other vampires in the room would hear him anyway, but he could still pretend to be having a private conversation. "She is teaching me how to fight as you requested, but she never talks to me if she's not instructing me. She doesn't even look at me!"

There was a trace of petulance to his voice and Ian grimaced, wondering if his Sire would think him foolish again. During their first talk, on Ian's first night as a

### ALL THINGS EXCEPT BLOOD

vampire, the Master had made it clear that Ian offering Eyrin to drink from his neck had been the most imprudent idea he could have come up with. Chastised, Ian had tried to stay out of his Sire's way until now, unwilling to feel like a child again. When he looked up at him however there was only sympathy in the Master's gaze.

"I know," he said with a quiet sigh. "I've been keeping an eye on you two. I've noticed the way she acts. I thought it would get better with time but I guess I was wrong."

Ian shook his head, not understanding what his Sire meant.

"Eyrin killed a human she was sworn to protect," he continued, his tone holding more patience than Ian had ever heard from him. "She wasn't herself when she drained you. The shock from her battle and from being wounded was still overpowering her. In normal circumstances, she'd never have taken too much blood from you. Now she blames herself for two mistakes, and being around you makes things worse."

The Master paused, but Ian barely noticed. He could remember suddenly the insistence with which Eyrin had demanded that he take her blood when he had first awoken. Had it been tinted by guilt? But if she felt guilty, shouldn't she have been nice to him, rather than distant?

"Maybe it's my fault," his Sire started again with a shake of his head. "I was angered by what happened, and I was hard on her. Harder than I should have been, maybe, seeing how she was already so upset. And I thought being responsible for you would be an adequate punishment, a way for her to learn the consequences of her actions, but it seems to be making things more difficult. Your death touched her more deeply than I would have thought."

If anything, the explanation confused Ian even more.

"But I'm not really dead," he protested. "And she will take human lives eventually, when she makes her own Childer, won't she?"

"Exactly," the Master nodded. "That's the whole point. She killed you, but she didn't give you back this second life. I did."

He sighed again at that, and looked older suddenly. "Maybe I should have let her. She's strong enough to have Childer of her own."

"So why didn't you?" Ian asked, quelling the small voice inside him that tried to point out how questioning his Sire was hardly the best thing to do. The slightly exasperated look the Master gave him said exactly the same thing.

"Being a Master is more complicated than siring a Childe. And I don't think she's ready to be freed and to found her own lair. It'll take her time to adjust her fighting

### *Kallysten*

to her new limitations. She didn't want to kill you in the first place, and I didn't have time to ask her if she was ready to take on this kind of responsibility."

Ian frowned. "But you told her to look after me. You made me her responsibility."

"I did. So she would see firsthand the consequences of her mistake. I also wanted you to distract her, and to stop her from feeling sorry for herself. But now she's feeling sorry for what she did to you. That's not much of an improvement."

For a long moment, Ian considered the game in front of him. On the Master's side, the green pieces had formed three bridges already to advance and capture the central squares, but the brown were close enough to take advantage of the bridges themselves. He could see, with no trouble, how to win the game, whether he played green or brown. Why couldn't he understand Eyrin and now how to act with her just as easily?

Looking up once more at his Sire, he hesitated before pronouncing the next words. He felt a little silly asking about this, it almost felt like asking kissing advice from his father, but he didn't know whom else he could ask.

"What can I do so that she'll love me again?"

The Master's blink clearly indicated that he hadn't expected the question, but he answered immediately.

"Vampires don't love, Childe. You might as well forget this ridiculous notion right now. She should have taught you that already."

Ian's spirit plummeted at the cold admonishment. He'd had strong feelings for Eyrin before becoming a vampire, feelings he had been certain were love, feelings that hadn't faded in the slightest when he had changed. But if vampires couldn't love, did it mean that he had never loved Eyrin, and had only been fooling himself? His distress must have been apparent, because his Sire spoke again, more gently this time.

"Vampires don't love," he repeated. "But occasionally, they let themselves be seduced."

A small frown and an equally small, hopeful smile battled each other on Ian's features as he observed the Master and struggled to understand.

"How did you seduce her the first time around?" his Sire asked, the faintest grin playing on his lips. "Nothing says you can't try to do it again."

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Even though Eyrin refused to acknowledge them, the gifts kept appearing. Sometimes they were left in her room, usually on her pillow and now and then by the fireplace. Sometimes, she found them in her cloak's pockets. Since she had resumed hunting demons four nights earlier, they had started appearing threaded to the pommel of



### **ALL THINGS EXCEPT BLOOD**

her saddle, or inside the satchels. They were small presents, usually small enough for her to hold inside her closed hand. Small animals carved out of wood and polished until they gleamed. Flowers and scented herbs woven together in intricate bracelets. The same kind of small gifts Ian had once offered her when bringing her the blood offering for his village. There was no doubt in her mind these new trinkets were from him, and night after night, it became increasingly difficult not to answer to them, not to give him a simple thank you, or maybe even just a smile.

She should have returned them. It would have been the right thing to do, the honest thing to do. She had a small idea what Ian thought would happen if he kept giving her small gifts like these. The first time around, she had taken him to her bed, and it was doubtless that he hoped the same thing would happen again. But in truth, the gifts had had little to do with him becoming her lover. He was a good looking man, she enjoyed talking to him and she had had only one occasional lover at the time; the decision to bed him had been easy enough to make. It was cruel of her to lead him on by accepting his presents and allow him to believe they would resume their physical relationship.

She had to tell him that he needed to move on. She repeated it to herself every time she arranged a new carving on the edge of the mantle over her fireplace, every time she slipped a delicate woven bracelet onto her wrist. And yet, she couldn't manage to refuse the trinkets. The most she could do was refuse to recognize she had even received them, as ridiculous as it was; Ian always made a small comment or gave her a pointed look whenever she would wear his bracelets during the hunt.

And that was something else altogether. Ian had been deemed proficient enough with a sword four nights earlier and since then, their Sire had made a point to have both him and Eyrin accompany his hunting party every night. As a rule, the groups changed every couple of days, but he had been keeping the two of them close and Eyrin couldn't help but wonder why.

Did he want to keep an eye on her, still? She could understand as much, her fighting was still sub par and even if they had found no more than a couple of demons at any given time so far, she was a liability for the members of her group.

But she didn't understand why he would keep Ian with them too. He had once explained to her that fledglings should be allowed to grow into their fighting skills away from their Sire after their initial training, so that they wouldn't feel they were being judged each night. Why was their Sire breaking the rules where Ian was concerned? Then again, he had left his training to her, for the most part. Maybe he didn't trust her teaching had been sufficient. Maybe he wanted to be there when Ian would make his first

### *Kallysten*

mistake, and maybe he wanted Eyrin to be there too so she could see him correct it; more punishment for what she had done.

“We’ll split here.”

Her Sire’s voice startled Eyrin out of her thoughts and she chastised herself for being so distracted by her situation that she had forgotten where she was and what she was doing. She looked around surreptitiously. The other Childer didn’t seem to have noticed her inattention, except for Ian. His gaze on her was slightly concerned, and she looked away, annoyed, to focus on the Master.

“They used this clearing as a campsite before,” the Master continued, and a couple of Childer nodded. “It’s easy enough to take over if we surround it and attack from different sides at the same time.”

With quick gestures and brisk words, he formed three groups, two Childer in each of them. Eyrin wasn’t overly surprised when her partner turned out to be Ian. She was stunned, however, to realize the Master didn’t plan to accompany them and was riding out by himself instead.

She almost started protesting, but already he and the other Childer were pressing their horses forward and scattering in different directions, leaving Ian and her to stand alone.

“Come on,” Ian pressed her, an eager edge to his voice. “We need to get into position.”

With that, he heeled his horse forward. A growing feeling of unease settling in her stomach, Eyrin followed him. He shouldn’t have been so excited to finally see a real battle. Their group had met lone demons in the past nights, scouts, and twice also pairs of them. Ian had danced his first fight and earned an approving nod from his Sire, even if all Eyrin had seen in his attacks had been flaws and openings. But this would be the first group attack in which Ian took part, and he didn’t seem to realize how dangerous it would be. Anything could go wrong. The demons could surprise them by being more numerous than they expected. They might hear one of the groups approaching and attack first.

They might slaughter everyone. Starting with Ian.

Had her heart still been beating, it would have broken free of her chest at the idea that more harm could come to Ian, once more because of her if she was unable to protect him. She had to prevent that. She knew just the way.

Softly calling his name, she indicated that they ought to dismount and leave their horses so they could be stealthier. Ian didn’t suspect anything, and she easily knocked him out with a blow to the head when he turned to tie off to a tree the reins she had

### **ALL THINGS EXCEPT BLOOD**

handed him. She caught him as he fell and gently eased him to the ground. The memory of kneeling next to him as he had been too weak to stand tried to take precedence in her mind but she pushed it away. Now was not the time for such memories. She was protecting him, even if she was too late to save his life.

Eyrin eased her sword out of the scabbard on her back before stepping forward and toward the clearing. It had been long enough. The others would be attacking soon, if they hadn't already. She forgot the pain lancing down her leg and, as she strode out of the cover of the trees and into the demon camp, she was almost as eager as Ian had sounded earlier.

No one knew where exactly demons came from. Legends said they were born out of air during thunderstorms, but Eyrin had long since stopped believing in legends. The same tales said vampires could fly and talk to cats. The one thing that was certain was that demons were attracted to humans like bees to honey. Sometimes, lone demons would attack a village and do some damage there, but it was rare. Usually, they converged until they had a small attack group, then chose a target. And usually, vampires managed to stop them before they reached the village. It helped that demons were heavy and slow on foot. They also left easily recognizable tracks that allowed vampires to hunt them down. It helped, also, that they weren't fond of sunlight. It wasn't lethal to them as it was to vampires, but only the strongest demon leaders could coax their troops to advance during the day. When it happened, the best chance of the village under siege was to arm everyone with a bow or crossbow, send a rider to warn the lair and hope that the demons wouldn't have killed everyone by nightfall. Thankfully, it didn't happen very often.

This group, Eyrin quickly assessed as she took her first look at the few huts made out of branches, probably didn't have a leader. With someone at their head, demons spent less time in one place, and certainly not enough to build decent cover. On each side of the camp, her fellow Childer were stepping in too; the Master was almost directly across from her. She wasn't sure whom the demons saw first, but the alarm suddenly ran through the camp, grunts and shouts calling all demons to arms. There was a dozen of them, maybe a few more, to the six vampires in their midst. Excellent odds for the vampires.

The first clash of her sword onto an axe hastily raised in defense sent a tremor through her arm that made Eyrin wince and grin all at once. Her sword swung again, and this time it found flesh to part and blood to spill. When she left the gurgling body behind her to find a new opponent, it didn't occur to her that she was taking revenge for the

***Kallysten***

wounds that had been inflicted upon her. Instead, all she could think of was that Ian would be safe, at least for one more night.

## ALL THINGS EXCEPT BLOOD

### Chapter Five

Once again, Eyrin slipped the woven bracelet that Ian had left in her room while she was feeding onto her wrist, and, as usual, she hadn't acknowledged it or Ian in any way. He had found it amusing, the first few nights, but as time passed he was beginning to wonder if she was playing with him, giving him hope as she wore his gifts but meaning nothing by it. His Sire had warned him the previous morning about staying focused on the hunt rather than letting his mind drift over to Eyrin, but there he was again, watching her as they rode, noticing her inattention while barely aware of his own.

He was glad, when the Master divided them into pairs in prevision of the attack, to be partnered with Eyrin. He had longed to show her for a few nights already what he could do; show her that he had been a good student, and that she could be proud of him. He didn't let the fact that she looked dejected at the idea that they would fight side-by-side affect him. Or at least, he tried not to let it affect him; it was becoming more difficult to keep hoping with each additional rejection from her.

The blow came out of nowhere, and he didn't even have time to feel betrayed before everything turned black.

Coming back to his senses was a difficult process, and it took Ian a few moments before he could manage to sit up. He looked around as he brought a hand to the back of his head. This time Eyrin had gone too far, and he would tell her as much. However, she was nowhere to be seen. Her horse was still tied next to Ian's, but she was gone. It wasn't difficult to guess where she had run off. In the distance, Ian could hear the sounds of the battle he was missing.

He cursed quietly as he stood and bared his sword at once, hurrying toward the clearing and the fight there. When he stepped past the cover of the trees, he immediately understood that it was over. The other Childer and the Master were standing in the middle of slaughtered demons and were picking up the axes and other weapons the demons had fought with. Some of them would be added to the lair's arsenal. The rest would be sent to villages for the metal to be melted and reused.

"There he is!"

### *Kallysten*

The exclamation from one of the male Childer brought all eyes toward him and Ian stiffened under the attention.

“We were beginning to think you had gotten yourself killed, young one,” the same vampire continued, his malicious smile widening. “But if you’re still here, I guess you just hid until the battle was done.”

The other Childer laughed or snickered before returning to what they had been doing. Only Eyrin and the Master hadn’t laughed, and they both continued watching Ian as he came closer. Ian was ready to lash out at Eyrin, but as he glared at her he noticed how sorry she looked even as half her face hid behind a curtain of short hair. Sorry for what she had done, or sorry for the others mocking Ian because of it?

Before he could ask her, the Master’s voice rose and he shouted a few sharp orders.

“Get back to your horses. We’re done here. Return to the lair. Eyrin, take the lead.”

She startled at that and gave their Sire a shocked look, but he ignored it, his hard gaze still on Ian, who felt more and more uncomfortable under the attention. She tried to say something, but an irritated word from the Master stopped her. Ian glowered at her as she walked by him, causing her to look away.

“What happened?” the Master asked, his voice cold but restrained when they were finally alone in the clearing.

Ian opened his mouth, ready to explain how Eyrin had kept him out of the fight, but he couldn’t manage to push the words out. He had noticed—everybody had—how the Master was keeping a very sharp eye on Eyrin. There was no way to predict how he would react to what she had done. And as much as Ian was upset with her, he didn’t want to see her punished.

“I...got lost,” he said lamely, looking away from his Sire’s piercing gaze. “I apologize.”

The silence that followed felt heavier than steel, and just as sharp.

“You’d rather have me and everyone else believe that you’re a coward rather than tell me the truth?”

Ian grimaced. He hadn’t expected that his Sire would easily believe him, but he hadn’t thought he would be called on the lie either. Admitting that he was lying, though, didn’t seem like the best of ideas so he kept silent.

“Get my horse,” the Master demanded icily, pointing toward the woods behind him.

### ALL THINGS EXCEPT BLOOD

Ian did as requested, his mind running wildly as he did. He wouldn't betray Eyrin to their Sire, but he would definitely confront her later. He couldn't begin to fathom why she had knocked him out before his first real battle and exposed him to ridicule and taunts. In any case, it meant that he couldn't trust her to have his back in a fight anymore.

He could tell that his Sire wanted to resume asking questions when he returned to him, but Ian took the initiative.

"I would like to request a favor, my lord," he asked with a small bow.

The Master snorted as he climbed onto the horse. "And you think I will grant it after you displeased me in such a manner?"

Ian clenched his fists but refused to drop his gaze. His only fault was to care so much about Eyrin that he was protecting her rather than himself. He intended not to be placed in that position again.

"I would like to hunt with another group from now on," he asked even though his Sire hadn't granted him permission to even voice his request.

Rather than reprimanding him, the Master heeled his horse forward in the direction where Ian's horse waited. Ian walked fast to keep up with him, and kept glancing up at the thoughtful features that showed little of what the Master thought.

"In other words," he finally said, "you don't want me to keep you in Eyrin's hunting group anymore. Is that it?"

Reluctantly, Ian inclined his head.

"What made you change your mind?"

They had reached his horse and Ian didn't reply as he straddled it, nor as they started riding back toward the lair. After a long stretch of silence, the Master simply said, "I see," and when he did his voice sounded just a touch less cold.

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The congratulations from her peers about her fight as they were riding back to the lair left Eyrin bitter. She was in no way back to being the fighter she had been just a month earlier, but no one, not even her, seemed to expect as much from her. The simple fact that she hadn't been hurt was enough of a victory, and she wouldn't have minded the praises if not for what had happened with Ian.

She had only thought about protecting him when keeping him out of the battle. She had realized he might not be happy about it, but it hadn't even occurred to her that the others might believe that he'd deliberately avoided the fight, nor had she anticipated what their Sire might think of it all. She wasn't sure why he had stayed behind with Ian, but it certainly wasn't to congratulate him.

### *Kallysten*

Would Ian tell him what she had done? He could have revealed it as soon as the others had started taunting him, but instead he had kept quiet. Eyrin wished she had found it in herself to defend him, but the glare he had given her had rendered her speechless. She had hurt him, deeply, and she would have to apologize for it. She might need to do more than apologize.

She had never entered his chambers since she had led him to them the first morning after his awakening and so it felt a little strange to push the door open and slip in. She had decided to wait for him there so that she could talk to him as soon as he returned. The room was dark but she quickly lit up a torch on the wall and looked around with some curiosity. The fireplace looked as though it had not been used in days. A chair stood next to the pile of wood, a half-finished carving and knife resting on it. The bed, washing stand and clothes chest were the same Eyrin had in her own chambers. She had expected him to display more reminders of his human life, she realized with some surprise. She had done as much herself when she had first been sired.

Something else she had expected to find in Ian's room was conspicuously absent. His scent permeated the room, and her own was slowly mingling with it as she paced back and forth, but there were no others. It seemed that no one else had come to this room, or even slept in it. Eyrin wasn't sure how she felt about that. She didn't think she liked the idea that Ian might be so focused on her that he would ignore offers from other Childer. She had witnessed a few of them herself, she knew for a fact that Ian could have easily found a bed partner, or more. Then again, he might have been sleeping in their rooms for all she knew. The flash of jealousy she experienced at that realization was entirely unexpected.

She had been pacing for about twenty minutes when the door was swung open and Ian strode in and banged it shut again. Judging by the way he froze when his eyes fell on Eyrin, he had not anticipated finding her there. His surprise didn't last long however and he walked to stand in front of her, his anger barely contained.

"Did it amuse you," he practically barked, "to ridicule me in that fashion? Did you laugh with the others, on your way back? Poor Ian, so scared he hid rather than join the fight!"

The angry words felt like as many slaps to Eyrin's face.

"No. I didn't laugh. And I never imagined they would, or else I..."

She couldn't finish, unsure as she was that she would have changed her mind if she had been able to predict the consequences of her decision. Ian was in front of her, perfectly healthy and unharmed, or at least as healthy as a vampire could be. She wouldn't trade that for anything.



### ALL THINGS EXCEPT BLOOD

“So why did you do it, if not for a laugh?”

There was still a lot of anger in his voice and eyes, and it was surprisingly painful. She was almost relieved when he turned away from her to face the washing stand. His movements were brusque as he got rid of his cloak and tunic, poured water into the bowl and splashed his face and chest with it. It was easier to talk to him like this, somehow.

“I just wanted you to be safe,” she said very quietly. “I never imagined you would get hurt any other way.”

“Safe?” he repeated, incredulous, as he turned back toward her and dried his face with a cloth. “By attacking me, you wanted me to be safe?” She was about to explain further but he raised his hands in front of him and stopped her from talking. “No, don’t bother. I don’t really want to know. I thought I’d show you tonight what I learned from you. I thought I’d make you proud. Instead, you taught me another lesson and this one will stay with me for a long time. But if you wanted me to leave you alone, all you had to do was say so, Eyrin. You didn’t need to make me the laughing stock of the entire lair.”

He was probably making things worse by being so loud about it but Eyrin forgot to warn him about that. She just wanted him to understand that she had only meant to protect him.

“There will be other fights,” she tried to explain soothingly. “Other demons to slay, other battles for you to win. I just didn’t think you were ready for this one.”

“Not ready?” he glowered, stepping closer to her. “I was ready, I—”

“You died once because of me,” she cut in as gently as she could. “I won’t let it happen again. I can’t.”

She had thought he would rage and protest even more at that quiet declaration. Instead, the whole fight seemed to drain out of him and she watched, a little puzzled, as his features gradually softened.

“Listen, Eyrin,” he started, very softly, and reached to take her hand in his. She let him, unwilling to upset him again. “Our Sire said...he said you feel guilty about the way I died. And that you’ve been pushing me away because of that. You have to see that I don’t blame you. And you shouldn’t blame yourself either. I had never thought about being a vampire, not really, but it is who I am now, and I’m fine with it. I like hunting demons. I like knowing that it keeps the villages safe. So please, don’t be sorry for what happened. I’m not.”

He sounded sincere, but Eyrin couldn’t let his words reach her. She couldn’t allow them to make sense.

### *Kallysten*

“Whether you accept what happened to you is not the question,” she pointed out with a small squeeze to his hand. “You didn’t choose to become a vampire. That’s what’s important. I am responsible for that, and I won’t let any more harm reach you.”

“But I did choose,” he murmured. “Our Sire asked us if I wanted it, and I did. It meant being close to you every day rather than four times a year, and I wanted that. I still do.” His face twisted in pain and he let go of her hand. “Or I did, until you betrayed me tonight. You talk about choices, but what about my choice to fight that battle?”

This time, Eyrin was the one who reached toward him, the back of her fingers caressing his cheek softly. She had wounded him more deeply than she had thought, even if she had been trying to protect him the whole time. Being with her, disfigured as she was, couldn’t possibly be enough for him and so she had pushed him away. Fighting that night had been too dangerous and she had again chosen for him. She didn’t regret either, but maybe it wasn’t the best way to make up for stealing his life.

“What do you want from me?” she asked, whispering. “Just ask, and it is yours.”

He sighed as she brushed her index over his lips. “I just want you. Just want things back to the way they were between us before—”

She shushed him by pressing her mouth to his, very softly as though he might break. She wished things could have been back to what they had once been, too. It wasn’t possible, his heart would never beat again, but at least she could comfort him.

“Have me,” she breathed when she pulled back just enough to speak, and was rewarded when he smiled at her.

After these last few weeks when she had forced herself to stay away from him and to refuse all physical contact, the first gentle glide of his fingers up her arms and over her shoulders was enough to make her shiver. She tried to remain still under his caress and to let him explore her as he wished. She had always taken the lead before, her experience taking over and guiding his lips, hands and cock where she wanted them, but this time she would let him set the pace. She owed him as much.

He tugged softly at her tunic and soon it was falling to the floor. Her undergarment was tighter, designed to make riding comfortable, but he had played with the lacing before and he managed to quickly loosen and remove it too so that she was half naked under his gaze. She flinched when his fingers trailed over the healed but still prominent scars that ran from her left shoulder down her side.

“Oh, Eyrin,” he said, almost choking on her name, and held her tight to his chest, stroking her back gently. “It doesn’t hurt anymore, does it?”

*It hurts every time I see you,* she wanted to reply, but bit back the words before reassuring him. It wasn’t truly a lie; even her leg felt much better.

### ALL THINGS EXCEPT BLOOD

Still holding her close, he led the way to the bed and they lay together on it. A gentle hand ran over Eyrin's arms, breast and neck, barely there yet all the more arousing for it. She only stopped the questing fingers when they tried to brush away the strands of hair covering her face. Ian nodded briefly as though understanding she wasn't ready to be *that* naked in front of anyone.

He leaned back toward her lips and she remained passive as he kissed her, contenting herself with slowly stroking his tongue with her own as he explored her mouth. He caressed pointedly where her fangs hid, but she refused to let them drop. She had taken enough of his blood as it was.

Still kissing her, he resumed trailing his hands over her, and the barely increased pressure of his fingers as they danced over her skin had Eyrin moan her need for more. She broke her resolution to let him do as he pleased and tentatively ran her hand over his arm and down his chest, spreading the few remaining droplets of water over his skin as she went further down. His breeches felt strained as she cupped his crotch and he arched into her palm in search of more friction. Her fingers were trembling when she pulled at the laces that would free him and she fumbled a little longer than necessary. Ian broke the kiss to let out a quiet grunt when she wrapped her hand around his straining cock and squeezed softly. She repeated the gesture, just to hear him again.

"I missed you," he whispered in between the teasing kisses he laid over her neck and shoulder. "Missed you so much..."

The plea was one she had heard before. Time had indeed seemed quite long between Ian's visits to the lair, and Eyrin had learned to miss him too. She had had few human lovers as attentive to her needs and wants as Ian could be when she let him. Right now, though, she wanted to satisfy *his* needs and make him call her name. He was always so lovely when he came.

Sliding over his torso with inoffensive bites and teasing licks, she stopped, just a second, with her lips pressed over his heart. She had always enjoyed feeling its beat, a quick tattoo against her lips or fingers when Ian was as aroused as he was now. She was almost surprised to realize it wasn't beating. For a brief moment, she had forgotten; remembering wove a painful knot in her throat.

"I'm sorry," she murmured in between soft kisses pressed to his chest and down still. "So very sorry."

Ian groaned when she flicked her tongue at the glistening tip of his cock. "Just...don't do it again," he managed to say, his voice sounding rough with need.

"I won't," she murmured in between open mouth kisses pressed down his shaft. "You only had one human life to lose. But I swear I'll protect—"

***Kallysten***

The fingers he had threaded in her hair tightened to the point of pain as he pulled her face up and away from his erection.

“What—what are you sorry about, exactly?” he asked, his needless panting subsiding and his eyes narrowed to mere slits.

## ALL THINGS EXCEPT BLOOD

### Chapter Six

The noise of the heavy door banging shut behind Ian echoed throughout the lair but it wasn't anywhere near satisfying. He had thought—no, he had hoped—that Eyrin had finally understood how much he missed her, how much pain her rejection was causing him, how bewildered he had been by her betrayal earlier that night. He had believed that she wanted him just as much as he wanted her, and that talking to him had at last broken through whatever barriers she had erected around herself. But he had been wrong, on all counts. The passivity he had taken as an acknowledgment that he was her equal, now, had only been her way to give him compensation; her body for the life she had taken from him.

That she would have sex with him out of pity, remorse or guilt was worse than anything. It was worse than the gazes he attracted as he made his way to the weapons room, some of them mocking, others disgusted. Clearly, the news that he was a coward was spreading fast.

It was worse, also, than his fear that he would never touch Eyrin again. He'd rather have been celibate than accept her pity. Couldn't she understand that he didn't blame her for his siring? Things happened, sometimes good, sometimes bad, but always for a reason. His father had repeated as much to him dozens of times as he was growing up, and Ian was convinced of the truth of the words. There were many things he had lost forever when becoming a vampire, but he had been given just as much in return.

Or so he had thought until Eyrin had proved he had lost her so thoroughly.

The sword slid easily into his hand when he picked it up from its wall stand. It was heavier and broader than what he had been trained to use so far but he had wanted to try using it for a few days and it seemed like the perfect time. With as much frustration and anger coursing through him, wielding the heavier weapon wasn't the challenge it had first seemed to be. It wasn't as though he could return to his bedchamber. Eyrin might still be there, and he had no wish to talk to her any more. He had left the room so fast in his need to get away from her that he had barely taken the time to lace his breeches again and had not even picked up his tunic from the floor. Childer walked around the lair half

### *Kallysten*

naked often enough and what was still unusual for him was the norm for the rest of them, no one would notice.

One after the other, he pushed his body into the fighting forms Eyrin had taught him, bitterly aware that he was trying to escape her by doing something intensely associated with her in his mind. He could tell when his movements were anything less than perfect, when the sword did not slice through the air at the perfect angle, and he pushed himself to repeat the motions, time after time, as Eyrin would have urged him to if she had been there.

When his Sire stepped in, he was exhausted and ready to stop. But the older vampire observed him for a minute or two before going to pick a sword on the wall. Ian stood at attention when the Master took position in front of him, and was startled enough by the first strike that he was almost too slow to parry it.

“Focus,” his Sire said tersely. “I have no intention of hurting you, so don’t let me.”

Ian was prepared for the second blow, and the third, both of which he blocked cleanly if not easily. Growing bolder, he tried to strike back. His Sire evaded the blow with almost insulting ease. He then struck with words.

“Eyrin is hardly the only lover you could have.”

Frozen in shock at the turn the conversation was taking, Ian didn’t see the next blow coming. It was a testament to his Sire’s control of his weapon that the blade merely nicked his chest, right above his heart, rather than cut more deeply.

“Focus,” the master repeated before striking again, acting as though he had not been saying anything out of the ordinary. “Human women come in every day. You could have your pick of just about any of them, few ever say no. And at least two of the Childer are making mooneyes at you. Or hadn’t you noticed?”

Ian kept quiet as he parried or evaded strike after strike, his body falling into the appropriate defensive stances with hardly any thought. He had in truth given no consideration to either option the Master had suggested. He’d had eyes for no one save Eyrin for five years. Being constantly so close to her was not helping anything. He could see now that she didn’t feel the same way as he did, that she had only been playing with him as a human and had tried to take him to her bed out of pity earlier, but it didn’t make it any easier to let go of his feelings for her.

“So? Aren’t you going to reply, boy?”

“I’m not a boy,” he protested without thinking. “And I don’t want anyone else. I want Eyrin.”

### ALL THINGS EXCEPT BLOOD

His Sire's next attack held just enough added force that Ian had to back away even as he blocked the blade with his own. His voice as he spoke again seemed to contain the very same strength.

"You have centuries left to live, Childe. Dozens of lovers to take, if not more. Why cage yourself? If she truly doesn't care about you—"

"I do."

The words were as quiet as they were unexpected, and Ian almost tripped over his own feet as he turned to face the newcomer. Eyrin was leaning against the wall by the entrance, where their Sire had to have noticed her. Had he been talking to her, rather than to Ian? How long had she been there?

"You do?" the Master said almost scornfully. "And yet, you've been rejecting him ever since he rose as one of us, Eyrin. If you care, you have a strange way of showing it."

Ian remained silent. He didn't trust himself not to defend Eyrin if he opened his mouth, and that was the last thing he wanted to do, still wounded as he was by what had happened in his chambers. Yet, he couldn't help wondering if she had come here looking for him, and if so, why.

He should have known better by now, but again, he couldn't help hoping.

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It seemed that hours had passed since Ian had left her, lashing out with words that, at that moment, hadn't made much sense. But as Eyrin had remained still on the bed and had thought about what she might have done to upset him so, she had begun to piece it all together.

He had been angry at the way she had kept him away from the fight earlier that night, and had expected an apology. Instead, she had apologized for killing him, moments after he had assured her he didn't blame her in any way for that. Of course he had been upset. She would have been, too, in his place, and she could only blame herself for not understanding faster. She would apologize for knocking him out even if she still believed it had been the right thing to do despite the consequences, but maybe she could also apologize for pushing Ian away these past weeks, if it turned out that he truly wanted her.

Maybe she could also stop lying to herself and admit that she wanted him too.

She had seen the effect glimpses of her ruined face had on vampires and humans alike, and she had persuaded herself that no one would ever touch her with anything over than pity for the scars marring her body. However, she had seen the same reverence and awe in Ian's eyes when he had looked at her as she had ever witnessed in his human gaze.

### *Kallysten*

She had been too caught up in what they were doing at the time to realize as much, but with just a few caresses of his eyes, lips and fingers, Ian had made her feel as though she were still beautiful rather than disfigured. It might have been why she had forgotten, for a brief moment, his siring and the incident that had led to it. It had quite simply been the first time in weeks that she had felt like herself again, and she owed that to Ian. All she could hope was that she hadn't broken what existed between them beyond repair.

She slid her tunic back on before leaving the room to look for Ian, unwilling to show her scars to anyone else. Finding him was a simple matter; all she had to do was follow the sound of his voice and clashing metal. She arrived just in time to hear him declare, "I don't want anyone else. I want Eyrin."

The pang in her chest was painful but sweet. Her Sire's gaze on her, on the other hand, made her shiver in cold. Thankfully his eyes didn't linger on her and he returned his attention to Ian, launching on him an attack that made Eyrin's fists clench even more nervously that she could smell Ian's blood in the air.

"You have centuries left to live, Childe. Dozens of lovers to take, if not more. Why cage yourself? If she truly doesn't care about you—"

She hadn't meant to intervene, not like this, but before she knew it the words were passing her lips.

"I do."

Judging by the way Ian startled when he heard her voice, he had not noticed her presence until she had spoken. Part of her wanted to scold him for it; she had tried to teach him to be aware of his surroundings at all times. However, before she could decide whether to remind him of that lesson to him or not, their Sire's words chilled her once more to the bone.

"You do? And yet, you've been rejecting him ever since he rose as one of us, Eyrin. If you care, you have a strange way of showing it."

"If I didn't," she shot back, trying with some difficulty to remain courteous in front of his accusation, "I wouldn't have kept him safe from that battle tonight. He wasn't ready for it and you should have known it."

She heard Ian begin to protest but she didn't hear what he was saying, caught as she was by the unanticipated triumph on her Sire's features and in his voice.

"I knew it!" he exclaimed, and for a second Eyrin thought he was agreeing with her. "I knew you had something to do with it. You will apologize to Ian for it, in front of the entire clan. You may believe what you want, but he was ready for that battle, and because of you he was unable to prove it."



### **ALL THINGS EXCEPT BLOOD**

Eyrin still didn't believe Ian would have been entirely safe, had he taken part in that fight, but she could hardly refuse what clearly sounded like a direct order from her Sire. The protest came from the most unlikely person.

"It's not necessary, my lord," Ian said quietly, almost submissively despite his contradictory words. "I will show what I can do with my acts. An explanation won't change how others see me, only how they see Eyrin."

Of all things, the Master rolled his eyes at Ian.

"As foolish as ever," he muttered. "But you were the wronged one, and if that's what you want..."

"It is, my lord."

Ian cast an almost shy glance in Eyrin's direction; she had no idea how to answer it or his words, so she gave him a smile, just as hesitant. Their Sire didn't even try to disguise his snort of laughter.

"I've had enough of this," he said, shaking his head as he retrieved Ian's sword and returned it as well as his own to the wall stand. "You two are liabilities on the hunt, too distracted by each other to pay enough attention to what you're doing, or playing games like you did tonight, Eyrin. It ends now. I want you to settle this out. Talk, fight, have sex, do whatever it takes but get past these apologies and regret nonsense. I've made you both, I am responsible for you both, and I am tired of you two acting like children. Go. Now. And don't let me see you again until you've resolved all of it."

He practically pushed Ian and Eyrin out of the weapon room and toward the bedchambers hallway, and before she knew it Eyrin was in her bedchambers, Ian next to her. The time had come to leave behind everything but the truth.

Still, truth had never seemed so hard to reach.

## Chapter Seven

As she walked away from him and to the fireplace, Ian kept his eyes on Eyrin and was eerily reminded of the day he had been sired. Eyrin had seemed as unwilling then to have him anywhere near her, as she seemed to be now, and it pained him to think that she only tolerated him because their Sire had requested it from her.

“If you want me to go...”

He left the offer unfinished, certain that he didn’t need to say more. He could see a faint smile drawn on her lips when she turned back to look at him.

“And disobey our Sire’s order?”

His hands closed into tight fists and he started backing off toward the door, but Eyrin stopped him with a shake of her head and softer words.

“I was coming to you for the same reason he sent us here.”

“To have sex?” Ian challenged. “If that’s it, I’m not interested in your pity. I’m sure I’ll find someone who doesn’t mind that I’m a vampire.”

Her sad sigh weighed on him to the point that Ian almost felt like asking for forgiveness before he remembered that he had nothing to feel sorry for, unlike Eyrin. He watched, slightly resentful, as she sat on the edge of her bed and tapped the mattress next to her with her hand.

“Come,” she said, a request more than a command. “I have one last lesson to share with you. Then you’ll be free to leave if you still want to.”

Reluctantly, Ian crossed the room to go sit near her, although he sat farther away than she had suggested. Then he waited. It took her a long moment to start talking, and when she did her eye seemed to hold him where he was.

“Vampires aren’t supposed to feel love, you know. That’s one of the first things our Sire ever taught me.”

Ian remembered hearing the same thing from the Master, but before he could say as much she continued, still very quiet.

“But that doesn’t mean we can’t love. And it certainly doesn’t mean we don’t. I think you love me. I think you loved me even before I killed you. And I...”

### ALL THINGS EXCEPT BLOOD

Ian didn't dare move or even blink for fear of breaking the charm and stopping her. He had hoped beyond reason, but he hadn't hoped for anything like this.

"The most difficult for me," she said slowly after a few seconds of silence, "is that I don't know if I'm sad or happy that you are a vampire today. I did kill you, and I can't express how horrified I still feel at that idea. You tried to comfort me, and in return, I took from you the most precious thing you owned."

He tried to interrupt her at that but she reached over to lay two fingers over his lips.

"And at the same time, I can't help but be glad, for so many reasons. You'll live forever. I see you every day instead of four times a year. You make a strong vampire, and part of me knew you would. So maybe it wasn't completely an accident that I killed you after all. That terrifies me. That's not who I am. I protect humans, I don't let harm befall them. And that's why I didn't let you fight tonight. I'd rather see you hate me than see you hurt, or worse."

The fingers retreated, leaving Ian free to speak, but he caught her hand before she could rest it in her lap as before.

"I am as much to blame as you are, if there is blame to be given. I gave you my neck when I shouldn't have. I knew the risks, and I chose to ignore them. I would do the same today, if I had to. Maybe it wasn't completely an accident that you killed me, but maybe it wasn't completely an accident either that I let you do it."

He kissed the inside of her palm, hiding his smile with a second kiss when she shivered.

"Do you want to pick up where we stopped earlier?" he asked, allowing his words to caress her skin.

"Where *you* stopped, you mean? I wouldn't mind, I think. What about you?"

Her tone had been teasing, but her free hand was anything but when she cupped Ian's crotch. He groaned as his cock hardened eagerly at her touch.

"I wouldn't mind either," he agreed, but had to express his only reservation before they moved any further. "As long as you're not letting me touch you simply out of guilt."

She blinked at that, as though surprised, and drew both her hands away from Ian. "I'll promise I'm not if you'll say you don't want me out of pity."

It was Ian's turn to be surprised. For a second, he thought about asking why he was supposed to feel pity. Then he saw the uncertainty reflected on her face—or rather, on the part of her face that he could see.

### *Kallysten*

Slowly enough that Eyrin could easily have stopped him but with his eyes pleading for her not to, Ian reached out to brush the hair away from her face. Her head jerked back a little, and he could see that she was fighting herself not to move any more.

“Remember when I said you were beautiful?” His voice trembled along with his fingers when they pushed her hair behind her ear. “I meant it then. I still mean it now.”

Still very slowly, he leaned toward her to kiss the healed but prominent marks that marred her cheek but Eyrin turned her face at the last second so that their mouths met instead. Earlier that night, she had been passive when he had kissed her. This time, she took the initiative as she had always done before that day, pressing her tongue to the seam of his lips until he complied and let her in. She stilled for a second at the first touch of her tongue against his and Ian grinned into the kiss when she stroked against the bleeding cut on the side of his tongue.

Part of him had missed this, offering his blood to her and feeling as though he were melding with her. It was only a small cut from his own fang and it closed even as she caressed it, but she practically purred into his mouth before pushing him down to lay on the bed.

“I hadn’t thought I’d ever taste you again.”

A dark shadow passed over her face as she spoke and Ian started to sit up again to comfort her, but she held him in place with a light hand pressed at the center of his chest. Lithely, she moved over him so that she was straddling his body. Ian’s eyes tightened when she rocked the apex of her legs against his crotch. The layers of fabric between them were sheer torture.

Without a word, she ran a finger over the cut the Sire had inflicted on him earlier. Ian almost expected her to chide him on his carelessness, but all she did was lean down to trace the closed wound again, this time with her lips and tongue, cleaning the dried blood. The touch was sensual but too delicate when every inch of Ian’s skin was crying out for more contact. Sliding his hands beneath her tunic, he caressed the smooth expanse of her back until she sat up again, robbing him of the feel of her. He protested with a wordless grumble that turned into a groan when, in the same movement, she pressed down again onto his confined cock and pulled the tunic over her head, exposing her chest to him.

“You’re perfect,” he murmured, cupping a breast in each hand and rubbing his thumbs against the hardening nipples.

Her fingers tugging over the laces of his breeches, Eyrin let out a quiet, derisive snort.

“Perfect,” Ian repeated, as much conviction in his voice as he could manage, and caught her gaze.

### ALL THINGS EXCEPT BLOOD

She gave him an almost timid glance and smile, completely at odds with her utter confidence when she freed his dick to pump it a few times in her tight fist. The contrast was strange, but not unpleasant. Ian thought he could get used to it.

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*He really means it.*

The thought, full of awe and wonder, kept echoing through Eyrin's mind. She wasn't sure how it was even possible for him to ignore the scars that disgraced her body, but Ian meant his words when he called her beautiful or perfect, just as he had meant his assurances that he was at peace with his new life and didn't blame her for it.

Somehow, she hadn't really believed him until now, a small part of her clinging to the idea that he had just been trying to be nice to her. To realize that he meant it, all of it, only made her want him more. She herself hadn't told him a single word she hadn't meant, but even now the truths she had been half-concealing to herself tasted strange on her tongue, like a fruit she had expected would be bitter but had turned out sweeter than honey.

Suddenly, it became paramount to feel him against her, without the flimsy barriers of cloth that separated them. She slid off him to get rid of her boots and pants almost feverishly; Ian watched her for a second, his gaze clouded with lust, before joining in her efforts and divesting himself as well.

The first touch when Eyrin lay down over Ian again, skin to skin from chest to toe, caused both of them to quiver and to try to increase the contact. His hands seemed to be everywhere suddenly, stroking with a feather light touch along her spine before too briefly cupping her ass, one sliding back up to massage her breast while the other found its way to her slightly parted legs and the slick wetness there. Leaning as she was on her forearm, Eyrin only had one free hand to explore Ian's flesh but she made as good a use of it as she knew how, mirroring his touch even as she pressed down onto his cock, trapped between their bodies.

The contact still wasn't enough, though, and each additional touch only added to Eyrin's craving for more. Letting herself fall by Ian's side, she clutched at his shoulder so he would turn with her. There was no need to speak; as soon as she slid her leg over his own, opening herself to him, he clutched at her hip and surged forward, penetrating her in one fast, smooth glide.

Eyrin sighed in pleasure, barely louder than a breath, and accompanied Ian's slow movements with her own rocking in counterpoint to his. After weeks of celibacy, to feel his cock sliding progressively deeper in her until she didn't know anymore where her body stopped and where his started was bliss.

### *Kallysten*

And still, incredibly, not enough.

They were sharing the most intimate act a man and woman could offer each other, but they were vampires, too. They could share more than sex. Ian had reminded her of it moments earlier with just a hint of his blood on his tongue.

With her arms tight around him, she pulled backwards until she was on her back, Ian resting between her legs. The position gave more leverage to his thrusting and he lost no time increasing his tempo, but it also offered his neck more fully to Eyrin, and hers to him.

She found the two puncture marks where she had bitten him easily enough. They were healed but slightly jagged beneath her tongue, a testimony to how she had forgotten everything, even herself, when she had last taken his blood.

“Do it,” Ian grunted, punctuating his words with his hardest thrust yet that sent a flash of heat through Eyrin.

“With you,” she replied breathlessly.

She tilted her head a little more, exposing the curve of her neck fully, and Ian’s rhythm faltered for a second or two. She didn’t need to encourage him, though. Before she could reiterate her words, his mouth was on her, blunt teeth biting painlessly as he waited for her. Her fangs pierced his skin an instant only before his sank into her but they started drinking together, slow, deep pulls on blood that, at that moment, didn’t belong to either of them anymore, but rather was theirs.

Her orgasm took Eyrin by surprise, lost as she was in the taste and feel of her lover, in her and all around her. She wrenched her mouth from him to gasp, mindlessly arching her hips into him to try to prolong the sensations coursing through her body.

Her name on his lips when he came was the most exquisite thing she had ever heard.

## ALL THINGS EXCEPT BLOOD

### Chapter Eight

“Good fight, Ian.”

“Surprisingly good fight, even after what we heard about you.”

Ian acknowledged the praises and prodding of his comrades in arms with a nod and a tight smile. Simon had asked more than once over the past three hunts about what had truly happened on the night that should have seen Ian’s first battle. He had not been subtle about it, and had not appreciated Ian’s refusal to answer his questions. Simon was a great fighter and Ian enjoyed hunting with him because it gave him the occasion to witness some excellent sword work and, hopefully, learn from it. However, his personality and his insistence to be told about what was none of his business almost made Ian wish that he hadn’t requested to hunt apart from Eyrin.

Then again, all Ian needed was to see Eyrin in the distance, pacing in front of the lair and undoubtedly waiting for him as she had the past three nights, to remember why he was better off not having his lover near him in battle. He was incredibly grateful when his two companions refrained from commenting about her presence, but at the same time he had no doubt that they would tease him about it, once again, at the first occasion.

As soon as he reached the stable and dismounted, Eyrin was by his side, her frown severe as she sniffed.

“You smell of blood,” she noted darkly, her eye detailing him and looking for wounds. “Where did you get hurt?”

Simon and Jeb clapped him on the shoulder as they passed by him, and he could hear their stifled laughs as they walked away.

“I’m fine,” he assured her with a roll of his eyes. “And honestly, Eyrin, I like you much better in the role of lover than in that of minder.”

Her eyebrow shot up at that and he could tell that she would protest until he was convinced of her good intentions, but she didn’t have a chance to do it. Behind her, their Sire cleared his throat to get their attention.

“Eyrin? Walk with me, Childe.”

The look she gave Ian spelled out very clearly that the discussion wasn’t over, but the kiss she pressed to his lips before catching up with the Master said something entirely

### *Kallysten*

different. Ian snorted quietly as he watched them walk away side by side. He knew Eyrin still worried for him, and he suspected she always would. In truth, he didn't mind her protectiveness—at least not as long as she restricted herself to words rather than blows to the head—but he would have liked it better if she had kept her mothering for when they were alone.

He took care of his horse, quickly but thoroughly, before entering the lair and walking to the chambers he now shared with Eyrin. They hadn't really talked about it, she'd just moved her possessions into his bedroom and succinctly explained that she didn't like her own much anymore. Ian suspected that it had something to do with the fact that he had died there, but he didn't feel like he ought to ask.

As usual, the fire was roaring in the fireplace, and Eyrin had placed a large metal pot full of water to warm next to flames. Stripping off his cloak, tunic and boots, Ian picked up one of the washing cloths in the pot and used it to clean off the dust of the ride, as well as the blood from the small cut on the back of his hand. It was nothing, and it would probably be gone by morning, but he doubted that it would escape Eyrin's notice.

She would ask to know how it had happened, certainly, and would drill him into avoiding being hurt the same way again. He had come to realize that it wasn't guilt that pushed her to be as protective as she showed herself, but rather it was her way to show how much she cared about him; how much she loved him, even if she had never said the words. He doubted she would say it, or even could, but it didn't matter as much as he had thought it would. Words only went so far; actions could be more meaningful, sometimes. And sometimes, simple smiles or small touches were sufficient.

He had just finished drying off when the door opened and Eyrin entered. He turned to face her and lost his smile as she approached, looking extremely grim.

"What is it?" he asked at once, concerned. "What did he say?"

He noticed how her gaze fell onto the back of his hand and braced himself for the predictable argument, but her lips pinching tight were her only reaction.

"He said that I fuss too much about you," she grimaced. "And that it's a bad habit to get into."

Trying very hard to contain his grin, Ian stepped closer to her and unhooked the fastening of her cloak. He caught it easily as it fell off her shoulders and threw it over the back of the chair with his own.

"I can't say I disagree with him," he snickered as he led her backwards until she was sitting on the edge of the bed. "You do realize I'm not a child, don't you?"

Kneeling at her feet, he undid the laces of her boots and pulled them and her stockings off. She brought her eyes back to her with a light touch to his cheek.



### ALL THINGS EXCEPT BLOOD

“You’re not my Childe. That’s what he said when he asked me to stop.”

The words were quiet and emotionless; too much so. Eyrin was more affected by the pronouncement than she wanted Ian to know. He wasn’t sure how to answer.

“And then,” she continued after taking a deep breath in, “he said he is putting me back at the head of a hunting group.”

Ian had quickly learned how much of an honor it was to be chosen as one of the Master’s lieutenants and he beamed at the good news.

“That’s wonderful!” he exclaimed, and cupped the back of her neck to pull her lips down to his for a quick kiss. She replied to it with surprisingly little enthusiasm.

“I’m not sure I want to do it,” she admitted. “It’s too soon and I’m not fighting as well as I—”

The kiss, this time, was Ian’s way to shush her.

“You’re ready. He wouldn’t have given this back to you if he weren’t sure you were. You’ll do just fine.”

He could tell that his words were comforting her, but she still pouted as he stood in front of her.

“You say that,” she protested teasingly, her voice muffled when he pulled her tunic over her head, “but you don’t even want to fight by my side.”

He gave her his most innocent smile. “Fine. I’ll help you. If you don’t want to lead that group, I’ll knock you out before the battle.”

She blinked twice, looking surprised, before laughing. Grabbing Ian’s waist, she pulled him onto the bed, twisting their bodies so that she was lying on top of him.

“You are terrible!” she chuckled.

Ian would have pointed out that she had started it, but her lips and hands were suddenly everywhere on him, setting his skin ablaze, and words were far beyond his reach

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The muffled sounds of voices and clashing weapons coming from the rest of the lair were typical for a late afternoon but they failed to disturb the deep peace in the bedchambers. Eyrin let her mind wander as she absently stroked her thumb over Ian’s chest. Their limbs were still entangled, as they had been when they had fallen asleep, and to be so close to him was soothing her mind.

She had never had a permanent companion in her bed, only ephemeral lovers, humans or vampires, whom she had taken in as the mood had struck. She was beginning to think that it would be very easy to get used to her new sleeping arrangements. She wasn’t sure how to feel about that. She wasn’t sure how to feel about many things

### *Kallysten*

anymore, in fact. After a century and half of thinking she would never experience love, the feeling was strange, and a little frightening too because it changed everything she had ever taken for granted.

“You look far away.” Ian’s whisper slid over the silence and its stillness without truly disturbing them. “Where did your thoughts take you?”

Eyrin blinked slowly before refocusing her gaze on him. For a moment, she could have fooled herself once again into believing he was still the young human she had made her lover. To that man, she would have smiled, and lied. To this one, she owed the truth. Not simply because she had caused him to be what he was today, but because he still saw the same Eyrin in her, when she herself continued to struggle with whom she was.

“I’ll have to leave, some day,” she murmured. “I don’t think it’ll be soon, Leane is older than me and she’ll probably be the next one, but some day. I think that’s why our Sire put me at the head of that hunting group again, so I’d have more experience leading.”

She had expected Ian to protest at the idea that she would leave the lair and him, but all he did was reach toward her face to brush a strand of hair off her forehead before running his knuckles softly down her right cheek.

“You always knew it’d happen. Why does it bother you so now?”

She stiffened in his arms. Couldn’t he understand? Didn’t he feel the same?

“I’ll miss you,” she grumbled. “Even though it won’t be reciprocal, it seems.”

“You know I’ll miss you too,” he said with a sad smile. “And if there was any way for me to come with you...”

He didn’t finish the sentence, but something in his tone hinted that he might accompany her, going against all rules and traditions, if she only let him. Eyrin didn’t have the smallest idea how to even respond to that. She didn’t have to, though, because Ian spoke again, his words quiet but firm.

“But I don’t think this is what’s on your mind. I’m right here, right now, and you don’t even know how long it will be before you have to go. So tell me what really bothers you.”

She frowned, ready to deny his words had any truth to them, but stopped short when realizing he might not be completely wrong. When she failed to say anything, he held her tighter to him.

“Don’t worry,” he said, his voice now a warm honeyed caress. “You’ll make a wonderful Sire. I know you will. You were mine in all things except blood, and my only regret is that I can’t call you Sire.”

### **ALL THINGS EXCEPT BLOOD**

Once again, she couldn't find the words to answer, but when he kissed her she knew she didn't have to say anything.

*Kallysten*

## About the Author

Kallysten is a French citizen whose most exciting accomplishment to date was to cross a few thousand miles and an ocean to pursue (and catch!) the love of her life. She has been writing for almost fifteen years, playing with Science Fiction, short stories and poetry, and is now having great fun playing with vampires and romance novels.

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