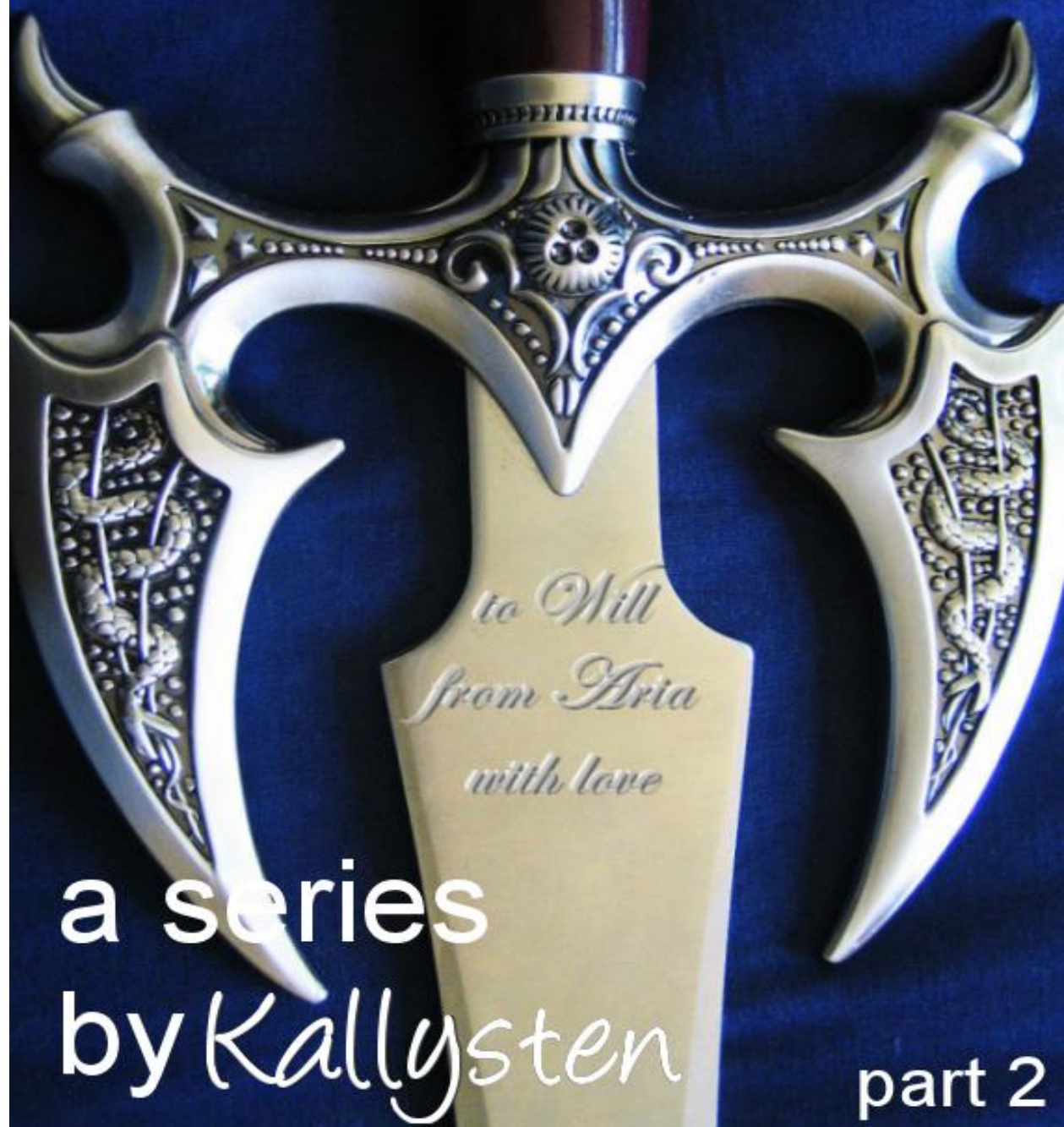


FREE STORY

# Aria & Will



a series  
by Kallysten

part 2

# *Aria & Will*

by Kallysten

## Chapter 13

Her mind still reeling from the sounds of battle—metal on metal and cries of pain—Aria staggered through her apartment to answer the door. She'd barely been in long enough for a quick shower and she had been about to fall into bed. She closed the sash of her robe a little tighter, yawned, then opened the door, scowling. Whoever thought it was a good idea to come bother her after five hours of fighting had the tongue-lashing of their life coming their way.

Her foul mood disappeared in a flash, replaced by worry, when she found all five Heads of Squadron outside her door, all looking grim.

"What is it?" She was still tired, but she wasn't sleepy anymore, and she was ready to pick up her sword again, if needed. Her eyes settled on Mary, whose squadron had replaced hers on the walls when the attack had come to an end at almost three in the morning. "Did the demons come back? Are we under attack?"

"We're not," Mary answered with a thin smile. "We just need to talk to you. Mind if we come in?"

Aria was acutely aware, as she stepped aside to let her peers in, that they were all in uniform, even those who hadn't been on duty that night, while she wore an old, frayed bathrobe. The five of them crowded the small living room, the sofa being just large enough for three of them to sit if they didn't mind being pressed against each other.

"There's a couple of chairs in the kitchen," Aria said blankly. "You can grab those if you want. I'll get dressed and be right back."

She left them to sort the seating arrangements by themselves and stepped into her bedroom, closing the door behind her. She didn't know what this was about, but whatever was going to happen, she would be dressed and decent when it came to her.

As she hurriedly threw clothes on, she couldn't help but wonder. Was this about Lorenzo? Since his departure two weeks earlier, she had been expecting to receive a formal blame for allowing him to leave with weapons that belonged to the Guard. If the five of them were there to talk to her about it, it couldn't possibly be good.

Dressed in slacks and a formal dress shirt, she returned to the living room. Mary and Lea had settled on the sofa. Paolo had pulled a chair into the corner. Jonas and Stephen were both standing by the far wall, but while Stephen was leaning back against

it, Jonas stood straight as though waiting for an inspection. He was the one who indicated the chair they had drawn up for her.

"Please, sit down, Aria."

She refrained from pointing out they were her guests, not the other way around. "I'd rather not," she said, crossing her arms as she remained standing by the chair. "Will you tell me what this is about now?"

"It's about Wilhelm," Paolo said. He leaned forward in his chair, resting his forearms on his knees and clasping his hands in front of him. She had a feeling he had been designated by the others to talk. "Or rather, it's about how close you and he are."

~

*With the city's difficulties in getting a steady supply of gas, the back and forth between the Guard's headquarters and the walls was done on foot. Only wounded soldiers were given a ride back. Aria usually used that time to walk amongst the members of her squadron, talk to them, and evaluate their state of mind.*

*This night, though, Wilhelm had joined her just moments after she started making her way toward the walls. They walked side by side, both of them quiet until the silence grew too heavy for Aria and she blurted out the first thing that came to her mind.*

*"You used to patrol the city before coming to the walls, didn't you?"*

*He looked at her, head tilted to one side. "I did. That's how we met, remember?"*

*She nodded. She did remember. She remembered being scared out of her mind, and so, so sad as she trudged through that cemetery. Unconsciously, she reached inside her jacket and ran her fingers against the handkerchief she had sewn into the lining.*

*"Why did you stop? There are still a couple vamp-related deaths every few weeks. That's what you were trying to prevent, wasn't it?"*

*"It was, but I wasn't all that effective. Too much ground to cover."*

*"So you stopped." She couldn't help putting a bit of incredulity in her words. "It's hard to imagine you giving up on something."*

*"I didn't give up."*

*They had reached the walls. They both had places to be. Still, Aria stopped for a second and looked at him questioningly.*

*"I didn't give up," he repeated. "I just found something to do that was more important."*

*It wasn't until later that night that Aria remembered. He had started showing up on the walls at nightfall at the same time she had become a full member of the Guard.*

~

Aria's mouth was dry suddenly. She considered Paolo, then the others, looking for the reprobation or condemnation she was sure had led them to her. She saw nothing more than seriousness and did not feel reassured in the least. Carter and Stevenson had never shown much appreciation for Wilhelm, and they always became defensive when Aria, or someone else, brought up his name. Lately, she had been the only one mentioning him during meetings, usually to point out procedures he and Bergsen had once established. Could the Heads of Squadron be here now to blame her for it?

"We're not that close," she said, hesitating a little. "We've just known each other for a while, and we're friendly. Not even friends, really—"

"Aria, please." Mary raised a hand toward her, palm out and appeasing. "Just...hear us out."

She frowned, confused, but nodded. When she looked back at Paolo, he started again.

"We would like you to talk to him for us. And ask him to take over the Guard."

Dumbfounded, Aria sat down in the chair beside her before her knees could give out.

"Take over...?"

"You've said yourself often enough that Carter and Stevenson are ruining everything Commander Bergsen and Wilhelm built. We agree with you, all five of us do. We've just been more...discreet about our opinions." He offered her a tight smile. "Do you realize the Majors have been preparing a file to get you dismissed from the Guard? They've scheduled a special meeting for tomorrow where you will be put on trial. They won't call it that, but that's what it will be. That's why we want to act now."

Aria was taken by the most peculiar feeling of dissociation. Part of her heard every calm word Paolo pronounced and examined it coolly; it didn't surprise her that much that the two Majors would be acting in this way. At the same time, another part of her mind was screaming in outrage. The Guard was her life, quite literally. She couldn't even imagine what she would do if she was ever dismissed.

Once the screaming in her mind had quieted down, she realized what was going on.

"So this is..." She passed her tongue over her lips, nervous to even say the word. "A mutiny?"

It was Jonas who answered. "It's the necessary first step to salvaging the Guard and saving Newhaven. Bergsen had started training those two, true, but he never formally appointed them as his replacements. They weren't ready, and if four years didn't teach them anything, they never will be."

"And you want Will..." She shook her head. "No. If he was interested, he wouldn't have pulled back when they asked him to after Bergsen died."

They looked at each other at that, and Aria had a feeling she was missing something. "What?"

"They asked him," Jonas said. "Actually, they asked me to ask him. But he had already been pulling away for a few weeks before that. A lot of us noticed at the time, but it wasn't our place to say anything. Bergsen talked to him about it, I think, and he came back to some extent—"

Aria felt completely lost. "Wait. Bergsen talked to him about what?"

"Aria, don't you know?" Mary sounded almost sorry for her. "He pulled away after you... were turned."

"I fought by this man's side for decades," Jonas added as though Mary had not spoken. "Your death was the only time I ever saw him miss a battle."

What do you mean, she wanted to ask, but the words refused to come. She knew what he meant. She had known for years, or at least suspected. All she needed to know for sure was for Wilhelm to put it into words. She sometimes despaired he would.

~

*It was a slow night, one of those nights when the bright full moon hung low in the sky and cast long shadows, making everyone see demons where the wind played over the leaves of the trees. Soldiers grew restless, on such nights, certain that battle was coming but unsure when exactly. There were few things worse than high-strung soldiers. Aria knew that as well as everyone who had ever been in a position of leadership. Alertness was good; jumpiness, not so much. She needed something to distract her troops, and she had found just the solution.*

*Her sword clashed against Wilhelm's as she parried his attack, the sound muffled by the leather strips that covered both blades. A few of the soldiers around them cheered.*

*"Not giving up, yet?" Wilhelm asked, a small smile on his lips.*

*"Why would I?" she shot back, stepping sideways before feinting to the right and slashing her sword toward his left, where he had let down his guard. "You're sloppy."*

*Wilhelm stumbled back inelegantly, just in time to avoid her blow. Laughter and heckling rose in the loose circle of observers, but he didn't seem to be affected by them.*

*"You're right, I am sloppy."*

*She watched, bemused, as he switched the sword to his right hand.*

*"This should help," he said, and launched a new attack on her, faster than any so far.*

*Surprised, it was all she could do to block his sword at the last second. She felt her bones rattle at the force of the blow.*

*"You were playing with me!" she accused, indignant, as she lashed out at him again.*

*"Not playing. Just...leveling the field."*

*She could hear her soldiers laughing and calling out to her, but she paid them no mind, entirely focused on Wilhelm. "I don't need any help to defeat you."*

*"I didn't say you did. I just have a little more experience—"*

*It was over in a flash, with the unmistakable call to arms sounding over the walls. Demons were approaching. Aria lowered her sword at the same time as Wilhelm did, and both of them pulled the leather strips off their blades. The time for games had passed.*

*"Soldiers, to your posts," Aria called, her eyes running over the circle around her and Wilhelm. "Get ready and be safe, all of you, or I'll kick your asses all the way to the hospital."*

*They broke away, all of them focused already, but the sour smell of dread and anticipation that had prevailed earlier was gone. She caught Wilhelm's smile and slight headshake as she turned back to him, and raised an eyebrow at him.*

*"What?"*

*"Nothing." He grinned. "I was just admiring your uncanny speech-making abilities."*

*She threw him a mock glare. "Glad you like them, because that order was good for you, too."*

*His smile softened and he saluted her with his sword. "As you say, ma'am."*

“Anyway, we’re pretty sure if you ask him, and if you tell him the Majors are about to have you thrown out, he’ll take the job.”

Jonas fell silent. When she looked around the room, Aria could see that they were all waiting for her answer.

“You all agree on that,” she said slowly. “Which means, you must have discussed it before tonight. Why didn’t you ever tell me?”

Embarrassed looks were shared all around, but no explanation came. Aria couldn’t help suspecting that some of them might have been ready to let the Majors sacrifice her.

“What’s important,” Mary said, “is that we all do agree. And it has to happen now, unless you feel like going through that trial tomorrow.”

Five minutes later, Aria was knocking on Wilhelm’s door.

~

*She hadn’t come to me since before she had been turned. She had kissed me, that night, and I had realized just how much she meant to me.*

*After all these years, I was surprised to see her there, but at the same time, I wasn’t. She had sought me every night for the past two weeks, and when she hadn’t, I had gone to her. After four years of craving her presence, it was heaven to finally talk to her, spar, fight by her side. Heaven and hell, all at once, because if I remembered that kiss as though it had happened just the previous night, she had given me no hint that she was open to a repeat.*

*I was in bed when she knocked on my door, and still half asleep when I opened it—half asleep, and half naked. I guess I should be thankful that at least I had boxers on. I invited her in, suddenly fully awake and self-conscious. I’m not sure I imagined the way her eyes traced my body.*

*“Just give me a minute,” I said. “I’ll throw some clothes on.”*

*Rather than sitting in the living room as I expected her to, she followed me to the bedroom, and I could feel her gaze on me as I put on pants and a t-shirt.*

*“I’m going to be thrown out of the Guard,” she said when, decent, I turned back to her.*

*I stared at her, confused. She was leaning against the doorway, arms crossed, and looking much too calm for someone who had just claimed the only thing they cared about was about to be taken from them.*

*“What do you mean, thrown out?”*

*"The Majors apparently have built a case against me. And tomorrow, they're attacking."*

*Every word she added only confused me more. It didn't help that we were in my bedroom and my mind insisted on reminding me of that one kiss—and of the other things I had dreamed of sharing with her. I gestured toward the hallway, and she took my hint, preceding me to the kitchen. Coffee seemed a necessity, even if I despised the rations of insta-coffee that all members of the Guard received.*

*"It'd be ridiculous for them to try to get rid of you. You're one of their best battle leaders."*

*The microwave beeped, and I went to it to retrieve the two cups. She answered while I had my back to her.*

*"I thought you'd be happy. You never wanted me to be part of the Guard to begin with."*

*I turned back to her so fast that coffee sloshed over the edge of one cup and burned my fingers. I ground my teeth rather than let myself curse, and glared at her.*

*"It's much too early for mind games, Aria. I didn't want you in the Guard because I was afraid you'd get yourself killed. I was right, wasn't I?"*

*She took the cup I was offering her and glared back. "I didn't die. I was turned. You of all people should understand the difference."*

*If I hadn't been so tired, I might have argued the point and reminded her of everything she had lost when she had become a vampire. The truth, though, is that I didn't want to argue with her anymore. That had never helped. Instead, I kept quiet and drank a mouthful of coffee.*

*"Will... There was nothing you could have done about it. You do realize that, right?"*

*It was hard to believe such a thing, especially seeing how I was the one who had placed Lorenzo in the position to become her Sire. And if Lorenzo had still been around, I'd never have voiced what I said next.*

*"I miss your heartbeat every time I look at you."*

*She stared at me, eyes wide and bright, the cup raised halfway to her lips.*

*"It doesn't mean I haven't accepted what you are," I finished, already regretting the words.*

*She found her voice again. "A vampire, like you."*



*"No. A fighter. More than I ever was. I became what I am today because I was forced to. You...you were born for it. It took me a long time to understand that, but you prove it, every night."*

*Again, she stared. She was touched. I could see as much. What I didn't see coming was the coffee-flavored kiss she pressed to my lips before pulling away as fast as she had leaned in.*

*"Thank you," she murmured. "And if you really think so, I need your help."*

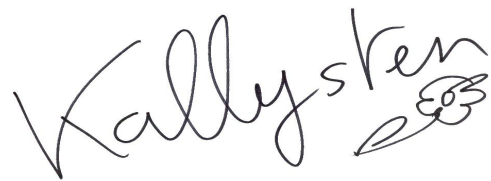
*"With the Majors?" I asked, remembering her first words.*

*She nodded. "The other Heads of Squadron approached me tonight. They agree with you that the Majors would be stupid to get rid of me. They...we also think the Guard has been declining ever since Bergsen died, ever since you took a step back and let the Majors do as they pleased. That's why we want you back in. We want you to take over the Guard. What do you say?"*

*If anybody else had given me that speech, I'd have laughed and sent them packing. But it wasn't just about taking over the Guard. It was about helping her keep the only thing she cared about. And it wasn't just anybody. It was Aria.*

*What could I say other than yes?*

tbc...

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kallysten". To the right of the name is a small, stylized drawing of a flower or a decorative flourish.