

## A GENERAL IN THE MAKING

*A tale about how Ahlf became the General of the Blood Guard.*

There was blood under Ahlf's nails. It looked like rust, dull and flaking as Ahlf scraped at it. The stench of death lingered in the air. All around him, soldiers – his own and those of the enemy, were strewn across the ground. Beyond the plateau, the Ishari encampment sat in flames.

It was a bloodbath. Erlan had been mad to think that they could take on the Ishari warriors. Ahlf did not believe in the threats of deities, deities that had no place in Erlan's kingdom, but even he could see that the Blood Guard were fighting a losing battle. This war, the deaths had become an all too frequent sight.

"Ahlf."

It was Lena, a woman older than him by at least a decade. Her hair was loose, wisps of grey staining the auburn strands. She had taken Ahlf as her own, when he joined years ago. Now, she watched him with the severity of someone who had become all too accustomed to the sight of death.

"It is Aerus," Lena murmured. Her eyebrows furrowed. "He is not doing well."

General Aerus was wounded in battle, run through by a sword that seemed to cut through flesh like butter. Ahlf caught the way Lena chewed on her lower lip, cracked and bleeding from her worry. They both knew what it would mean if General Aerus did not survive. Erlan had voiced his opinions well enough.

Swallowing the rise of bile, Ahlf followed Lena through the remains of their camp. Soldiers were in varying stages of dying, their groans following Ahlf even as he tried his best to ignore it. Arriving at General Aerus' tent, Ahlf shared a look with Lena. Despite her grisled appearance, there was true fear in Lena's eyes. If Aerus died, both of their lives would change forever.

Inside, Aerus was lying on a thin mattress, now stained red with blood. The physician, a woman that Aerus chose when their last physician was killed, looked up at Ahlf with wide eyes. Ahlf knew then that Aerus was not going to make it. The tent stank of death, a sickening sweetness that made Ahlf want to retch.

“Aerus,” Lena called, kneeling beside the man. “Aerus, it is Lena. I’ve brought Ahlf with me too.”

Aerus’ pallor was pale and his face covered in a sheen of sweat. His torso was exposed, bandages wrapped firmly against the wound above his heart. Blinking, Aerus murmured something too low to hear. Lena frowned, drawing closer and gripping his hand, enclosing it in her own. Ahlf looked away, noticing the tears in Lena’s eyes. It was an unspoken thing, but even Ahlf knew that the relationship between Lena and Aerus was more than one between a general and his second.

“Come here, Ahlf,” Lena called, looking up at him. “You know what must be done.”

Ahlf stiffened, his heartbeat quickening. These past few months spent fighting in Ishari had left a bitter taste in Ahlf’s mouth, one that made him question everything Erlan had asked him to do. They had been fighting against the Ishari for months now and still there had been no decisive wins for the Blood Guard or Erlan’s vengeance.

Ahlf walked forward, his eyes straying towards the dying Aerus. He crouched down, as Aerus glanced at him with sudden alertness. The General opened his mouth, his breath stale and his lungs rattling under his chest.

“Ahlf,” Aerus gasped. “I will not... I am dying...”

Lena smoothed Aerus’ forehead with her palm, her eyes downcast with grief. Ahlf swallowed a thick lump, his chest squeezing at the sight of Aerus. The General had been like a father to him, a father that Ahlf had sorely longed for throughout his childhood. Watching Aerus like this, half-dead and struggling, only served to drive a blade through Ahlf’s heart.

“Ahlf,” Aerus wheezed. “You know what the King has asked... you know that this... my duty is yours.”

Ahlf shook his head, suddenly wanting to deny the General’s words. Aerus could not be dying. Erlan was wrong. A war against the Ishari all because he had been spurned by a woman that Ahlf knew could have easily been replaced by another was not a war that Ahlf wanted to be a part of anymore.

Lena reached out, her palm on Ahlf’s shoulder. “It is the order of the King that you take over Aerus’ role.”

Staring at Aerus, Ahlf could not reply. How could he? The General of the Blood Guard was dying, half of the other soldiers were scattered about the camp like corpses and still, the Ishari had not suffered any losses. Ahlf did not want to take over a group of men who were ready to go home, a group that thought that the war would have been over by now.

“I cannot,” Ahlf choked. “I *refuse*.”

“There is no... refusing... the King,” Aerus breathed. “You know that.”

“A war like this,” Ahlf murmured, “it will cost us all. I cannot lead these soldiers to their deaths, Aerus. I cannot keep marching on as if we are fighting against our enemies. The Ishari *were* our people.”

“Ahlf,” Lena warned. “Do not speak so brazenly.” She glanced at the physician. “It seems as if your grief has clouded your judgment.”

Ahlf nodded, falling silent. In the past months, Erlan had become increasingly paranoid of the soldiers who fought against the Ishari. Only a month ago, Erlan had declared that there were traitors in the Blood Guard and had Aerus flog them to death for all to see. It had been a gruesome spectacle and one that only aided the Ishari in their fight against them.

“Ahlf,” Aerus spluttered. “Ahlf... do what I could not. Save our... people. Change our King’s mind.”

Aerus began to cough, wheezing and red. The physician drew closer, ushering Lena and Ahlf outside of the tent before returning to the General. Outside, the sky was overcast and the air was no less stale than inside Aerus’ tent. Lena let out a shaky breath, running her fingers through her knotted hair.

“That damned fool,” Lena snarled.

“Aerus?” Ahlf asked, confused.

Lena fixed Ahlf with a glare. “Not Aerus. Your friend. The *King*.”

Ahlf looked away. *Friend*. They had been friends for a time. Good friends, perhaps even best friends. Erlan had not always been so bloodthirsty. He used to be good, a compassion that was not shared by the rest of his family. But ever since last Spring, Erlan had been a different man. One who did not care for anything or anyone but his need to satisfy his penchant for vengeance.

“All he does is send us to the battle, for what? A lover that chose to listen to her gods instead?” Lena demanded.

“I have tried to talk him out of it,” Ahlf explained. “But he does not listen to me. He is the King and I am just another soldier.”

Lena let out a frustrated laugh. “You are more than just a soldier to him, Ahlf. He’s all but declared you the new General. He doesn’t care that Aerus lies dying, all to win a war that no one wanted.”

“What do you want me to do about it?” Ahlf cried. “I have tried my best, Lena. But Erlan, he does not listen to me.”

Lena huffed, turning away from Ahlf. She stared at the dying soldiers, those on the ground who were injured or ill from infection. When she met Ahlf's gaze, Lena scowled.

"Make him listen, Ahlf," Lena breathed. "Make him listen, or I swear to you that I will."

The conversation was cut short when the physician came running towards them. Her eyes were wide, her lips quivering. Lena muttered out a curse, shoving past the physician and into the tent. Ahlf looked at the young healer, the woman who had not been ready to take over to tend to wounded soldiers. She shook her head, trembling under Ahlf's gaze.

"I am sorry," she mumbled. "I tried my best. I-"

Ahlf did not remain to hear the rest of the woman's words. He rushed to Aerus' tent, his breathing hard and the sound of his blood rushing past his ears. Lena was clutching Aerus, when Ahlf arrived. Her face was streaked with tears. She wailed loudly, but Aerus did not stir. Blood, foul and sticky, dribbled down the dead General's lips.

"Lena, I-" Ahlf began, but was stopped by Lena's glower.

"Looks like our King got what he wanted," Lena hissed. "Congratulations on your promotion, *General Ahlf*."