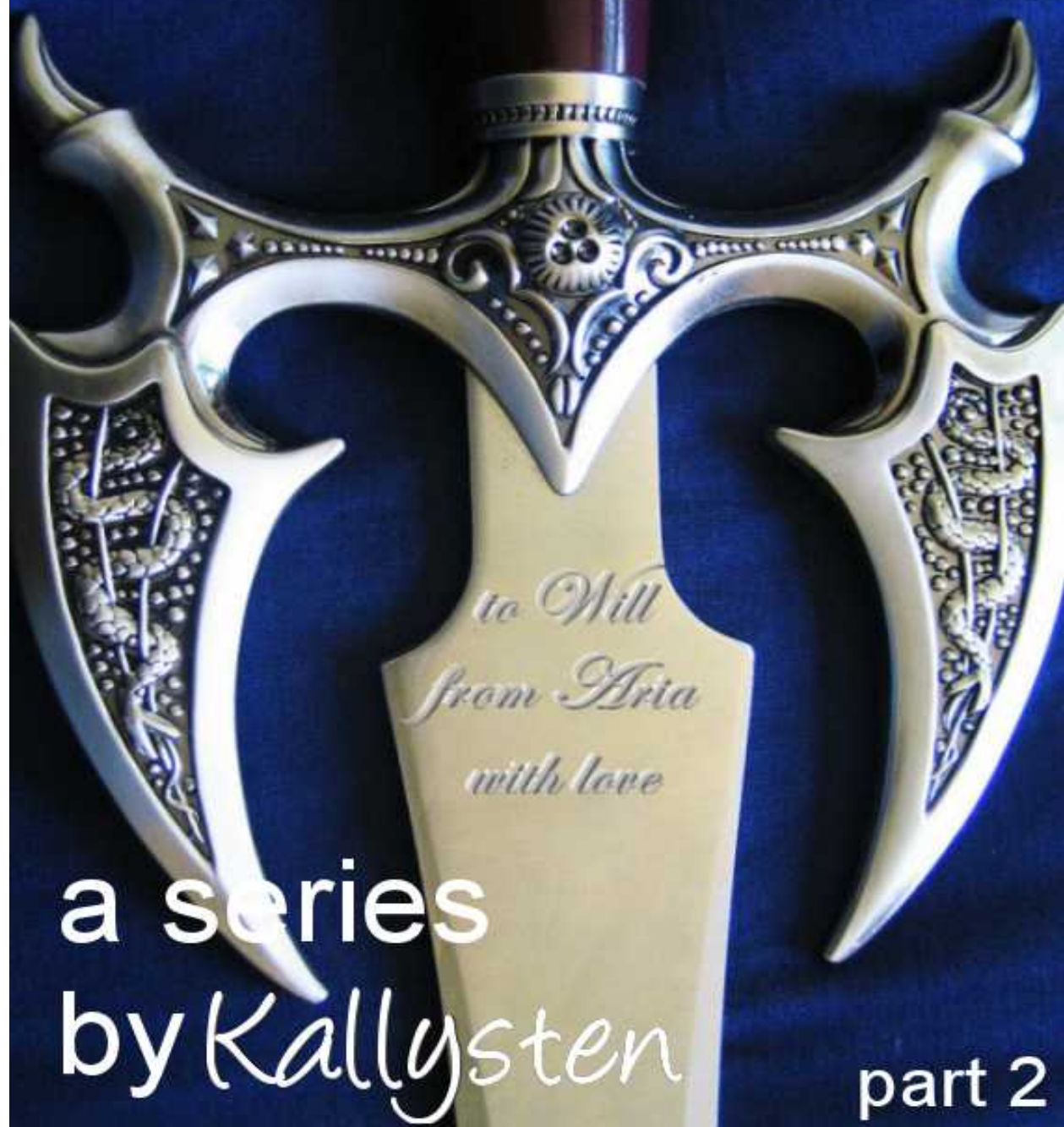


FREE STORY

# Aria & Will



a series  
by Kallysten

part 2

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## **Part 2 - A Sword for Will**

### **Chapter 11**

Aria's short nails clicked rhythmically against the glass table. On the printed sheet in front of her, the seven items on the meeting's agenda taunted her. She had only checked off the first two, and the meeting had started more than three hours earlier. She hid a yawn behind her hand and leaned back in her chair. Around the table, the five other Heads of Squadron concealed their boredom and tiredness with various levels of success while Carter and Stevenson continued to argue over how many troops would be needed that night. The two majors had asked opinions and advice at first, but it had soon become clear that they wouldn't let the Heads of Squadron—their subordinates—weigh in on the decision. They rarely ever did.

"If the intensity of the attack is the same as it was two nights ago, we'll need as many troops as possible on the walls."

Stevenson had only rephrased an argument he had offered earlier, and Carter rolled her eyes at him.

"We can call more soldiers if we need to." Her counter-argument wasn't new either. "The troops need rest. Most of them were out until sunrise for two nights in a row. Vampires won't mind but humans—"

The distinction she was trying to make shook Aria out of her stupor as effectively as a bucket of icy water. She sat up, her brusque movement drawing everybody's attention to her.

"Vamps will mind just as much as humans," she said coldly.

She was the only vampire sitting at that table, and she sometimes had the feeling that the others forgot what she was.

"I didn't mean anything by it," Carter replied with a strained smile.

"I'm sure you didn't," Aria shot back. "Just like I'm sure you don't mean to bore us all to tears by arguing endlessly over what should be a simple matter. This question was first asked decades ago. Commander Bergsen and Wilhelm established a procedure that worked to this day. Why change it now?"

A quick glance around the table showed approving nods, but across from her Carter and Stevenson seemed to agree on something for the first time that day.

“Commander Bergsen is dead,” Carter said. “Major Stevenson and myself are in charge here, per his will.”

“As for why the procedures need to be changed,” Stevenson added, “you only need to look at the numbers to realize the situation is different. There are more attacks—”

“Have *you* looked at the numbers?” Aria interrupted him impatiently. “The number of attacks have surged every dozen years since they started occurring. If the pattern holds, we’re at the height of a cycle right now.”

Carter snorted and looked around the room as she talked as though to take the other Heads of Squadron as witnesses; her expression soured, no doubt when she found them less sympathetic to her words than she would have wished.

“If the pattern holds! What if it doesn’t? What if they keep coming in increasingly greater numbers until we’re defeated? Will it be time then to worry about changing procedures?”

A voice rose on Aria’s right before she could reply. She looked at Jonas with mild surprise. The oldest of those around the table, she didn’t know him much save for his reputation at having been entirely devoted to Bergsen. He was usually very quiet.

“What if’s don’t help on the battlefield,” he said calmly. “What we need right now is a decision. You two can argue about changing our usual responses to demon activity later. Without us.”

Carter looked stricken speechless, and Stevenson sputtered a few seconds before he could let out a coherent response.

“This is mutiny!” he called out, his voice shaking in outrage. “How dare you question—”

“We’d be more at fault if we kept quiet.”

This time, the interruption had come from Aria’s left, and she struggled not to throw a quick smile at Mary. They had gone through the cadets training together what seemed like a lifetime ago, and while they had never been close friends, they had remained friendly even after Aria had become a vampire. Not everyone had been as understanding.

“Leadership is supposed to guide us,” another Head of Squadron chimed in. “You’re hardly doing that when you spend two hours arguing. You do realize that’s more time than any of us slept today, right?”

Silence fell on the room.

Fifteen minutes later, the decisions had been made and the meeting adjourned. All the way back to her apartment, Aria couldn’t shake the feeling that it would all have been much easier if Wilhelm had been there.

Things had changed a lot since Bergsen's death, only weeks after Aria's turning. Somehow in her mind all of the events that had happened around that time had become linked, and it was sometimes difficult for her to tell if there was any relation between two separate events.

Four years earlier, she had become a vampire, turned by her boyfriend Lorenzo when she would have otherwise died from a wound received on the battlefield. Bergsen had died of a heart attack while giving a speech to a new class of Cadets. Wilhelm had taken a step back from his involvement in the Guard, even if he was still on the walls every night. There were rumors in the Guard that he had been asked to step back by Bergsen's two chosen successors. These two Guard members, Carter and Stevenson, had made many changes as the years had passed. They had created a new rank—Head of Squadron—and Aria had been named as one of them. Half the soldiers under her command were vampires, and she had had to fight hard for them to accept her as their leader in combat when she was nothing more than a fledgling.

All of them had accepted her, by now; she had proved herself by defending them, both in battle and in meetings like the one she had just left. All of them, or almost.

The elevator's door opened. She swallowed a sigh as she stepped out. The apartment she shared with her Sire was mere feet away and she was exhausted, they should have been easy steps to take. And still, it took her long minutes to finally enter the apartment. When she did, it was as quietly as she could, and to go lie down on the small sofa rather than join Lorenzo in bed.

~

Far in the distance, the moon reflected off the demons' armor and weapons as they approached. Aria lowered her looking glass and tapped a finger on the mini-com hooked behind her right ear to activate it. A single tone indicated she was on line.

"Aria here. Forty to fifty."

"Same here," a voice answered in her ear.

A second voice agreed. She tapped the mini-com twice, shutting it off, and raised the looking glass again. At her side, Lorenzo cleared his throat.

"I count only thirty," he said when she looked at him.

She forced a smile to her lips. "Thanks. You know we always estimate to the high."

He did not react to the smile in any way. His body remained tense. He was always tense when he talked to her on the walls, these days. She was afraid it would get him hurt. No one could be that tense on the battlefield and remain unscathed.

"Why?" he challenged. "High estimates make the soldiers think the fight will be harder than what it'll really be."

“And it also prepares them to fight longer than what they’ll need so that when the fight ends, it’s good news.”

He didn’t look convinced. Aria wasn’t in the mood for another one of these discussions.

“That’s the way we’ve decided to do it,” she said blankly, and directed her attention back to the approaching demons. A few more minutes and they would be close enough for a volley of arrows.

“We?” Lorenzo snorted. “You mean your merry band of—”

“If you disagree, Lieutenant, I suggest you take it up with your Head of Squadron. You asked to change units as I recall. And your unit is not on duty tonight.”

Almost a year after the fact, she still felt the pain of that request, as sharp as the slash of the sword on the night she had died. He hadn’t even told her he didn’t want to serve under her anymore, going straight instead to Major Stevenson. She could only remember how betrayed she had felt. Things had started to turn sour between them long before that, but up to that night she had believed it would get better. She didn’t know anymore what to do or say; whatever she tried, it never seemed to be the right answer.

She watched Lorenzo walk away. Unconsciously, she clenched her hand on the hilt of the sword hanging from a scabbard at her belt, eased it out and let it slide back in. In the distance, behind where Lorenzo had disappeared, she could see a lone silhouette leaning against the edge of the fortifications. She didn’t need to get any closer to know it was Wilhelm; to know, also, that he had heard every word.

Turning back toward the plain, she raised her looking glass again. She couldn’t wait for those demons to finally reach Newhaven.

~

*Aria changed a lot, in those four years, and yet she remained the same child—young woman—fighter I had ever known. It was only a natural progression for her to move up the hierarchy of the Guard, a progression that I had stifled while she was human but that I refused to impede any more. As difficult as it was for me, I was determined to let her be. I couldn’t help keeping an eye on her, of course, but I didn’t meddle any longer. It wasn’t my place to do so. She had a Sire. Unfortunately, it would have been easier to stay on the sidelines if he had been doing a better job.*

*It had been a long time since I had last had a Childe, but I had not forgotten what it had been like. There were so many things a newly turned vampire needed to learn, their first few years were as rich in learning as a human child’s first years. Or at least, they’re supposed to be. As much as I looked, I didn’t see much of that happening between Aria and Lorenzo. In all fairness, it wasn’t entirely his fault. From the little I had learned about him, I knew that his own Sire had*

*been killed mere weeks after his turning, and he had needed to rely on the rest of his clan to teach him about being a vampire. No doubt there were many things he had never learned—obedience to his Sire the first of them—and what he didn't know, he couldn't teach Aria. It made it even more difficult for me to watch from afar. The Sire in me wanted to teach Aria—to teach both of them—what all Childer, all vampires ought to know, from age-old customs and traditions to the proper way to bite an offered throat or wrist. However, it wasn't my place to do so. I wasn't anything to them.*

*And so all I did was watch as years passed and Lorenzo became more frustrated and angry. His scent reeked of it at all times; I'm not sure how Aria tolerated it. I don't think he was angry with her, just with the situation itself. If I am to make a guess, something deep inside him, where the vampire part of him was rooted in his mind, knew that things were supposed to be different. His own Childe wasn't supposed to give him orders. She wasn't supposed to spend so much time dealing with other vamps. She wasn't supposed to be able to say no to him. And yet, she did all these things. If he had understood what he was, what they both were better, he could have understood why it was all upsetting him so much, but as I said he had never learned all of this as a Childe himself. There was no way he could have stopped things from going the way they did. No way he could have avoided leaving her in the end.*

*What?*

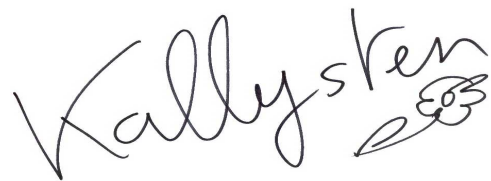
*Oh. I suppose. I could have given him advice, from one Sire to another. There's nothing in our customs against it. But would he have wanted such advice, coming from me? Every time he looked at me, I could see the suspicion and fear that I would somehow try to take Aria from him. He didn't want to have anything to do with me—and he certainly didn't want to discuss her with the man he considered his rival.*

*Yes, I guess the reverse is true as well. I wasn't too inclined to helping him keep her. Would you have been?*

*I waited four years for her. For a vampire, four years are nothing. But when you fight every few nights and know you can die at any time, four years can feel like an eternity. And when you go to bed every morning knowing that the woman you will dream of is going to sleep in another man's arms, these same four years feel like they will never end.*

*But they did end. Lorenzo left. And when he did, at last, Aria turned toward me.*

*tbc...*

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kallysten". To the right of the name is a small, stylized circular emblem or doodle.