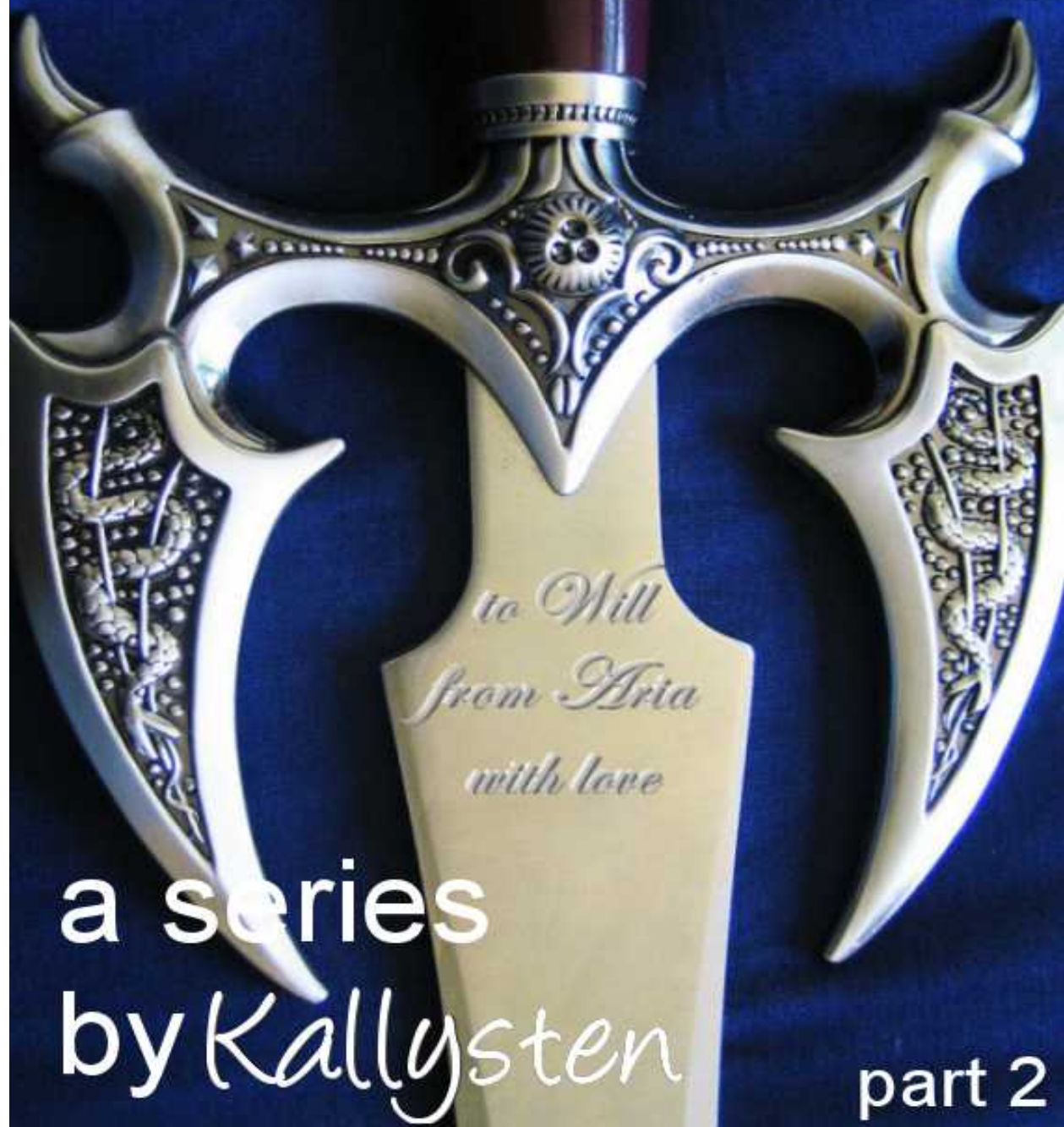


FREE STORY

Aria & Will



a series
by Kallysten

part 2

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Chapter 12

Stakes and knives went first, followed by the axe, the blades wrapped in an old t-shirt so they wouldn't destroy the bag. The handle was too long to fit inside.

Technically, Lorenzo wasn't supposed to take any of these. The weapons belonged to the Guard, and Newhaven needed them too much to allow people who left the city to take them away. As a Head of Squadron, Aria should have stopped him. She should have made him surrender the weapons, or at the very least she should have informed his Head of Squadron that he was planning to leave.

She did nothing, however. She said nothing. She just sat on the floor in the corner of their bedroom, arms around her legs and chin on her knee, and watched her Sire and lover, the man with whom she had spent close to six years, get ready to leave. She watched, and she listened.

"It's been forever since I saw the ocean."

He was done with the weapons. He now opened the first drawer of the dresser they had shared and started pulling out his underwear and t-shirts.

"Well, not literally forever, I'm not that old, you know that."

He threw a grin at her, strained and fleeting. She didn't respond.

"And then I'll go south. I thought I might go home, but there's nothing left for me there, and I can't stand the snow. I used to like it, when I was human, but not anymore. Hate the cold."

She hadn't known about the snow—it never snowed, in Newhaven, and she had never seen snow herself—but she knew how much he disliked being cold. It was purely mental, of course. The cold didn't hurt vampires, it was merely a feeling, no more threatening or uncomfortable than warmth, or the feel of the wind on their skin. She remembered how, when she had been human still, he used to wrap himself around her, hold her tight and close. She remembered how loved she had felt, then.

"I've heard there aren't so many attacks in Brazil."

She had heard as much. Every few months, new rumors surfaced. Brazil had less demon attacks than the rest of the world. Demons didn't like rainy regions. They didn't

like deserts. They didn't like mountains. They didn't like swamps. If all the rumors had been true, there wouldn't have been demons anywhere on the planet. Aria had long ago stopped believing any of it was true.

"What do they speak in Brazil, anyway?" As slow as he was working, he was done with the first two drawers. Pants, now. He would be finished soon. "I've learned a bit of Spanish in school. Think that'll help?"

She could have told him people didn't speak Spanish in Brazil, but that would have required talking. She didn't feel like talking. She didn't feel like doing much at all.

The sound of the zipper filled the bedroom, as large as a shadowy presence standing between them. He was done. He would leave, now.

"Come with me."

She had known he would ask. Part of her had even hoped he would. It would have hurt too much, if he hadn't even asked. That didn't mean she could accept.

Leaving the traveling bag on the bed, he came to her and knelt down, so close and yet he didn't touch her.

"Come," he repeated, the word a plea more than a demand.

"I can't." She forced the words out. They came with difficulty at first, but as she kept talking, she realized the void inside her wasn't growing any larger, and it became easier. "You know that. It's not any different from the first time you asked."

"It is different." His voice strengthened, picking up a fire she hadn't seen or heard in him for longer than she could remember. "You were human, the first time I asked you. You're my Childe now. You're supposed to do as I say. To follow me. Can't you feel it?"

There was just a hint of desperation in his last words, just enough that Aria's certitude wavered. She searched herself, looked deep inside her, in the same place that hungered for blood and feared sunlight. She didn't find anything that resembled what he was describing. It had been there, once, but not anymore.

"I'll miss you," she said very softly.

He opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out. He clenched his teeth, a muscle twitching on his jaw line. Looking away, he stood, picked up his bag and left without another word.

Aria's vision blurred, her eyes full of tears. She had known for weeks that this moment would come, but it still hurt as deeply as any wound she had received in battle—if not more. She wasn't sure dying had been any more painful than this.

She allowed herself five minutes. She couldn't afford to give her pain any more time than that. No, not her pain; her mourning. Lorenzo was lost to her, now, as unreachable as everyone she had ever cared about. Or almost everyone.

When the five minutes had trickled by, she forced her body to take deep, unneeded breaths, and slowly calmed down. She stood with some difficulty and walked to the small bathroom to wash her face in cold water. It helped; not much, but it did.

Night had come. She was needed on the walls.

~

After Lorenzo's departure, Aria would have wanted nothing more than to give herself to the mindlessness of a fight, numb her feelings in the repetition of blows and kills. Of course, it would have been too easy if the demons had been amenable. There wasn't a single one in sight, this night, not as far as she could see.

Her fists clenched at her sides and she crossed her arms. At least it'd give Lorenzo a chance of reaching the next city without too much trouble.

Abandoning her vigil, she turned around to look at the troops waiting in the street behind the walls. Some of them were talking, others played cards. Someone had brought a guitar and was practicing. Pairs, here and there, were practicing as well—and the sounds of their swords clashing together, at times, were more melodious than the discordant rifts rising from the guitar. Even from high above them as she was, Aria could recognize the vampires amongst all of them. There was just something in the way they moved that set them apart from humans.

Not many vampires remained in the Guard for long. Usually, after a few years, they tired of it and decided to take their chances elsewhere. Like Lorenzo. The few who did stay were often those who had no clan and no other purpose. As far as she knew, there were only a handful of Sires and Childer fighting for the Guard—and tonight, there was one less. There were also very few vampires older than a couple of decades, and only one who had earned the title of Master, however that title was earned. There were many things Aria didn't know about her kind, many questions Lorenzo had answered with a shrug and an "I don't know", and now she wouldn't have even that. She could have gone to someone else to understand. She could have gone to Will. She had stayed away from him, however, as years passed, just as he had stayed away from her until that moment.

"Quiet night."

She had heard him approach, and so his words did not startle her. They did surprise her, though. She couldn't remember the last time he had spoken to her when he hadn't absolutely needed to. She turned her face toward him. He was leaning back against the waist-high guard of the wall, his silhouette dark against the sky. Needing to see his face, she came to stand by him. His expression left no place for doubt.

"You know," she said almost accusingly and looked away so he wouldn't see her pain.

He turned around and rested his forearms on the stones. From the corner of her eye, she could see that he was watching her.

"I know. The sentries told me."

"You must have been happy to hear it." Her voice held the bitterness of tears, but she didn't let them rise to her eyes. "You never liked him."

She would have expected him to protest. He didn't.

"You're right. I never cared much for him."

"Because he was my Sire."

"No. Because you loved him."

She looked at him at that, stunned. Will was never that candid. Pulling answers from him was practically impossible, usually. Why was he confiding this to her now?

~

Why?

Did I need a reason?

How's that for a reason: I'd waited four years for Lorenzo to get out of the picture, and now he had. She thought I'd been happy to hear it; honestly, 'happy' was far from the truth. Try ecstatic. That's not something I'm accustomed to feel.

As much as she wondered what I was up to, talking to her that night, she didn't ask. She just leaned there, eyes lost on the horizon, a miserable look on her lovely face and her scent heavy with salt even if she didn't cry. I wished I had known what to say to comfort her, but at the same time I couldn't help being glad.

See, it wasn't so much the news of Lorenzo leaving that had made me so happy. Rather, it was the not so small detail that he had left alone.

I've never minded silence and contemplation, but I was too excited that night to remain idle very long. While I was watching her, I noticed her hand closing on the hilt of her sword, easing it out an inch or two and letting it slide back in. I'd watched her do that same mindless gesture countless of times before battles.

On impulse, I grabbed that hilt, once she had let go of it, and pulled the sword out completely. She immediately tensed and looked at me, frowning.

"What are you doing?"

I took a few steps back and slashed the weapon back and forth in front of me. It made a soft swishing sound as it cut through the air. It was lighter than what I was used to, but well balanced.

"Just checking your sword." I brought the blade closer to my face and inspected it. "Good. It's been sharpened recently."

"Of course I sharpen it. You think I'd fight with a dull blade?"

She was holding out her hand toward me, demanding the return of her weapon without a word. I complied.

"You do it yourself?" I asked, puzzled. "Why? The armory—"

"She's mine," she interrupted me, and it took me a second to realize she was talking about the weapon. "I don't just pick up any sword before coming to the walls."

I shrugged. "I do. Nothing wrong with that. They're all good swords."

"I'm sure they are. But this one..." She raised it in front of her, watching the blade as closely as I had moments earlier. "This one saved my life a few times. I trust her."

There are few things I wouldn't have offered, at that moment, to hear her say she trusted me on that same tone of voice.

She slid the sword back in its scabbard with practiced ease. I thought she would return to her contemplation of the countryside—and, I was sure of it, to her brooding about Lorenzo—but she stayed as she was, facing me, a look of uncertainty now fluttering on her features. She was biting her lower lip, adding to my impression that something was bothering her even more than I had thought so far. She rarely ever shared anything with me; she was more adept in finding fault with me. The one time we had spoken without strain, she had been wounded and afraid to die. And so I found myself oddly curious about what was on her mind.

"What is it?" I asked when, after a couple of minutes, she still hadn't said anything. My question seemed to free her.

"Is there something wrong with me?"

I blinked. "What do you mean?"

"Lorenzo said..." She took a deep breath. Her eyes were locked somewhere above my right shoulder. "He said as his Childe, I should have been...compelled to go with him. But I didn't feel anything like that. I just didn't want to leave."

I struggled with myself not to grin. I doubt she'd have liked that much. For years, I had known that Lorenzo was squandering the influence he should have had on his Childe, and now I had the result of that in front of me.

"There's nothing wrong with you, Aria. The bond between Sire and Childe varies. It depends on a lot of things, including whether the Sire reinforces it or not. I doubt Lorenzo even knew how."

She looked straight at me at that, and I knew, at that instant, that she was going to ask one of two things—either how I knew about it, or why I had never told him. I didn't feel like answering either question, so I added, as seriously as I could:

"And then, you were already pigheaded as a human. I guess it only got worse when you were turned."

I watched her eyes widen as she was clearly offended, and couldn't help it. I grinned. She got the hint then that I was teasing her, and her face broke into a smile—but not before she had punched my arm and called me an idiot.

"I've got to go talk to my squad," she said after a little while. "Goodnight. And thanks."

I'm not sure what she was thanking me for—making her smile, maybe, or telling her nothing was wrong with her. I just know that her quiet words and the shy little grin she gave me as she left had my stomach flipping over in the most peculiar manner.

Bergsen, rest his soul, had once said I was acting like a love struck teenager where Aria was concerned. I, of course, did no such thing—if only because when I'd been a teenager, I wouldn't have dreamed of talking to a woman without a chaperone. Now, though, it was all I could think of. She was all I could think of. And therein lay the problem.

In the past few years, I had known exactly where I stood—outside a Sire and Childe relationship—and what to do—nothing. Now it was time for me to court Aria. I'll be damned if I knew where to start with that. Now don't get me wrong, I had seduced a few women before her, and been seduced by a couple as well. But after years of watching

her from afar, of remembering a single kiss while wishing I could forget it, of wanting her so much it hurt, what I had done on this first night, coming to talk to her, was just about the extent of what I could figure out I ought to do.

Thankfully for me, she wasn't hindered by such hesitations.

tbc...

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