

A MEETING OF FATES

A story about how Ahlf met Salyra.

The deaths were too great and Ahlf knew then that he had made a grave mistake when he brought his group over the ridge of the hill. Someone screamed beside him. Ahlf blinked. Dust and sweat both fought to claim dominance over his skin, but it was the blood which dripped from his brow that won the battle.

“We cannot continue like this, General,” Lena breathed.

Lena was his Second, despite being ten years his senior. After General Aerus’ death, Ahlf found himself quickly promoted to fill in the empty shoes of Aerus, with only Lena at his side. Neither of them wanted to fight this endless war, one that had dragged on for half a decade.

Behind him, Ahlf noticed a man - *no a boy* - groaning on the ground. Blood dribbled past his lips, his wound too fatal to recover from. This was supposed to be a scouting mission. But the Ishari had led them into an ambush and now all that Ahlf could do was to lead his people away from the carnage that awaited them.

“We must retreat,” Ahlf replied. “Gather those who can still walk and lead them back to the camp.”

Lena frowned, her eyes like the forests of their home, now filled with defiance.

“And leave you to protect our flank?” Lena asked. “I think not, General.”

Her tone was stern, but Ahlf could hear the hint of concern, hidden within her voice. Lena was worried. Ahlf touched his forehead, wincing when his fingers came away stained red. A gash to the head was nothing compared to the rest of the men and women Ahlf had brought with him. Half had been killed by the Ishari and the others were too wounded to remain and fight.

“It was not a suggestion,” Ahlf found himself saying. “Lead those you can back to the camp.”

Lena scowled. “You’re going to get yourself killed. I didn’t watch Aerus die just so you could follow the same path, Ahlf.”

Ahlf smiled, a cold thing that filled him with fury at the thought of fighting a war he thought would have ended years ago. This was Erlan’s order. They had to destroy the

Ishari all because their King could not stand his pride being wounded by an Ishari woman. Death was something that Ahlf could no longer deny. He relished in the idea that he would not have to return to the Blood Guard, to lead them to their own deaths.

“Send my regards to our King,” Ahlf muttered.

He turned away from Lena, from the rest of the wounded soldiers who were retreating from the ridge. Beyond the hill, the Ishari warriors were waiting. He could hear the blood curdling cries for mercy from those who had not been fast enough in their escape. Ahlf began dragging those who could walk, shoving them towards where Lena and the rest of the Blood Guard had retreated.

Even if he died today, he would die knowing that he would never have to fight again.

A woman, her armour pierced by a spear, laid groaning on the ground. Ahlf reached towards her, but stopped when he realised that both her legs had been burnt badly. She would not be able to walk. He stared at her face. When had the Blood Guard started recruiting children? Ahlf could not stop the rage that bubbled inside him, one so fierce and hot that it took him all his restraint to stop from screaming.

Erlan had become a merciless king in the time that the war continued to rage on, Ahlf realised. There had been no signs of his friend behind the orders that Erlan barked out to him. A series of shouts drew Ahlf’s attention away from the dying woman. He looked up, stupefied by the sight of at least fifty Ishari warriors who had made their way to the top of the ridge.

They wore armour of gold, so bright under the sunlight that Ahlf had to look away.

He knew then that he would not survive. Ahlf stared at the wounded woman lying at his feet. He could see the fear in her eyes. Perhaps in a bid to comfort her, or perhaps to comfort himself, Ahlf crouched beside the woman. He gripped her hand within his own and shut his eyes, praying to any deity that could hear them to at least make their deaths quick.

“I found one.”

Ahlf opened his eyes. He was surrounded. The Ishari warriors crowded around him, wielding swords of fire. *No*. Fire was not the right word. Their swords glowed, bright and hot though the Ishari warriors seemed immune to their glows. Ahlf stared in wonder, horrified and curious as he examined the weapons. Their steel seemed unlike anything Ahlf had encountered in Cyre.

“Should we kill him?” one of the warriors asked.

“No.” It was a feminine voice. “This one’s their *General*.”

A woman, wielding a three-tipped spear, strode towards where Ahlf crouched over his dying guard. She was nothing like the warriors around him, her armour a mere dress that billowed behind her. The Ishari warriors watched her in awe, clear deference in their gazes. Ahlf could not understand it, but when he looked up into her face, he suddenly realised why she garnered such respect.

Her eyes were glowing; a brightness that rivalled even the sun’s rays. She could not be mortal, Ahlf thought. No woman should have eyes that shone so brightly as if someone had carved her with stars for eyes.

“What’s your name?” she demanded.

Ahlf did not reply. He found that it was hard to breathe and his ears buzzed with a faint crackling. He opened his mouth to speak, his voice barely a choking gasp as his words failed him. The woman smiled. There was nothing kind about the expression she wore.

“Pathetic,” she muttered. “Just like your leader.”

She blinked and the glow in her eyes were gone. Suddenly, Ahlf could breathe again. He spluttered as he gasped for air, his eyes watering. The woman knelt towards Ahlf and he found himself cowering from this woman, so powerful and now, so human in her appearance.

“Come now,” the woman drawled. “Even Erlan’s dutiful hounds must have names. Do not make me ask again.”

The underlying threat in her voice was enough to sober Ahlf. He did not meet the woman’s gaze, not when her proximity caused the hairs of Ahlf’s neck to raise up. He was afraid of her, he realised. And he was entirely at her mercy.

“Ahlf,” he gasped. “My name’s Ahlf.”

The woman gazed at him, her stare drawing Ahlf’s eyes to her face. It was disconcerting to see the woman now, without her glowing eyes. They were dark, though perhaps it was because of the absence of light that they appeared this way. Her hair was plaited, a thick rope that hung over her back, nearly ebony in its hue. She looked like any other Ishari woman and yet, she looked nothing like them at all. Ahlf found that it was hard to tear his eyes away from her sight, even though he knew that she could kill him if she so willed it.

"Ahlf," she repeated, as if tasting the sound on her tongue and deciding that she did not like it. "Tell me, Ahlf, how close are you to your master?"

Ahlf frowned, confused. "My *master*?"

She narrowed her eyes, before gripping Ahlf's chin in her grasp. Her nails were sharp and Ahlf grimaced as they cut into his skin.

"Your King," she snarled. "*Erlan*."

Ahlf trembled, fear pooling in his gut. "I-I am the General of the B-Blood Guard. That is all."

The woman glared, her eyes suddenly alight once more. "Do not lie to me, Ahlf. My people tell me that you are no mere general to your master."

Ahlf's eyes widened. Had the Ishari warriors been watching them the entire time? How long have the Blood Guard's plans been revealed to their enemies? The woman seemed to understand Ahlf's thoughts, smiling at him cruelly.

"Do not tell me that you believed that your Blood Guard would have been enough to destroy Ishari," she hissed. "Our gods will never abandon us the way the rest of Cyre did."

"It's... I..." Ahlf stammered, struggling to understand.

"Perhaps I was wrong about you," the woman remarked. "Your death would serve me better than taking you prisoner."

Ahlf had not realised how afraid of dying he was until her words settled into his mind. He had foolishly thought that risking himself to die in a war was better than returning to the camp. But now, as he stared up at the woman who was certain to kill him, Ahlf realised that he did not wish to die. Not like this, not whilst fighting against an enemy that were once part of Cyre.

"I can help you," Ahlf blurted. "Erlan is my friend. We are... close."

Perhaps, years ago, Ahlf's words would have been true. But now, they only rang out with hollow falseness. He stared at the woman, praying that she would not hear the deceit in his voice or notice the desperation in his eyes. He wanted to live and Ahlf would be damned if he did not use Erlan to survive, when the King had all but thrown him to his own demise.

"I see," the woman replied. "Very well, Ahlf, General of the Blood Guard, after today, you will become a prisoner of the Ishari."

She stood, gesturing for the warriors to shackle Ahlf. A part of him wanted to flee then, but as he searched for any escape routes, Ahlf realised in despair that there were none. His eyes returned to the woman, her face impassive and her eyes alight with brightness.

"Who are you?" Ahlf demanded. "*What* are you?"

She smiled, her teeth flashing. "I am Salyra and I am a Priestess of Ehulla."