

With his full squad assembled, Kessler quickly made some mental notes. First he had to know what each of them would be able to do. Judging by their weaponry and interests he had a pretty good idea of everyone except for the mute. With a few words he managed to take the mute to the side, and asked a simple question; "what are you good at, Haria?" Haria took pencil and paper into his hand, writing quickly onto a paper. **Do you swear to keep it a secret if I tell you what I do?** Kessler looked up at the adult, unsure if he realized that Kessler was now his superior and needed to know. He nodded, promising himself to try as well as he could to keep the secret. **I am very good with my fingers. I get around with theft and card tricks and such.** "Interesting. I won't tell. Are you stealthy as well then?" **Yes, to a degree.** "Good. Go pick up your weapons from your crate, I want to see everyone at the ready in three minutes." Haria shook his head. **Don't boss me around little boy.** "Don't call me little boy. I am your direct commander. Look at my insignia. The little wing means I'm in charge. So call me sir, understood?" Haria looked confused and in awe, before shaking his head again. **They made you in charge of four men? Do you think you can handle it?** "Better than most, likely. So stop complaining and put on your gear, understood?" Haria nodded, rushing off while Kessler checked his own weapon and armor again. He had three sheathes for one weapon; one on his back to hold the whole thing and two on his hips to hold the separate blades when split. He thought for a second, checking to see the gear Haria would be getting. A curved sword and a push dagger. So two spellcasters and three direct fighters. Forming ranks would be next to useless with such a strange collection of possible moves, which meant they would have to learn to fend for themselves. That took a lot of training, but if he could pull it off they might be presentable for combat. Kessler started to look around, trying to find if he could see a commander. Someone higher in rank than him, to inform himself about their mission.

Looking around, it appeared he hadn't just been placed in any squad. The other teams all had similar weapons. Five men with spears and round shields, five men with crossbows, five men with greatswords and so on. Lots of people with lots of specialties. But all of them grouped together, while he got stuck with the misfits. Finally, he found an overseer. The man was in full armor, with an eye on top of a wing rather than just a wing like Kessler. Kessler made a polite bow. "Sir, I am Kessler, team 472 number 1. I wish to be informed of the first next goal of my team in order to strategize and prioritize training." The man turned around to face Kessler. "Good day, 472-1. I am currently not in a position to inform you about your orders yet, but Lady Ghala has the orders you are asking for. If you can find her. She's usually quite busy." "Thank you for your aid, major." With in mind the person he was looking for, Kessler went searching again. Lady Ghala was a strike witch, dressed in black leather armor. She had a larger set of magic items than others; she was talking to another soldier, so Kessler had some time to look at her. Her sandals had small white wings, her shin guards had red symbols on them that leaked purple magical sparks. Moving up, her armor had runes on it, and on her hips rested a belt with pouches and beads hanging from it. Her cape was short, with a small symbol to indicate her rank; two eyes and two wings with a circle on top. Finally, on her head rested a tiara with a small red crystal which had streams of magical energy flowing from it.

"What is your question, 472-1?" Kessler was shook from his short trance when she spoke, the beautiful woman having turned and put her hands on her sides. "Yes, I wish to be informed of the next first goal of my team in order to strategize and prioritize training." "Yes, that's quite Allright. Your team will be sent to the frontline as a pushing squad. When the

enemy's forces breach the first formation, your task will be to strike back and cut through them as efficiently as possible." "Understood, my lady." "Now go back to your squad. I have plenty of business to attend to." Doing as he was commanded, Kessler ran back in the direction of his team. A strike squadron. A dangerous position. If they pushed forwards too much, they would be surrounded by the enemy entirely, but if they didn't push forwards enough they would endanger everyone else. Either way they would risk death, whether it was at the hands of the court of witches or the blades of the enemy. Kessler found his way back slowly, strategizing his formation. The weapons he had gotten weren't very well-suited to a strike squadron, unless he were to shield himself and his troops with death. "Get over here. I need to explain something." The group gathered, Haria probably having told them that Kessler was in charge. "We are going to be a strike squadron, which means we are very much in danger at all times in battle. We will need to train your stamina in order to allow you to keep attacking until the enemy is pushed back, and possibly offense to ensure victory." And with that, it was time. The horn blew, marking the moment they would have to begin marching towards their camp outside of the city. Kessler held the pace, marching forwards with his allies nearby. Soon enough they came past his house, where Diana and Josaphine stood outside. His mother stared forwards blankly, and he was reminded of the days of grief and anger that had followed his father's last mission. Josaphine was smiling, waving him away happily. He gave her a short smile back while he continued along his path.

The next few days were painful. He did manage to figure out the exact workings of his team's abilities, some being more useful than others. Marth's greatsword could set fire to anything flammable it hit. Kenn's book could fire a set of up to five little orbs, which sought out their targets and then called a pillar of light from the sky which seemed to electrocute them. Herb's mace could send out a purple aura that didn't seem to do much except look intimidating. And finally, Haria could enhance his speed and travel short distances through walls. A great team, if he was trying to infiltrate some place or if he had a few thousand of the same team. Unfortunately, he had only one team, and his task was to battle the Huqei. His own blade was remarkably similar to theirs, except for the tail end blade. He still couldn't tell its magical properties, except for splitting in two. It was strange. Either way he had to keep going, training his men by forcing them to run around the camp, or keep using their abilities until they couldn't breathe, or simply hold their weapons directly in front of them to tire out their arms. He had some one on one time with each of them every day, training them in the use of their weapon. He couldn't much help with Kenn's book, but at least he could give him a dagger and teach him how to use it properly. He slept in the front of the tent, but mostly ignored his soldiers. He should be seen as superior, even if he was younger. And after three weeks of rigorous training, it was finally time. The long march towards the northern border would begin, and they would have to prepare for a battle against the finest men of the Huqei of the north.

"Kessler?" "Yes Kenn?" "I've got something to admit." "Then speak." They whispered to each other while holding pace, Kenn closely behind Kessler in their marching formation. "I don't want to go out there. I don't want to charge in with you." "That's a shame, Kenn. Cowards and traitors are to be executed. So you'll have to find some courage in that book of yours if you don't have it yourself. Because should you not charge in with us, you'll be executed shortly after." "You misunderstand. I am trying to ask to be placed in a different battalion or something. My magic item is better suited at long ranges-" "be silent, Kenn. I am not in charge of who is placed in what battalion. Should you survive this battle I'll see what I can do

for you.” Kenn remained silent, falling back a bit as to not disturb Kessler, until Marth picked up the pace, taking his place behind Kessler. “Hey, Kessler?” Kessler sighed, already annoyed. They had another day or three of marching ahead of them. “I know we already discussed what our tactic is supposed to be in battle, but you haven’t told us anything about what our team’s specific tactic is. I figure I have to be one of the people up front, but what about the others?” Kessler had spent his nights preparing to answer this question, but had intended to do so to the group the night before they arrived. “Be patient. I’ll tell you the day after tomorrow along with the rest of the group.”

And soon enough Kessler had to make true of his promise. The night before the first battle had fallen, and the camp felt an unusual gloom. Kessler’s tent was the first to have set up completely, and returned directly after being given their meal. “So, here’s the plan. Kenn, you are going to stay behind the four others. When the enemy breaks through our defenses, have your first blast prepared. First however we use some intimidation. It won’t be very effective against the Huqei, but something is better than nothing. That means that Herb uses his mace first to send out purple light. Act as if it’s an aura that makes us more dangerous. Stay within the light as much as you can. Then Kenn fires, and Haria uses his first dash forwards to get straight in the middle of the enemies. Marth and I will then move forwards with sheer attack force to pick you up again, while Herb picks off anyone he can from behind us. Then when Haria is back with us, he does the same. In the meantime, Kenn, you are protected by us, and will have to clear small waves of enemies to give us some space to work with. Those enemies should be no more than 20 feet away, understood?” “Yes sir.” “Finally, I want to drill this into your skulls one more time. Never, ever break formation. Once our first burst is done and we are back in formation, breaking out of line is a certain death, understood?” “Yes sir.” The unilateral voices of Kessler’s four soldiers was a good sign to him. They understood he was in charge, maybe even respected him. Tomorrow though, everyone would be put to the test.

War is hell. Everyone knows that. A trench is a digging site of death, a formation is order within mayhem. In the tactics of the Huqei though, there was honor. Their goal was still victory, but not at the cost of dignity. From what Kessler could tell, they stood on the other side of a battlefield with a foe that had broken its warriors in three segments; the largest segments was the infantry; hundreds of men with those strange, slightly curved blades on their back, and large spears in their hands with bowmen behind them. The second group was cavalry, a smaller group of a few dozen warriors on horseback with pikes and shields, and two blades rather than one. The last was a single man who stood in front of the army on horseback. A large ancient pauldron decorated his shoulder, with a large blade on his back. He was holding a large shield and a modified axe. No doubt the champion of this part of the Huqei military. The strategy stood in stark contrast to the forces he was a part of. Three long rows of shields covering all sides, followed by the strike squads. When the wall of shields would inevitably be broken through, their task was to kill as many enemies as possible until the wall of shields could be restored. After that came their finest warriors and generals. Should the strike squads fail, they would succeed. And in the middle of it all, Lady Ghala. This army’s dedicated strike witch. Her magic would serve to do the real damage to the enemy. All they had to do was protect her. Buy her time to get the greater spells off. Kessler’s heart was pounding. He was nervous. How could he not be. Kenn had folded his legs, sitting

behind the four defenders in front of him and breathing heavily. Marth had his greatsword on his shoulder, unfazed but the whole affair. His mask was on, ready to charge. Haria was grinding his blades together, trying to make them sharper. Finally, herb was standing perfectly still, his hands entwined in a prayer to the goddesses. A horn resounded from both camps, and everyone took formation. It was time to begin this hell on earth.

The enemy started with a charge, the footmen raising their spears and running forwards. The whole formation tensed up, and Kessler could feel the nervousness of the men in the air. With a few seconds left until the charge hit, the bowmen fired their arrows. Hundreds of thin lines crossed the skies, falling towards them. A few men raised their shields, bracing themselves from the arrows, and the enemy footmen were there to mercilessly slaughter them. A large purple ethereal plaque appeared, shielding them from the arrows which disappeared as they passed through it. Kessler gripped his blade as the first rows of enemies clashed with the shield, breaching through the first wave of shields. Second came the cavalry charge, which the infantry split up to give room to. The horses were fast, and due to the weakness created by the initial strike of infantry they were able to breach the wall of shields. Three or so strike squadrons stood behind them and began attacking the horses, and the slaughter began. Kessler put his hand on herb's back, who seemed like he wanted to rush in to help. "Hold position, herb. We have our own place to guard." Herb turned around and returned to his position just in time. In front of them, walking through the infantry, was the enemy hero. With his strange and ancient pauldron he stood out quite a lot, and his helmet was more decorated than the others. He carried a longer sword than any other soldier, and it was covered in ice. "Hold position. Give it a second." Kessler spoke, to himself and to his team. And then, the man slashed his sword, releasing dozens of shards of ice at the formation. The first wall of shields froze in place, the men killed in an instant. The infantry around the hero subsided, allowing him space to fire his attacks. He held his blade in both hands, lifting it above his head for a vertical slash, when suddenly someone stood before him. Haria had seen his chance. As the blade crashed down, Haria blocked it with both his push dagger and his curved sword, being thrown away by the energy of the blast. "Fuck! Open the shields! Charge!" Kessler yelled the commands, splitting his blade in two as their previous tactic was thrown out the window. Marth ran forwards, trying to find infantry to hack into, while Kenn stepped a foot backwards, firing his first blast at random. Herb kept his promise, creating his useless aura of intimidation before running forwards. And Kessler? Kessler ran. Haria was laying on the ground, winded by the intense power of the enemy hero's blade. But Kessler ran forwards, arriving just in time to prevent his death. His blade hit the hero's, striking it out of its trajectory and making it miss Haria by an inch.

The champion looked at his foe, a child no more than half his age. But he had provoked a duel, and that was what he would have. His eyes were so red Kessler swore they had always been blood-shot as he launched his first strike at Kessler. He responded with his dagger, blocking the strike while holding it in reverse grip to put his arm into his defence. With a swift rotation of his body his blade came out at the other side, striking the champion's armor as a familiar white orb hit his pauldron. Kessler backed down, grabbing Haria and helping him up as the heavenly strike descended on the champion, causing a light stumble. His recovery was quick though, fueling his blade with more of its magic as he thrust it forwards, shards of ice shooting off of it with ludicrous speed. The hugei didn't intend on losing the duel Kessler had provoked. But neither did Kessler. With a quick sidestep, the attack hit a shield behind him, rendering it useless. A slash came from the side, and Kessler's blade blocked it. The

dagger struck forwards, finally piercing the champion's armor and drawing some blood. When he retracted it, kessler was surprised to see his blade covered in fire. He jumped backwards, out of reach of the equally confused champion. But it didn't give him much time as the champion raised his blade above his shoulder, standing prepared for a lunge. Sensing the magic of the blade at work, kessler pushed the blades together, combining them into one. As he had thought, the larger blade now lit on fire as well. And kessler now finally realized what this weapon's gift was. Not strength. Not wisdom. Not dexterity. Not intelligence. This blade could be one or two. This blade could thrust and slash. And this blade could imbue itself with opposing elements. This blade's gift was the gift of versatility. A counter to whatever he came across if he was skilled enough with its use. Raising his blade in a manner mirroring his enemy, kessler felt as if he knew what he was doing. His team might have broken formation, but that wasn't important. The important thing was that he was fulfilling his purpose; he was buying lady ghala time to do the real damage while he held back this champion. Slowly circling his enemy, he now stood with his back to the enemy army, awaiting the first strike.

And before long the first strike came, a lunge forwards in an attempt to stab the young boy. The battlefield around kessler faded. There was only himself, his enemy and their blades. He raised his arm, making the tip of his blade go down and sideways, causing the enemy attack to scrape past his blade and hit the air next to his body. He turned his hands and body, forcing the enemy blade up and transitioning into a thrust at the champion's chest from below. It failed to connect as the hero jumped over kessler, landing at the other side and sheathing his blade. Kessler recognized what he was doing as the preparation for a huqin quickdraw. Kessler responded with the only "honorable" movement; he put his blade at his hip, preparing to do the same. The fire crackled around his blade as his enemy and he took a deep breath in. And then the true fight began. A flash of black and red came out of the champion's blade, almost looking like a brushstroke of a painter as kessler responded with his blade. The metal clashed, the fire crackled, the black traced the champion's blade. They both retracted and struck again. But this time kessler angled his hands forwards, resting his blade on his shoulder as he blocked the strike. The blade's momentum was stopped, and kessler made his winning move. He clicked the small button on his blade's hilt, and the clang of metal on metal resounded in both their ears as the dagger was ejected, shooting into the enemy's thigh. He screamed, hatred burning in his eyes. Such an underhanded, low tactic. Kessler's blade enflamed with something more powerful. White and gold traced his blade as he turned his body, taking the offense on his foe now. The champion was forced to defend, but kessler kept attacking. Again and again he struck, the white and gold rotating and flashing around his body as it traced after his blade, and the champion slowly was forced to back down, taking steps backwards as the blade in his thigh forced him to bleed, until the pain forced him into a mistake. He tried to block a previous strike from above him, the white and gold light confusing him as kessler slashed at him from below, diagonally across his chest. And that was enough, piercing through his armor and creating an enormous gash in his chest. The foe fell to his knees, his eyes piercing kessler's soul as he spoke for the first time in a decade, breaking his vow of silence. "Dishonor-" kessler's blade descended again, lowering deep into his shoulder before he pulled it out. "Honor without victory is useless, dear foe. Now rest, you did all you could."

Kessler's focus shifted as his enemy's corpse fell. A blue thundercloud had appeared above him, covering the entire battlefield. He checked to find marth standing over Haria,

surrounded by burning corpses of the huqei. Marth and kenn were standing back to back, marth giving a good smack to anyone nearby as kenn fired pulse after pulse. They'd gotten seperated, and the lady's attack was about to hit. Kessler took his dagger out of his foe's thigh, combining his blades as he ran into a storm of enemies. Slash by slash, he cleared a way forwards, rotating his body and felling men with every motion. Slowly but surely, the thunderclouds above him became thicker, but he paid no mind. Man after man lost their life to his white and gold traced blade, slashing again and again until he had cleared an area around himself and his team. They could barely launch a proper attack, as kessler already felled the enemies before they could even choose them. They quickly ran back to the formation, and soon enough the lady's attack began. Kessler sensed it, hearing what appeared to be rain around him, and ran back to the line of shields as fast as he could to behold the sight. The thunderclouds had formed thousands of arrows and spears made of spectral light, which descended at the enemy at a supernatural rate. All around, men were slain, their bodies covered in dozens of arrows. The rain of death continued on and on, slaying every man and dousing the grassland they fought on with enough blood to feed the flowers for years.