

The Legend of Aetharia

An Eransian Fairy Tale

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An Eransian Fairy Tale

In Ancient times, when the world was different and magic still flowed in the breezes and the rivers, a winged woman returned to her home in the Eransian mountains of Qarradune after having been away from her people for far too long.

Aetharia soared through the air with the icy blue petals of the ashhalana flowers, which were already on the wind at this time of the cycle. She allowed the warmth to lift her, before she finally allowed her sweeping white plumed wings to lower her to the large shelf that provided a comfortable landing at the cavern she preferred for rest.

They'd seen her coming. Children and adults alike gathered to embrace her as her feet touched the cool grey stone. She was flooded with a rush of praise, of questions, of pleas to share her stories of being among the Others.

With adoration, she was whisked into the bright shelter of the high-ceilinged cave, where she could recline on the pillows while eating and drinking to her heart's content. Where she could shut her eyes and remember a time before she donned her armour and her sword - the only armour and sword ever worn by an Eransian.

Women and men took turns gently brushing the length of her long, perfectly white hair. They rubbed sweet oils into her hands and feet, wrists and ankles.

Finally, hunger satisfied and thirst slaked, muscles rested even as her exhaustion persisted, she gave in to the children's appeals for her story - the only story of the Others they would ever hear from someone who had lived among them.

And so, she told them...

* * * * *

One sunny day, she lay on a bed of downy pillows, allowing the gentle breath of wind to cool her. On every other sunny day, as she lay this way and gazed out over the world, she felt happy and complete. *What else could she want?*

She was no princess, and her home was not a palace, but all Eransians lived together in beauty and luxury. Everything she wanted, she had. She was surrounded by friends and flowers. Food was plentiful. Life was bounty and simplicity.

Most of the winged people who lived in the Eransian mountains didn't know the Others. They were, after all, other. The Others lived far away from the mountains, where the land was low, and the water was lazy.

But Aetharia was different. She had been among the Others. She had visited with them. Learned from their schools. Befriended them. Elindria and Freyss were her friends, and they were in danger.

Out beyond the mountains, beyond the rushing river to where it slowed, widened, and meandered, the Others were at war. The Eransians didn't know war. War was a concept so foreign to them that it was nearly impossible to describe. There were no words for warfare or bloodshed. There were no concepts among these people to justify such terms.

But Aetharia's friends Elindria and Freyss were caught up in the war of the Others, one expected to be larger than any Qarradune had ever seen. Aetharia wanted to help her friends. *She had to help them.*

A tear descended her cheek. The droplet moved quickly, with purpose, like a river from a mountain.

Though Eransians were a peaceful people, she knew the strengths they held. Aetharia saw her people not only as one of them, but also as an outsider might. Their powerful wings gave them the advantage of flight. Their lithe bodies could wield weapons from the air. Their clear eyes could spot peril from a great distance.

Her decision made itself. She would represent her people in this battle, and she would do it alone. Aetharia would bring the power of the Eransians to Elindria and Freyss in this war against Xandon and Enadria. That way, her people and her friends among the Others would be safe.

She'd prepared. For seasons, metalworkers had been learning secrets of the armourers among the Others, having studied the samples Aetharia brought for them to adapt to the needs of flight and movement. They had studied the weapons she'd brought them and reworked them for distance and swiftness.

Today, she would leave her people, likely for the last time. She would fight in the war of the Others, and in doing so, would risk becoming one of them instead.

Dressing took little time. The soft snow-white fabric of her gown caressed her body as it flowed away from her skin along the billowing sleeves and throughout the asymmetrical waterfall of her skirt. The bodice was a gorgeous reminder of the nearly blinding beauty of her home, with ashhalana flowers skillfully embroidered throughout, as though holding the mountain air inside her lungs for her. The flowers continued their path down the cloth behind her to what served as a short train when she walked, and a fluttering flag while she flew. No matter where this war took her, Eransia would always follow her in this way.

At her hip, she secured an ashhalana flower in full bloom, with matching streamers of diaphanous blue and white ribbon trailing from where it was affixed.

As she was, she felt familiar. She felt like home. It was the armour that brought the Others to her appearance. The armor and the weapon. Unlike any Eransian before her, Aetharia donned a maille that shielded the front of her bodice. Her gauntlets and chausses were made of the same iridescent metal as her long, single-edged sword, which protected her hand with its dramatic ashhalana-shaped guard.

Dressed, she joined her people gathered in a common space, waiting to see her off. They were proud of her. Proud, but uncertain. She was going to war. This was unknown to them.

Shoulders lowered, but head held high, she progressed through them, among them, accepting their offerings of flowers, fruit, tears, and kisses. Reaching the ledge, she looked down at the fog that coated the drop to the ground below her, then looked up to the horizon, beyond which she would be headed to fight before the sun could set.

Turning back to her people, she let her tears fall. There were no words left to say. No grand speeches or verses of comfort or bravery. She loved her people, and she'd already told them as much every day, sometimes more often. It was the way of the Eransians.

And so, she faced the sky again, and rose into the wind, her wings lifting her powerfully but gracefully through the air, the great flag of Eransia fluttering behind her in the form of her hand-embroidered skirts.

By that evening, after only the briefest time in the military camp among her friends, she already struggled to remember those beautiful mountains she'd only just left behind. Everything around her was red. It was in fields, on walls, on paving stones, and most devastatingly, on people.

It was only upon entering the tent where her friends Elindria and Freyss were seated at a table, deep in conversation over the strategies for the next day, that she noticed how utterly pristine and unstained her gown and wings had remained. It was the advantage of fighting from above, she imagined. Her sword was as bloodied as those of her friends, but by the laws of gravity alone had she kept her hands clean. She wondered at how untouched she outwardly seemed, when inside, her scars were already forming.

Every day, they fought. They battled brutally. They won and they lost, both in conflicts and in people. Every night they planned, they grieved, and they held one another in what little sleep they could scavenge from the darkness.

Days and nights passed, then more days, followed by more nights. Aetharia did not bother to count how many had gone by. She did not see the need. There were too many, and her focus was better used elsewhere; on the fights, which she never lost, and the battles, which were sometimes won.

She had become a legend; a celebrated warrior to her allies, and a feared menace to her enemies, easily recognized by her bright wings and ashhalana-adorned clothes. No longer was her goal to stealthily approach the enemy in a surprise attack. Instead, she declared her presence with a lantern burning whitely above the redness.

By the end of it, as she cradled Elindria, whose tears seemed interminable when they saw Freyss cut down by Xandon in their final battle, she contemplated that place she once called her home; that place as foreign to her as the blue star that shone down on them from the deceptively peaceful starfield above them.

Nobody won the war, but everyone had lost. The survivors scattered, returning to the places they had once called their homes, or to new places unseen and without the memories of devastation and heartbreak.

Aetharia could think of no other place but the mountains. Her clothes had been bloodied by then, many times, but they remained unblemished, having been carefully washed to remove anything that could soil them. It was as much of a priority to her as keeping her sword sharpened.

* * * * *

Now she was home, her voice rasping on the final words of her tale, her people listening, rapt. Unlike the day she'd left, today, she had words to speak. Far too many of them.

To the surprise of all who had gathered, Aetharia did not request another glass of water or even to be excused so that she could sleep and recover. Instead, she asked for a bowl containing the dye of the ashhalana flower, the same that had been used to dye the threads to embroider the dress she had worn all those days she had battled among the Others. When the dye was brought to her, she asked to have it added to streaks of her hair, which several women gladly did for her.

Once Aetharia's hair was dyed, she stood, shoulders lowered, head high, facing everyone whom she deeply loved.

"I left our home once and gained the knowledge of the Others, and it changed me. It made me unlike who I used to be. It made me unlike an Eransian. I came to love some of the Others, and it drew me into their fights. I left our home again to fight with the Others and to keep us safe. Now, I know I am not one of us anymore," Aetharia's tone carried no shame, but neither was it

prideful. “You can see now that I do not look like one of us anymore,” she added as she stroked her hand over her newly dyed hair of white with ice-blue streaks.

“I will share with you one piece of wisdom,” she said, looking as many people directly in the eye as she could. “Our people have everything we need here and everything we ever will need. I will teach a few of you the art of defense, to keep out any Others who might find themselves nearby. This is a skill to be passed along through generations of Defenders to keep us safe from the hate the Others bring wherever they go. Then, once I have taught you all I can, I will leave you, because, as one of the Others, I can no longer belong with you.” Tears fell freely as she spoke, but neither weakened nor shook her voice.

In the days and weeks that followed, she taught three people how to defend their home in the mountains. They learned to carefully guide the Others away and back to their own homes, or to fight those who were determined to invade. When her lessons were complete, she woke before dawn, dressed in her gown and armor, and rose into the air, the great flag of Eransia fluttering behind her.

* * * * *

Today, the Eransian mountains remain a secluded, heavily defended place. They teach their children of the beauty and perfection of their mountains, and how there is never a need to leave its comfort and protections. Their Defenders protect their home from anyone who is Other.

But, still, now and again, a man or woman will look out at the horizon and will use their powerful, graceful wings to fly away from the mountains and into the world of the Others - the Others of today, who are very different from the Others of Ancient times, and yet not so very different at all – never to be seen again.