

The fireplace crackled as Kessler looked up from his screen. It was late at night, and Angela had apparently woken up since she was standing in the doorway to the living room. "What are you doing baby?" Kessler closed the screen to give her his full attention. That, and hide his little project. "Nothing special. Just a little side project." Her bare feet danced across the fake wood floor, the flames making her shadow dance around as well as she made her way to him. "What kind of project?" "Something a little hard for me." She put her hands on his shoulders, giving them a bit of a massage. "You're really tense. Is something wrong?" "No. It's just bringing up a lot of bad memories." "Then maybe you should ask your boss to put someone else on it?" "No. I want to do it." "Alright. But come back to bed. You can do this when it's not 3 at night, can't you?" "I can. I just don't want to bother you with it." "The only thing bothering me right now is you not being in bed with me when I wake up in the middle of the night." "I'm sorry, darling. I'll be right up." "No, you're carrying me back into the bed." "A fair enough demand."

The slaughter was immense. The spectral arrows had even reached the back line of bowmen of the Huqei, and after the battle they had faded into particles of light which quickly dissipated. but the death they had caused remained. The army of the Jocei might have been victorious, but they did show respect. Lady Ghala ordered her soldiers to set up camp on the hill and then begin digging graves for the fallen, both their own and the enemy's. She made a large stone glow, making a small memorial for the widows of the men who had fallen, with date and a short description of the battle. Kessler stood before the stone, looking at the words she'd used. 'Quick and painless' it said. He wasn't entirely sure that thousands of arrows were painless. But then he felt a hand on his shoulder. He had taken off his armor since the battle was done, so his base tunic and pants were all that was left. "Lady Ghala wishes to see you." "Yes sir." Kessler turned around, following the man back to the tent camp into the largest tent; lady Ghala's tent was large and purple from the outside with golden details. Inside it was much more comfortable; the tent was set up on top of wooden platforms on which rested animal skins to walk comfortably. Lady Ghala laid sideways on a sitting bed in the middle of the room. The tent had been divided into a path into the middle, and six sections that connected to the middle section, each blocked off with more purple fabric. "Is this the boy?" "Yes, my lady. This is the boy that charged forwards." Kessler was bowing with his eyes on the ground, and that comment made him afraid. He had broken formation as well. He was supposed to give the right example, and he'd gone for a duel with a powerful enemy instead.

"You can go now, officer. Now tell me, boy. How old are you?" "Thirteen, my lady." "Thirteen. That's very young. Was there No other man that could have taken your place?" "The previous time a soldier was required of my family, one of my fathers was sent, and he hasn't returned. My other fathers are either already in voluntary service or have become scholars to avoid the demand." "Then those fathers are cowards. I believe your name is Kessler, yes?" "Correct, my lady." "Then I have to applaud you, Kessler. You showed great bravery this morning. Not only did you succeed in your task as a charge squad, but you saved dozens of soldiers, and perhaps won us this battle." "But my lady, you won us this battle!" "I landed the killing blow, but if you hadn't distracted the Huqei champion, he could have easily broken through the formation and perhaps have reached me. If that had happened, he would have broken my concentration and forced me to focus on him. That would have possibly cost us the battle, as you could see that they had far greater numbers than us. You, Kessler, have shown great valor and power. Tell me, what did your weapon do for you in that battle?" Kessler heard lady Ghala open a scroll and dip a feather in ink. She was going to write something down. "Well, when I drew blood of the enemy's champion, it covered my weapon in an opposing element. He started with ice, and piercing his skin gave me fire. Then he empowered himself and his blade with red and black light which I'm not sure about, but my blade was covered with gold and white light when I next hit him. It traced my blade, creating a sort of distraction, which helped me win against him." The quill scribbled across the papyrus as lady Ghala quickly jotted down whatever she might be thinking. "Interesting. How did you learn to fight at the level he was fighting?" "When my father answered the last call, my mother realized I was the next in line, and took me off school to train instead." "You went to school?"

Does that mean you can read and write?" "Yes, my lady." "And who is your mother?" "Lady Diana of Westhaven." "Oh. Her." The lady's voice sounded like she was suddenly annoyed after he named his mother. "Did she let you see your friends after she pulled you off school?" "No, my lady." "That's what I thought. Kessler, do you wish to stay with your team, or do you want me to be your guardian?" "My... guardian? I don't think I follow, my lady." "Kessler, I want to make sure you stay healthy and safe. This would mean that I can take you as a husband of mine, and you would enjoy the benefit of being allowed to sleep in my tent. Aside from that, you would stand by my side in battle so that you wouldn't be in danger in the frontlines. But I don't want to force marriage on you. You can deny, and I will increase the rank of you and your team. That way you are a bit further from the frontline, although still not as safe as I'd like." Kessler was confused. He was just a boy, a soldier. Why did she care about him enough to offer him marriage, just to keep him safe? "My lady, I cannot accept a marriage to you. It is a great honor, but the safety of a single soldier isn't worth that much." "Kessler, do you know what your weapon is made of?" "No, my lady." "It is made of rezmor steel. It's a magical material, but for some reason it refuses to interact with women, including witches. It will interact with men though. However, it is completely unpredictable when it does. We can't know ahead of time what a rezmor steel weapon does. But with you the effect seems immensely powerful. Aside from that, you're not just a soldier. You are a child. Thirteen years of age. You shouldn't have to be here at all. I can't send you back home without the threat of death through supposed treason, so I want to ensure your safety in the only ways I can; marriage and the included promotion, or simply a promotion."

Kessler's brain bluescreened for a moment. That was strange. Magic usually ignored men rather than women. And due to his synergy with this material in combination with his young age, she wanted to protect him? This was extremely unusual. "My lady, might I ask you something?" "Of course, Kessler. And please, call me Ghala." "Yes, my lady. My question is that you said I'm not supposed to be here due to my age. But I'm the only applicable man in my family." "Kessler, you are thirteen. Every family is sent that letter, but if there is no applicable male above the age of 16, the matriarch of the family can choose to ignore the letter. You didn't have to be here, but you were sent anyways." Kessler's eyes began to tear up. "I-is that?" "Yes, Kessler. That's the truth. Your mother sent you to war when she didn't have you. But it's going to be alright. I'm going to do all I can to protect you, you understand?" Lady Ghala had raised herself from her laying position, stepping towards Kessler and squatting in front of him, putting a hand through his hair. "I'm going to make sure you get out of this alive, do you understand? If there's anything I can do, just come to me, and ask. I will take care of you since it seems lady Diana would not." The disgust at his mother's name dripped out of her words. Kessler's tears welled up further, and he closed his eyes, releasing them onto his cheeks. His muscles grew weak, and he fell to the floor, but the witch caught him, pulling him in and holding him tight. Her hand rested on his shoulder while his arms embraced her back. She made quiet shushing noises as he cried in her arms.

When he next woke up, he was lying in a bed with something warm underneath him. The blankets were wonderfully soft and comfortable, the body beneath him clothed in a simple robe. Lady Ghala's arms wrapped around him as she woke up. Kessler tried to recall what had happened, but his memory failed him. He recalled some revelation. Some cruelty. But the screams of the men with a dozen arrows in their body overwhelmed his memory, making him grasp for his forehead in... pain. Not physical pain like he was used to. Ghala stirred, releasing him from her arms. "Are you alright, Kessler?" "Yes, I'm fine, I'm fine. I just have to be strong for a moment." "Alright. Have you considered my offer?" "I... don't recall your offer." "It was a choice between safety and staying with your team." Kessler shook his head, trying to get the screams out. The blood. "Honorless..." he whispered. "I'm sorry, I should stay with my team. I thank you for the offer though, my lady." "Alright Kessler. But take care of yourself. Do not stand before a blade unless you are sure you can win the fight, you understand me?" "Yes, my lady." Kessler stood up, clutching his head as he moved out of the tent and back into the camp. The cold ground was causing a white fog to well up around the ground, which he waded through on his way to the tent of his men. He was still wearing his tunic,

although it was all frilled up due to him sleeping in it. As he opened the flaps to the tent, his men groaned. Usually, he would do that to wake them up and get them to start running laps to train, but today he wasn't going to train with them. He got to his bed, which was a simple wooden frame with cloth spanned over it to make an uncomfortable but adequate resting place. He sat down on the side of it, holding his head in both his hands, brushing his fingers through his hair. What had he done? Less than a day ago he had stood opposite to a champion, and he had killed him. Not only that, but he had also slaughtered at least a dozen men after that. He had killed people. He stood up, running through the camp. He ran and ran, his mind getting foggy. He ran into a river and kneeled down beside it, plunging his head into the cool water. His white tunic and pants got dirty and wet because of the mud and water, but he didn't care. He looked at his hands and he could just... feel the blood on them. There was so much of it. It felt like his hands were burning, and he put them in the river, rubbing them together, trying to get the blood off. He kept rubbing them together, washing them over and over until his nails had made little wounds all over his hands from which more blood flowed. He kept washing them again and again, until he felt a hand on his shoulder. It shocked him awake, and the genuine pain of his bleeding hands caused him to flinch back. Haria seemed to have awoken and had gone to track him down. Kessler raised up, knocking the mute's hand off of his shoulder. "This is no business of yours, Haria. Go back to the tent before I make you run three laps." Haria tried to get his notebook out of his pocket, but Kessler slapped it out of his hand, before pointing back at the camp. "GO." He shouted, allowing Haria to pick up the mud-covered notebook on his way running back to the camp. Ensuring he was alone again, Kessler slowly walked away from the river to a place where he could sit. His body shivered from the intense cold, and his hands were still bleeding from the friction wounds he had caused. As he let himself fall down to the ground, he began crying again. What had he done? The champion's blood-red eyes stared back at him from inside of his mind. Honorless. Victorious, but honorless. Had he spoken some sort of curse in that last word? Was that what the pauldron could do? Curse whoever killed him? He didn't know. But he raised himself up from the ground. If this was a curse, it could be lifted. All he would have to do was to ask someone to lift the curse and he wouldn't cry and hurt himself anymore. That was a desirable outcome. If his hands were wounded, he couldn't fight.

The sun was shining high above the tent camp as Kessler's hands were being wrapped by Kenn. "What did you even do-." "Be silent. I don't want to answer your questions." Kenn looked down at his work again, fastening the simple bandages with a small knot. "That should hold for a while. When you take it off, it should have stopped bleeding. There weren't any deep wounds." "Good. Now, I am going to go to the training field. You have downtime today." Kessler lied, planning to go to lady Ghala and ask for his curse to be removed. He couldn't show any weakness. If he did, his men wouldn't see him as their commander. He was obsessed with that thought, being seen as a commander to them. He had responsibilities. And with those responsibilities came duties. He rose to his feet, causing the faces of his men to look at him in confusion. Kessler was afraid they knew something. Maybe they thought he couldn't handle it. But he could. He knew he could handle it. Cracking his knuckles, Kessler stormed out of the tent and towards lady Ghala's tent. He knocked on the pole by the entrance, alerting the lady of his presence. "Come in." She spoke, and Kessler walked into the tent. It was warmer there. Lady Ghala was busy with a large contraption through which a set of fluids ran, mixing at different temperatures and dripping into a bottle. "Oh, hello Kessler! How can I help you?" Kessler kneeled down, his gaze meeting the ground. "Lady Ghala, I believe something is wrong. I've entered some sort of trance-like state an hour or so ago in which I unconsciously harmed my hands. I believe it is part of a curse of some type. Would you be so kind as to try to help me remove this curse?" Lady Ghala stepped away from the construction on her table, moving towards him. "Kessler, I'm afraid you're wrong. That doesn't sound like a curse. It sounds a lot like something we call Corpseshock. It was exactly what I wanted to protect you from, but it seems to be too late. I'm going to send you and you back to the capital, and there you can find a lady of the church to help you with this. Once she considers you healed, you will get the choice of an honorable discharge or marriage with me and being

allowed to fight again. Either way, I'm permanently taking you off the frontlines." "But my lady-"
"Kessler, no. I'm trying to protect you. I'm sending you back, and not to your mother's home. You're going to live in my house until you are healed, you understand? If you need to, you can treat this as an order from your commander, anything for you to work on this, you got it?" Kessler's face distorted, in confusion, nearly anger. "My lady, I don't want to retreat. I can still fight." "I know you can, Kessler. But that would be the death of you if you keep going. Not all scars show white skin."

That afternoon, lady Ghala summoned a carriage made of purple light, and made Kessler step into it with a letter to her husband. Kessler obeyed, although reluctantly. His squad looked at him as he stepped into the carriage, and Kessler looked away in shame. He didn't want them to think he was a coward that ran from battle. The carriage itself was weirdly comfortable. The carriage began riding by itself as lady Ghala waved him away, becoming a dot on the horizon soon after.

Kessler fell asleep on the purple pillows inside of the carriage, his dreams haunted by strange feelings and sensations. When he awoke for the first time, it was in a cold sweat. He darted awake, looking around the carriage and the landscape around him. He couldn't remember why he'd woken up. After checking one more time only to see nothing of danger around him, he curled up into a ball, trying to fall asleep again. It took a while, but eventually he managed to fall into a light slumber. The next time he awoke, he did have a clear reason he awoke, the clattering of the wheels on cobblestone. The carriage had arrived in the capital of the Jوعي empire; Nalis. The carriage drove itself through the streets in the night, which were awfully busy. He wasn't used to all the sound. Kessler kept himself busy with finding where the letter was and checking if he still had his weapon on his person. When the carriage finally stopped, he rubbed his back and ass a little. They were sore from the constant bouncing on the cobblestones. The carriage door opened, revealing the ground for him to stand on. Once his feet were both planted on the ground, the carriage faded into purple petals of light, drifting in the wind. A man pushed open the door into the courtyard of the massive house, walking to Kessler. "Hello there. Are you a messenger, a soldier or a child trying to break into my house?" Kessler, realizing this was lady Ghala's husband, faltered for a bit. Should he bow down? Did he technically outrank him? He kneeled, just to make sure, and silently pulled the letter out of his pocket, presenting it to the man. "Ah, a messenger." The man picked the letter out of Kessler's hands, ripping it open with his finger before looking down at Kessler. "Come inside, kid. You look like you've had a rough day." Kessler looked up, before quietly standing up and walking to the door, leaving the man to read the letter as he went inside, awaiting the husband's response. Not long after, the husband followed him inside, closing the door behind himself. "So, Kessler. My wife told you why you're here, yes?" "Yes sir." "Don't call me sir. You can call me kai. And I'll get you some clothes, some food, and later today I'll take you to the temple." "Alright si- I mean kai." Kai took Kessler's hand, walking him to the room where they stored their clothes. He pulled a few sets of clothes out of the closets, which seemed to mainly be reserved for a vast collection of dresses and jewelry of lady Ghala's. Kai decided on two sets of white clothes, one set of black clothes and one additional brown tunic to give to Kessler. "There. Now go downstairs and get the servant to make you something warm in the kitchen. I need to send a few messages around."