

If we are going to talk about kessler, we need to begin with something other than a person. If we're going to talk about him, we're going to begin at the beginning. And that beginning is a meteorite.

In the dark fog of a spring night, it fell over the green hills of the jocei empire. It left a scar on the landscape as it touched down, raining fire across the ground. The next morning the green hills were not green, but brown. The crops had been mildly ruined around the crater. The reason was a flood of people coming from around the empire; smiths, scholars and witches had gathered to research the material, which was named rezmor, after the star they said it originated from. Rezmor had unique capabilities; it could be molded into any shape, and magic had unpredictable effects when cast upon it. But perhaps the most important one was that, when forged into the shape of a weapon, it's capabilities were enhanced exponentially. And so the witches, who had first suggested turning the comet into utility objects for them, gave in to the scholars and blacksmiths, allowing them to turn the comet into a storehouse full of magical weapons and artifacts with the help of the witches. And when the meteorite's metal had been delved out, all that was left was it's core; a small white crystal shard. And as it was uncovered from the metal, a young witch claimed it for herself in an instant.

The witch brought the crystal to the city of eimwell, the capital of the jocei empire. And as night fell and the witch arrived, a mother muffled her child. Born only hours ago, the child was tightly wrapped in blankets as the two women bumped into one another. And without knowing it, the two had sealed the child's fate in that very moment. Both women stood still for a moment. The witch in her white robes stared at the woman in her old, grayish rags. The woman held a basket with her child and it was obvious what she was going to do. The witch on the other hand carried nothing. She'd conjured a necklace to hold the crystal, and her hands were busy settling her robes from bumping into the woman, who had now begun to bend her knees in order to bow. "That will not be necessary, lady. Continue on your business and tell none that you saw me, and I will do the same." Without wasting another word, the witch continued on her path, leaving the child and his mother alone. The mother, struggling to stand up, continued on her path to leave the child at a doorstep. There was a very old tradition within the empire; since it was seen as a sign of misfortune to bear a male child first, pregnancies were carried out in secret to avoid the shame paired with it. When a male child was born first, the mother or father would go out looking for someone willing to take the child in. And that process had been made very simple; if one was willing to take in a boy, they would paint a white inverted V on or near their door so that the father or mother could easily find a willing home for their child. It was a wonderful tradition, and because of it, the mother was easily able to find a willing parent in the richer part of eimwell. She gave her unnamed child one last kiss on the forehead before she laid it on the doorstep and knocked on the door a few times, as loudly as possible, to wake up the new parents. And without another glance at her son, the woman closed her robes and ran away into the dark night, never to be seen again by her own son.

Less than a minute later, a woman opened the door and picked the basket up from the doorstep. There was no note, no symbol or crest, but she knew enough. She had a newborn son on her hands. She stroked the palm of her hand across his face, before running into her home to wake up her favorite husband. "Darling! Darling! Someone left us a boy!" The husband, greeted with the rare sight of his wife in his chamber, immediately woke up, looking

at the basket his wife was holding and back at her. "Oh that's such wonderful news! Did you see the mother?" "No, but it doesn't matter. We have been blessed with a second child, and that is all that I care about." "I guess it doesn't. Have you thought of a name for him yet, my dear Diana?" "You know I have. I want to name him Kessler." "I like it. I really do. Kessler it is, then." "You can go back to sleep now. I'll tend to his immediate needs now, and you can take over in the morning. Sleep soundly, my dear Ryanor." "Goodnight, Diana."

And so, young little Kessler found a family. There was his mother Diana, his five fathers, only three of which he would ever see. Then there was his older sister named Josaphine. His mother worked at the temple as a priestess, and his fathers were spread among the legion and the libraries of the city. Ryanor, his favorite father, and his mother's favorite husband, was a general in the legion. A great warrior and a great speaker, who could sway enemies of the empire with words or actions as required. His mother later had another daughter named Aurelia. And in the beginning, life was good. His mother was kind, letting him play with both the other boys at school and with the girls, even if she got some backhand looks from the other mothers. In class he was taught along with the other boys who they would become; soldiers, scholars, builders, farmers. The aim of the school was to push them towards becoming a scholar, as almost every school in the capital tried. They were taught how to read, how to write, how to act and behave. In the meantime, the girls sat across the hall, away from the boys. They were taught what they could become as well. The goal for them was to make them witches, but a girl could become anything she wanted. All of them were taught some of the most fundamental magic tricks, such as distortion of light and the ability to create harmless fire to heat themselves with. But apart from that, the school asked what they wanted and taught them what they needed. All of them learned how to read and write, but some learned more magic, others learned how to count and calculate, and some even wanted to learn about the gods and all they could do. Kessler got to play with some of the girls, and they tried time and again to teach him the simplest of magic tricks. But the truth was that he could never learn them. No boy could. Only women could use magic on their own. And when he was eleven, he was first taught that. That was the lesson in which they explained artifacts; the only way a scholar was able to access the magic that was so innate to witches. As Kessler learned with the other boys, he was taught that a witch could create an artifact to fuel a husband's magic, but that most artifacts were made for the army. Witches used their magic on weapons, imbuing them with magical capabilities that would allow any man from the Jocei Empire to fight a dozen or more normal men and win. That day he went back home to his mother filled to the brim with questions and curiosity. Diana had once been a great witch, and was once widely known as a candidate to be the grand witch. But she'd given up her task as a witch to work at the temple. When he came home he ran right for her room, where he found her at the side of the bed, crying. He knew not to enter her room, and seeing her cry made him back away.

Josaphine, 13 then, knew what was going on, and caught him before he could run to find his favorite dad to ask what was wrong. She pulled him by the brown fabric of his tunic, stopping him in the middle of running with ease. "Kessler, stop. Don't run. Don't go to Ryanor's room." "Why not? What happened? Why is mom crying?" "Don't call her mom, Kessler. You know I don't like it when you do that. But-" "but what? What happened to daddy?" "Kessler, Ryanor has to go back to the battlefield. The Kreshul are gathering a force to attack us, and all noble families have to send one of their men to the battlefield. Ryanor is the one carrying noble blood, so he has to go." "But... but he's got that wound in his chest! And he said that he

couldn't use artifacts!" "Yes, kessler. And that's why mother is crying. She loves ryanor, and it's almost certain that he will not survive this battle, especially if he has to fight with his old weapons." "What are you saying? What do you mean?" "Kessler, the next time that ryanor leaves, he's not coming back. And since Gailan is already a soldier and the other three husbands that mother has are scholars, you will be the next man in line to join the military, should the empress ask it of us. So no more playing with the girls, no more fiddling around. You need to grow up, kessler. And you need to do it now." "But Josaphine, how am I supposed to- how can I-" "don't complain, kessler. You need to be strong and just take it. Your life is going to change, and so is mine. Do you understand?" tears welled up in Kessler's blue eyes as he nodded his head. "S-so what d-do I do now?" "We wave goodbye to ryanor, our father, and you begin your training to take his place when the need arises. No more books for you." "A-alright." The next days marked the beginning of the first great event in kessler's youth; his adoptive father ryanor, with a limp and a drained artifact at his side, joined the caravan to battle, his mother holding her children close to her as he marched along. Before he left, his father had given him a small necklace, with a message inside. It was a symbol in the old language which he couldn't read, but his sister told him it meant strength.

And with that, little kessler dropped out of school, instead staying home to be instructed by hired blades funded by his mother. Eleven year old kessler was forced to begin training his body; scaling walls with his bare hands, resisting punches to the face without flinching. When he was twelve, one of the hired blades began his weapon training. At first it was just a sword. Then he added a shield. Then armor. Then he dropped the shield in favor of another blade. Then on to a different weapon. By the time he was thirteen, he could wield mostly any weapon he could think of, and was stronger and faster than most kids three years older than him could dream of being. His father never returned home. Dead people don't usually do that. His sister had taken his necklace away, saying he didn't deserve it yet until he could beat her in a fight. It was rigged, of course. Josaphine was already very skilled at magic, inheriting the gifts of her mother. Blasts of psychic energy, flames, spiders. She used anything and everything to make sure kessler remembered his place, no matter how strong he got; beneath her. Beneath every woman in this empire. And twelve days before his fourteenth birthday, a letter did its rounds among the nobles; the huqei, a land of powerful knights wielding strange blades and wooden armor, approached the northern borders of jocei. Every noble family was to send a man to fight. When the letter came, Josaphine was the first to find it. She gave it to her mother first, who had turned into a bitter woman after her beloved husband's death. She sent the child away with a scowl, reading the letter for herself. When she came out of her chambers, she was wearing her old uniform; before the temple. Before ryanor. The purple bindings around her hands, the black dress set with crystals and the white blindfold all signaled that she had returned from retirement, becoming a witch once more. She walked to kessler's trainer, a burly man who was teaching him to handle a greatsword that was quite a bit taller than kessler. The man bent his knee as soon as he saw her. "Hired blade, leave at once. The child must come with me." Turning her back, Diana began walking to the living room, where she set the letter on the middle of the table. Kessler had his head down, and sat on the opposite side of the table. "Kessler, child. This letter holds a very clear instruction. We must send one of our blood to defend our empire from the huqei. You will be the one I send." Kessler's face was overtaken by a mix of emotion. Blind panic, grief and anger. He recalled the letter sent to his father, Ryanor, which looked exactly the same as this one. He recalled how it had meant a death sentence for his best friend in

the whole world. His breathing became labored, his eyes looking around for something to find comfort in. His mother laid her hand on the letter, sliding it to Kessler before standing up and leaving without another word. His eyes tried to pierce a hole into her back as she walked away. Why didn't she stay? Why didn't she hug him? She was sending her only son to war, and she couldn't even be bothered to comfort him? A spark lit up a deep, dark corner of his heart as Diana slipped out of view, and he opened the letter. With one hand holding it up and the other brushing through his messy blonde hair, Kessler made one last check to ensure Josaphine wasn't nearby. And then he burst into tears.

Two days later, Kessler is dressed in a red tunic with purple accents. The man riding the carriage had told him they were headed to the armory, where he would be assigned a weapon and armor. It wasn't very ceremonious; they would simply give him a number and tell him to find the chest with his equipment. All the numbers were in sets of five, and the people sharing a set would form small squads that would share a tent. As the carriage stopped, Kessler took a deep breath. He could see that the people outside were all older than him. Adult men. And he was so much shorter than them. Weaker than them. All he could pray for was that they wouldn't laugh at him, because he knew that he wouldn't be able to take that without bursting out crying right now. After counting to three, Kessler stepped out of the carriage, and into the crowd. It was quite a wait until he got to the locket, which reached up to his chest. The man behind it seemed disinterested though, not even caring about the fact that the child in front of him was sent to war at such a young age. "Family name?" "The family of Diana, the witch of Westhaven." The name did seem to peek the man's interest, causing his brow to rise. "Diana of Westhaven? I thought she would be exempt of sending one of her men. Anyways, your code is set 472, number one. Go ahead and find your chest." "Thank you, sir." Kessler memorized the number as fast as he could, walking towards the storehouse to the left. There were lines upon lines of men walking to the stacks of boxes, but some of the men were looking on a piece of paper and back to the storehouses. One of them, a tall man with toned muscles, tapped Kessler on the shoulder. He was wearing the same uniform as everyone else, his black skin didn't provide the proper contrast though. "Hey kid, could you help me find my code?" Kessler thought for a moment, before nodding. He figured that, like many others, the man probably couldn't read or write numbers. "What was your set?" "Four hundred and seventy two. Number three." "Oh, then you're headed to the same set as I am! Follow me." It was a strange sight; the young child followed by a muscular man almost twice his size, headed to a stack of boxes. With a bit of help, they undid the stack, placing the boxes in a circle. Kessler opened his own first. On top was the armor; a leather base with metal knobs on it. The leather was hard, great against piercing, but not very good against bludgeoning as it bent easily. Luckily this was also a positive, as it allowed him to move. Kessler quickly fitted the armor onto himself, knowing that it was likely enchanted to adjust itself to the wearer once put on. Then he wiped away the straw used to protect the steel of the weapon underneath, and he felt a shock in his heart.

At the bottom laid a strange weapon. It began with a slightly curved, extremely thin blade with one sharp edge. Then there was a guard, much like a rapier's. A strange thing, because normally rapiers would be thin and for thrusting, while this blade appeared to be made for slashing. Then came the hilt, protected by a metal thread. A small knob sat around where he would place his thumb. But the strangest thing was that after the hilt, the blade kept going.

There was a metal ring, after which followed a smaller hilt, without a guard, and then a weapon that looked like a thick dagger, with a bladed end in the opposite direction of the blade on top. He picked up the weapon, expecting it to be hefty, but it was light. And then, he felt it. A jolt of energy running through his veins. An instinctual sense of the weapon in his hands. The rezmor steel did its work, telling him what it could do as he attuned to it. He held the weapon above his head, placing the dagger's smaller hilt in his offhand before pushing his thumb into the knob. With a loud, satisfying sound of clashing metal, the blades pushed apart, splitting into what was effectively a dagger and a katana. The armor made sense now, as it allowed him to be very mobile, and such a weapon relied on extreme mobility. He turned around to the first of his squadmates, expecting to see a similar weapon and armor. Instead, he was faced with a man in full steel plate armor, with resting on his shoulder a greatsword two and a half times the size of kessler. He gulped, a bit nervous due to the mask included in the armor; a grey mask with a mouth that appeared to be screaming, with hair and eyes sculpted in detail onto it. The man flipped up the helmet, revealing his face again. "Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. I'm Marth, by the way. Thank you for helping me find my box. Do you know when the others will be here?" Kessler sighed in relief, having feared for his life a second ago. "I don't know, but they should be here any minute. Kessler, by the way." As he spoke, they heard the crack of another chest opening, and number two of their unit had arrived. The new man was wearing black robes and a stylish, pointy hat. He pulled out of his box similar black robes, with a shimmer of gold shining through the black fabric. Underneath was a simple mace with a grey crystal shining brightly in its hilt. "Hello there, stranger! I am marth. Pleasure to meet you. Who are you?"

The man stood still for a moment before his response came. "I am herb, husband of eliga of the temple." Kessler knew vaguely who eliga was. A priestess of calamity, the goddess of wrath and punishment. Undoubtedly she would have given her husband a gift before he headed to war, and as herb took up his equipment, kessler quickly saw what that gift was. A black necklace with a silver pendant resembling a scorpion on it. The sacred animal of calamity. Likely a way to store a powerful spell in a way her husband could cast it. "A man of great faith then?" The new voice came from a man sitting on the fourth crate, dressed in white robes with blue details. A scholar, by the looks of him. Kessler didn't look forward to having a man of faith and a scholar in his party, as he vaguely remembered that the church and the scholars clashed with each other greatly. "Indeed. And who might you be?" The fourth man introduced himself as kenn, one of the great many scholars of the city, who had been researching magic before his summoning to war. He pulled leather armor and a book out of his crate.

And last but not least arrived a stranger wearing a bandana over his face, who wouldn't speak to them but wrote. Kind of annoying, kessler thought. If marth was to know what the last member of the party, who went by ariah, was saying then someone would have to translate. A mute, an illiterate, and two people who were inevitably going to fight among themselves at some point. And all of them were past their 20s. Marth even seemed to be in his early 30s. As a 15 year old, he would have to step up with this bunch of misfits around him. He checked his crate one more time, to see if he hadn't missed anything. It turned out he did. A small metal plaque which told him his rank; a wing and a sword. With a quick inspection of the crates of the others, there was his insignia, marth's insignia of an axe, kenn's insignia of a book, herb's insignia of a candle and ariah's insignia of a dagger. The wing meant kessler was in charge. Jolly.

