

AN OFFER OF PEACE

A tale of Ahlf and Salyra's early relationship.

The heat in Ishari was unbearably warm. Ahlf wiped his brow, sweat gathering against his skin like a sticky residue. His tunic, loose and thin, clung to his back as he stared at the rest of the buildings. Three months since his capture had passed and three months had come and gone without a word from Erlan. The thought of Erlan caused Ahlf to scowl and he grunted in a mixture of rage and betrayal.

He had hoped that his capture would have been a short one, after all, the Blood Guard cannot function well without its General. But after the days became weeks, until months passed, Ahlf realised that his friend was not coming to save him. It had left him hollow, an anger of wanting to lash out at those he once served as faithfully as a hound would its master.

“General.”

Ahlf stiffened. The voice, a softness that belied the danger of its owner, came into his view. The woman, *Salyra*, the one responsible for having him captured all those months ago, now stood before him like a goddess. Her eyes were dark, no longer as bright as they had been when he first saw her, but there was a glint of something powerful in her gaze. It caused Ahlf to look away, tensing as if he was the lamb to be slaughtered.

“I am not a general anymore,” Ahlf muttered.

In the months after his capture, Ahlf had discovered that his people, the men and women that he was supposed to lead, had retreated from the Ishari borders. He had been left stranded in the heart of Ishari, with no ally in sight. What good was being the General of the Blood Guard with no one to lead?

“So it seems,” Salyra replied.

She moved to stand beside Ahlf, her scent of cloves and myrrh cloying in the air. Ahlf frowned, though he made no move to retreat from her. It had taken him a while to understand the way the Ishari warriors structured themselves, but what had become evidently clear was that Salyra was in charge of them.

Ahlf was not certain how a priestess could be involved in war, though he had seen enough of Erlan's discrimination of the Ancient Ones to understand that the gods could cause bloodshed without purpose.

"The others wonder about you," Salyra murmured. "You are useless to us if your master does not come for you."

Ahlf grew still. Every muscle in his body was tight, alert for an attack. Despite his illusion of freedom in Ishari, he was still a prisoner of war. He was bound at night and the warriors took turns to watch him whenever he had a free moment. Even now, he could make out the two warriors who stood farther down the hill, as he stared at the homes of the Ishari village.

"He will come," Ahlf mumbled.

But even he heard how foolish he sounded. Erlan was not coming to save Ahlf and his survival as a prisoner was becoming slim with every moment he remained in Ishari. Salyra sighed. The sound drew Ahlf's attention towards her. She was plain faced, but even he was not blind to her beauty. Already, many of the warriors seemed besotted with the priestess, willing to follow her every command, without a second thought.

"Your King has deserted you, General," Salyra replied. "He is not coming for you. Deceiving yourself of the truth will not help save you."

Ahlf swallowed, his shoulders tensing as he glanced for a way out. Even if he was to die, he would not allow himself to be led to the slaughter. Escaping was his only way out, but the way back to Cyre was guarded heavily by the Ishari warriors and the sea was

too volatile to swim across. *No*. Perhaps he could not swim across the sea, but the river bordering Cyre and Ishari was manageable on most days.

“You will not escape,” Salyra commented.

Ahlf froze, his eyes widening as he looked at Salyra. She was smirking, amusement in her eyes. Had he spoken out loud? No, Ahlf was certain he had not. Then how-

“You are easy to read, General,” Salyra explained. “While you have remained with us, your patterns are familiar enough to learn. Like a cornered rat, you are already looking for a way to flee.”

“You will have me killed then, now that my usefulness is gone?” Ahlf asked.

Salyra gazed at him, her eyes appraising. Ahlf found himself matching her stare, unwilling to look away and reluctant to show his fear to this woman who had captured him. Ahlf did not know Salyra well, not in the time that he had spent in Ishari. She kept away on most days and when she did find him, it was only to ask about Erlan. But now, standing before her like this, Ahlf realised just how much he had underestimated her sway over the warriors around him.

“Killing you would be a small mercy,” Salyra replied. “You are responsible for the death of my people and for that, many want to see you suffer.”

“Torture, then,” Ahlf grunted.

“No,” Salyra sighed.

Ahlf’s eyebrows furrowed, his confusion warring with relief. He turned to look up at Salyra and found that she was the one avoiding his stare. Her lips were pressed into a thin line and her fingers were curled into her palms. The moment stretched out, dragging until Ahlf’s mind had gone over the possibilities of Salyra’s words. If he was not to be tortured, was he to be executed?

“This war has made us forget who we serve,” Salyra spoke, breaking the silence. “The Ancient Ones teach us to worship them and to honour them with love and charity.”

Ahlf snorted. No matter the god, beliefs could be weaponised and used against anyone who wielded the power of the gods. An unbidden memory of his mother, praying to the Ancient Ones, for peace, came to his mind. He remembered her sobs when she discovered that he had joined the Blood Guard and her pleas to return when he had told her that he had been made General.

“You do not believe this?” Salyra asked, frowning.

“No,” Ahlf huffed. “Look at what the gods have caused.”

“The gods have done nothing but serve those who would use them as weapons in a war that should not have happened,” Salyra retorted. “Your master has made certain that many who fight in this war have forgotten this.”

“It does not matter,” Ahlf spat. “Death is death, regardless of who is behind it. You may preach to someone else about love and charity, but I am no fool. This war would not have happened if-”

“It would not have happened if your master’s pride was not so easily wounded,” Salyra snapped. “He is the reason for this unprovoked war against Ishari.”

Ahlf went quiet. He hated that the priestess spoke the truth and he hated it even more that he knew it to be the reason for Erlan’s madness. His King, his former friend, had once prayed to the very gods that he now claimed were the reason for the war. And for *what?* A woman that had listened to the priestesses instead of her heart?

“What is it that you want with me?” Ahlf demanded, tired of the conversation.

Salyra frowned. “Your help.”

Ahlf stared at her, confused and fearing that he had finally lost his senses. He searched her face, trying to unearth the deceit in her voice and the taunting in her eyes, but he found none. It left him reeling and unsteady and his steps faltered. Salyra reached out, her fingers gripping Ahlf's forearm as if to steady him but her touch scorched his skin and he drew away, scalded.

"You want my help?" Ahlf laughed. He felt delirious. "What madness has rotted your mind to believe that I would help you?"

Salyra scowled at Ahlf, her eyes hardening like the tips of spears.

"You will help me because I pleaded on your behalf, *General*," she spat. "You would be dead, were it not for me."

Ahlf stared at her, before he laughed. It was a low sound, reverberating in his chest and rattling under his ribs. In all the time that he had been a prisoner in Ishari, not once had the priestess deigned to speak to him unless it was about Erlan, and now, she wanted his help because she pleaded for his life.

"Enough," Salyra hissed.

But her voice lacked rebuke and only seemed to make Ahlf laugh harder. She was embarrassed, he realised. Perhaps it was only fitting, since she was a fool to believe that Ahlf would help her and the warriors he watched kill the men and women who followed him. Had she truly petitioned for his life with the belief that he would help her out of some moral obligation?

"Thank you," Ahlf breathed. "I have not had much opportunity to laugh like that."

Salyra scowled. "This is no jest, General."

"I will not fight for your people," Ahlf muttered. "I will not help-"

“Fight?” Salyra asked, frowning. “No. What good would you be in a fight? You will simply get yourself killed.”

Ahlf scowled, suddenly annoyed at the priestess. Despite what she believed about the Ishari warriors, Ahlf knew that he was skilled in weapons and combat, a feat that he found he was increasingly good at when he cut down his enemies. But beneath his wounded pride, he felt confusion filling his mind. If he was not to be used in the war, what use could he possibly have for Ishari?

Salyra began to pace, her eyebrows furrowed and her words frantic.

“Ehulla came to me last night and whispered words of peace,” she explained. “I thought that I must be mad to believe her, but the vision became clearer. We cannot fight this war for eternity and we cannot keep sending our young children to their deaths.”

Ahlf scoffed, “You spoke to Ehulla? Do not be naive. The gods do not talk to us.”

Salyra rounded on Ahlf, glaring. “She speaks to *me*. I am her follower, General. She comes to the priestesses in dreams and visions and it would be foolish to ignore her words.”

“So what? She told you that the war was bad. What does that have to do with me?” Ahlf asked.

“It has everything to do with you,” Salyra responded. “You are the loyal hound of your master, but you are also a Cyre-born man. An act of unity is what is needed to stop this war. Your master has not come for you, but that is because we have killed the many scouts who have tried to infiltrate our village.”

Ahlf frowned. “What? Erlan has been looking for me?”

Salyra ignored his question as if she had not heard it. “It means that you can still reason with him. You can persuade him that the war must end.”

"You said that Erlan had sent scouts to the village," Ahlf replied. "How long have they been coming here?"

Salyra frowned as if finally hearing him. "The last ones were found a week ago, near the border. But it does not matter, our people saw to their execution."

Ahlf let out a sharp breath, disbelief and anger filling him. Salyra turned to face Ahlf, staring at him with a determined look.

"Your master would listen to you, General, if you pleaded for peace," she breathed.

"He would sooner kill you," Ahlf muttered.

"Not if you could persuade him that you have found a better way than war," Salyra replied.

"And what would that be?" Ahlf scoffed.

"Unity," Salyra whispered. "Between Ishari and Cyre."

"He tried that before and it only caused the war to start," Ahlf retorted. "Or have you lost all memories of your *Princess*?"

"Not them, you fool," Salyra spat. "Us."

Ahlf stared at Salyra, stricken and slightly horrified. "There is no *us*, priestess."

"There could be," Salyra replied. "Think it over, General. Think of what a union could bring."

"War," Ahlf sighed. "It would only bring more war."

Salyra shook her head. "No. Ehulla has told me that this will bring us peace, and an end to this ceaseless fighting. Do you not want it to stop?"

Ahlf hesitated, the prospect of peace being a tantalisingly cruel one. Then, he shook his head. The thought of any form of union with this priestess was madness at best and treason at worst. He could not fathom the idea.

No, he would rather *die*.