

**KALLYSTEN**

*Aria*

*& Will*

*This is a 'deleted scene' from the novel Aria & Will. It is set between chapter 19 and the epilogue.*

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## **THE BREACH**

There were many advantages to sharing an apartment with Wilhelm, not the least of which were his amorous skills. On the nights when the demons did not attack Newhaven, he and Aria rarely reached the bed for the first round. On the nights when the demons did attack, things usually turned out ever fiercer.

There was, also, one major disadvantage. As a Head of Squadron, Aria only ever received phone calls if something really bad was happening. Will, on the other hand, received a call if *anything* was happening – and sometimes even if nothing did.

That day, it wasn't even noon when the familiar strident ringing echoed through the apartment. After a hard night of fighting, it wasn't near enough sleep for Aria, and she buried her head beneath a pillow, for all the good that it did, while Will pulled himself out of bed with a grunt. They had agreed not to put a phone in the bedroom; if the darn thing rang, Will always ended up going down to his office anyway.

This time again, it didn't miss. Will was back in the bedroom after only moments, already pulling clean clothes from his dresser and laying them on the bed for after his shower. Aria peeked out from under her pillow and blinked at him sleepily.

“Need me?” she mumbled.

She always asked; Will always came to kiss her, drew the sheet higher on her, and told her to get some more sleep.

Not this time.

“I’m... not sure,” he said. “This could be nothing, but you should probably come with me in case it’s not.”

Aria was still blinking in confusion when he picked her up in his arms and carried her to the shower. The water never stayed warm long enough, but the jet of ice-cold water woke her up almost as well as Will’s kisses.

“So what’s going on?” she asked him when they had toweled each other dry and were getting dressed. He was buttoning his most formal shirt, and Aria followed his lead by putting on her dress uniform.

“I’m not sure,” Will said again. “Linn said a man came in from somewhere East and that he claims... well, I want to hear it for myself.”

Aria tried not to sigh. “If it’s another one of these lunatics that say we should work out a treaty with demons—”

“I’m sure Linn wouldn’t bother me for that,” Will cut in with a grin. “She’d ask for you.”

The last time some of these ‘peacemakers’ as they called themselves had come to Newhaven, Aria had been the one who dealt with them. They had left town within the hour, and the entire Guard had still been laughing about it three months later.

Aria chuckled at the memory, and she was still smiling when they entered the Guard’s headquarters. Linn, Will’s unofficial secretary, was waiting for them and led them to the conference room at a brisk pace without allowing her artificial leg to slow her down. She had been one of Aria’s best soldiers, and an excellent Head of Squadron after that. Aria knew that she hated being stuck in an office, but it was certainly a better outcome than to have her name engraved on a commemorative stele in Newhaven’s park.

“Have you told anyone about this?” Will asked her, keeping his voice low.

Linn gave him an offended look. “Of course not. If it’s true, the privilege is yours. And if it’s not...” She shrugged. “The last thing we need is more hope snatched away from us.”

She opened the door to the conference room and held it for Will and Aria to walk in, following them and closing the door behind her. A man was seated at the conference table, a single piece of paper in front of him. His hair was gray, cropped very close to his head. Several scars crisscrossed his bare arms; Aria would have bet anything they had been caused by demon weapons. He was a soldier, she thought, and her first impression was soon confirmed. He stood as they approached the table, and looked at Linn as though waiting for her to make the introductions.

“This is Commander Wilhelm,” Linn said very formally, “and the Head of Squadron Aria. Commander, Aria, this is Sergeant Campbell from the squad.”

Wilhelm nodded once, no doubt because he recognized the name of the soldier's fighting group. He didn't offer him his hand to shake, she noticed, and neither did she as she sat at the table across from him. Will took the chair on her left and motioned for Campbell to sit down as well.

"It's been a long time since we had visitors from the squad," he said. "Anything we can do for you?"

Campbell glanced at Linn before raising an eyebrow at Will. "I think you already know," he said. "But if you need to hear it from me, there you go." He pushed the piece of paper across the table until it was in front of Will. "Demons come in through breaches, or rips between their dimension and ours. We found a way to close these breaches with magic. On this paper is the spell your mages need to perform." He paused briefly in his recitation, then added, "If you don't have mages capable of performing the spell, we can help, but it'll be some time before we can get to you."

Had Aria's heart still been beating, surely it would have stopped by now. She glanced down at the paper, but she knew nothing of magic and it was gibberish to her. Now she stared at Campbell, almost expecting him to start laughing and admit it was all a prank.

"We have mages," Will said slowly. He had picked up the sheet of paper and was reading it. Glancing at him, Aria wondered if he understood any of it. She knew he couldn't perform magic, but he certainly seemed to take it seriously enough. "How do we find this... breach?"

Campbell shrugged. "That, I can't help you with. All I can say is, there'll be demons there, and you'll know you found it at the moment you see it. I imagine you have a general idea of where they're coming from? Send troops to explore until you find it, then organize your attack."

"If you've done this before," Aria started with enough doubt in his voice that Campbell interrupted her.

"I have. Three times."

"Then why don't you stay and help us?" she finished.

Campbell stood and shook his head. "You're just one city. My assignment is to reach as many towns as I can and transmit the directions to close the breaches. I'm done here, so unless you have any more questions I'll be on my way to try and cover as much ground as I can before nightfall."

Getting to his feet, Will held out his hand to Campbell for a handshake. "No questions. This paper explains everything we need to know. Thank you. If you need provisions for your trip, Linn will take you to our kitchens."

Whatever Linn thought of any of it, her face did not show it as she led Campbell out. She closed the door behind them. Will picked up the piece of paper once more and leaned back against the table.

“You think it’s genuine?” Aria asked, afraid to hope too much.

Will nodded very slowly. “I’ve heard... rumors,” he said, looking down at her.

“There have been rumors for as long as I can remember,” Aria protested. “What makes you think that this time it’s any different?”

He tapped his fingers to the piece of paper. “I’m no mage, but I’ve seen and heard enough spells to know this isn’t just made up. It looks real. Very real.” A corner of his mouth lifted in a wry smile. “And maybe I just *want* it to be real.”

Aria smiled back. She could understand that. And she also understood what the next step had to be.

She stood in front of him, hands clasped behind her back. “If we’re going to look for that breach, I want to—”

“Volunteer your squadron?” Will finished for her with a roll of his eyes.

Aria’s entire body tensed, the way it always did when she could see an argument rising again. They’d spent decades together, but she doubted they’d ever stopped arguing. Then again, if they ever did stop, she would miss the making up that always followed.

“Someone’s got to do it, and my soldiers—”

“OK.”

She blinked very slowly. “OK?” she repeated. “You’re not going to argue? Say that it’s too dangerous? Too uncertain? Claim it’s got nothing to do with me when we both know you still cringe every time I pick up a sword?”

Will curled a hand at the back of her neck and pulled her closer to him. “When have these arguments ever convinced you of anything?”

Laughing lightly, Aria pressed a peck to his lips then hugged him. She knew him well enough by now to realize this: if he wasn’t arguing about her going to look for that breach, he had to think they had a real chance to find it – and to close it. And if Wilhelm allowed himself to hope that the end of the fight was coming, then maybe she could, too.