

Soon enough, Kessler was sitting on the side of a long table, a bowl of hot stew resting on his lap and a blanket draped over his shoulders. He was... warm. The blanket was soft. But he felt restless, uncomfortable. Kai was sitting across the table from him, re-reading the letter. "So just... one more time. You're the child of that... witch, who sent you to war, and you're thirteen years old, and nobody told you that was odd?" "I was trained for years. I received a rank as squad commander. I didn't want anyone to question my authority, so when they tried to tell me I told them off." "Kessler, do you know why my wife sent you back to the capital and not to your home?" "She did tell me something, but I don't quite remember." "The reason she sent you here is because your mother, that... you see I'm not of a high enough rank to cuss at her, so the closest thing to what I really want to say is witch. That witch, she sent you to war when it was entirely unnecessary. She put you on military training when you were, what? Ten? And knowing her, she lost interest in you as her plaything when you were two or three years old already. My wife sent you to me so that you wouldn't have to go back to your mother. She sent you here to heal. You're a thirteen year old who killed a dozen or more men and witnessed one of my wife's most destructive spells. You saw the corpses of hundreds if not thousands of soldiers. It might not have set in yet, but you have corpshock, Kessler. And now you need time to heal. Which is where the church comes in. The priestesses here are the best healers in the empire. Now, they can't just cast a spell and wave your troubles away. I assume not, at least. But what they can do is work with you so you can get a grip on who you really are. Help you come to terms with reality, and accept what has happened in your short life so far. And Lady Ghala has given me a few rules for you, but most important is that if you want to go back to that battlefield, you first need an okay from the high priestess and a ring around your finger, be it hers or someone else's. That means that it'll take a year at the very least before she lets you back to the battlefield, which is hopefully enough time for this war to blow over and peace to settle. But I need you to realize that the war against the Huqei is not your fight to face, Kessler. You have no responsibility for the men of your squad anymore. They will hopefully be back as soon as this war ends and everything will be Allright. But for you to heal, I need your mind here, and not on the battlefield. Do you understand?"

The church was something to behold. It was a round building on a square platform, with a large dome for a roof. Inside of the large structure was a plaza that had been divided into fifteen sections, each one representing a different goddess. Kai took Kessler along by his hand until they reached the section centered around the goddess Thirna, the spirit of healing. The section was dominated by a statue of the goddess with an altar before it. The statue showed her in simple white robes, with flowers growing on her legs and roses forming a crown on her head. A small lizard sat atop her hand, her patron animal chosen for its ability to regenerate its tail when lost. The altar was covered in offerings of cherries, roses and gold, and a tall woman made even taller by the heels she was wearing stood by the altar in prayer. Her robes were white with red details, her hair covered in a green veil. Kai knelt and Kessler followed his example as they awaited her finishing her prayer. A pinkish light descended from the statue when her prayer finally imbued it with the intended magic, and she finally turned around. "Welcome, children of the moon. You have come for healing, and Thirna will grant your desire. Tell me your wounds, men." "We Thank Thirna for granting us time in the sun, oh priestess. I bring before you a child, scarred by a mother, sent to a war against better knowledge. I bring before you what is left of his innocence. I bring before you what is left of his mind, in hopes that you would use Thirna's blessing and restore anything you can, allowing this child to live the life intended for him." The priestess turned to Kessler.

She revealed her hand from her robes, the fingers covered in golden jewelry, her fingertips entirely covered in the shining yellow material. She placed her thumb on his forehead and the rest of her fingers towards the back of his head, pushing forwards to force Kessler's head upwards. She looks him in the eyes, green lookers staring into his soul. The cold metal feels strangely familiar on his head as she assesses him, moving his limbs however she wants. "I shall see what I can do. Who was his mother?" "Lady Diana, the priestess turned witch." The woman turned her head as soon as the name was mentioned. "This is the child of that monster? Do you have any idea what she did to him?" Kai seemed distressed at the start of the sentence, but quickly calmed down, his head still turned to the ground. "I know not what she did to him exactly, but I know she trained him for combat from an age that is against the laws of the goddesses and the empress." "A child born to a monster, trained to fight, sent to war. I see in his eyes what he has witnessed, and I know he should not have. But I can see already that to undo the damage that has been done is impossible. This child has been harmed beyond recognition or innocence. I shall see what I can do, but I can't promise anything." "Priestess, I thank you for showing a man the patience to do anything at all for his sake. I thank Thirna for anything she may do for this child."

The priestess had told Kai to leave, placing Kessler on the altar on his back. The pinkish light spreading from the statue was warm, while the stone altar was cold. It caused Kessler to shiver, uncomfortable in his position. The woman had yet to touch him skin to skin, her hands covered in gold. She had called a few younger girls to her side, who were gathering oils, balms, flowers and bowls of water. One of them brought a knife, presenting it to the priestess. Kessler didn't know if he was part of a ritual, a spell or both. The priestess of Thirna took the knife from the girl, sending her away again as she doused the blade in some of the oils. Stepping to the altar, she placed the knife on his clothes. Kessler now understood why he had gotten an extra robe for this outing from Kai. The blade cut smoothly through the fabric as she revealed his scarred body to the goddess, each cut also leaving green traces of light just above his body. The girls began cleaning his body with the water, carefully ensuring that they do not touch the lines of green light. The ritual continued when the priestess took the golden protectors off of her fingers, tracing the green on his skin with her nail and finger. Kessler shivered again at all the cold and different sensations, looking up to see the green light escaping into the air, forming a swirling ball above his head. The green began to change colors, shifting and swirling until the priestess turned her hand up, touching the ball of light. What was supposed to happen was a perfect orb having formed in the air above him. Instead, the orb was cracked and tattered, a bright spark glowing in the middle of it. "What is That?" The priestess spoke as the girls began to light candles, placing Kessler's hands in the bowls of balming fluid. The smoke from the candles pulled towards the hands of the priestess, who began to draw strings between pieces of the orb with it. "Child, I assume you do not know what I am doing, so I will enlighten you. This orb, or what should be an orb, floating above your head represents your mind. Scars left on it, trauma dealt to it, this orb shows it all. With a healthy person, this orb shows a few cracks at most. Your orb however, your mind, is damaged beyond recognition. The smoke from these candles is what I usually use to fill the cracks, but the damage to your mind is too large. There is not enough to tie together, so to speak. So what I will do instead is fill as much of it up as possible with smoke, and form a protective bubble around it. I've never had a case like this before, so I don't know what it will do. But at the very least, your mind will be able to recover any wounds it can." "Will it hurt?" "I don't think it will hurt you physically, but I can't be sure. Laela, put him to

sleep so I can complete the spell and form the protective layer.” One of the girls placed her hand on Kessler’s forehead, and spoke a few words. Then everything went black.

Whatever came out the other side, it was no longer Kessler. The orb that was his mind was filled with a smoky haze, with a metallic shell covering it. He had been laid on a bed in the office of the priestess, where she was keeping up the spell showing his mind to accurately draw and describe it in a notebook. When he opened his eyes, she laid her quill down. “Good morning, child. How do you feel?” Kessler’s face contorted as he slowly sat up, finding his bearings for a moment. “I.. I don’t know.” “It’s totally normal to feel confused right now. Your mind is coping with being made whole again, and the protective shell should be doing its job.” “I’m... not confused. I need to go back. Can you give me a letter of approval to go back?” “Of course. I just need your name.” Kessler froze for a moment, genuinely thinking before answering. “Kessler.”

Once Kessler received the letter telling people he had healed from the priestess, he walked through the temple for a moment. He had received new robes from the priestess, and in the pocket of the robes two stolen golden rings brushed against his leg. It’s not like she would miss them in all of her wealth. If she had enough to dress her hands in so much value, she had enough to miss it. Kessler quickly sold one of the rings to the first person he could find that seemed like they’d accept stolen goods, taking the second ring and putting it on his finger. Kai wanted a ring and a letter? Well, now he could get a ring and a letter. Kessler’s knock on his door was confident, strong. Much different from how he got there. Kai opened the door, staring Kessler in the face as he did. “I- didn’t expect you to return so soon. What-” “They fixed me. I’m wearing a ring. I did what Lady Ghala asked. Send me back.” “What? It’s been hours, the reason she set those goals is for you to keep off of the battlefield. I can’t allow you to go back to the battlefield. What happened to you? Your eyes seem...” “Irrelevant. I was born to be a warrior and I meet the demands you gave me. If you don’t hire a carriage or horse to take me to the battlefield, I’ll sort it out myself.” “Kessler, I don’t think you should-” “It doesn’t matter what you think. I have been enrolled to the army and therefore stand higher than you in rank. You will arrange this for me or I will arrange it myself. Where is my weapon?” The boy stepped through the doorway past Kai, who followed swiftly. The words he spoke were lost on the newly healed Kessler, who only meant to get back that which belonged to him; a place at the front of the battle. After some time of discussion, it became clear to Kessler that Kai wasn’t planning on letting him go, which meant only one thing in his eyes; he had to go there by himself. He assembled his arms, preparing to go right that night. When night fell, he did just that, sneaking out of his room. His blade shivered as he touched it, quivering with excitement to return to where it belonged. The long thin blade was perfect for slightly pushing the locking pin up, allowing the boy to open the window in full armor and jump out, using the sword and the wall to slow his descent. Soon enough, his feet hit the ground and the boy disappeared into the night.

Although he’d been asleep on the way to the city, what remained of Kessler was highly analytical. It knew what direction the march had gone coming from his home town, and with a vague memory of a map of the empire, the route was quickly determined. He did figure that meeting the same army as he had been in was a bad idea, so instead he opted to go directly to the front lines. Not with his team, but by himself. He marched with just enough rest for his body to be invigorated, without taking rests that would keep him back for too long. His eye was not on the beauty of the empire around him. Each town or valley was a landmark in the

distance rather than a place to rest or a scene to take in. his feet marched until he found an army of the empire, which he recognized as the fifth legion's first company. his mind had not stood still as he trekked, and he immediately went to work. the nearest town did quite finely; he purchased a simple sheet of metal, a hammer, an axe and a knife. with the new tools at his disposal, he created an oval shape that would fit his face from wood. an emotionless shell-like mask, with small holes for the eyes. the hammer served to turn the sheet of metal into the shape of the mask, providing proper protection for his features. when night came, he asked the blacksmith to attach it properly to his helmet. and the next morning, the small warrior with a mask for a helmet approached the hollow's pass and the army stationed there. kessler spoke with a harsh voice, deepened intentionally. "i am a warrior of the new legion, sent to reinforce this company by myself. find your commander and have them explain the situation to me." the soldiers on guard woke up slowly. too slowly for kessler, who stomped the ground. "now!" the two shocked awake, one of them running to the tent in the middle of the camp, bringing back a war-witch dressed in red and gold.

"we have not requested reinforcements to date. who sent you, masked warrior?" "lady ghala did, my lady. she granted me this mask to hide my identity and malformed visage. i am a strong warrior who has a good amount of experience, but my body is small and my face unappealing. she requested it be left on when i tread into the public, only to be taken off when i'm alone." "very well. lady ghala's legion has had a recent success attributed to a few warriors in specific. were you one of them?" "yes, my lady." kessler looked up at her. "as i spoke, i am experienced and powerful. may i know what the situation is so i might aid your army in its goals?" "of course. but first, what might i call you, malformed warrior?" "you might call me by whatever name you please, but ghala called me the iron mind." "a will of steel, a heart of diamond and a mind of iron. an old saying, but it rings true. the situation is as follows; our approach through the hollow pass should have been simple, but the hupei strengthened their defenses. they armed an unknown number of archers with a special type of enchanted arrows known as bloodseeker arrows; they need only be fired and the arrow will seek a living target and hurl itself at it. the enchantment then destroys itself shortly after connecting, causing our first formation to combust under the rain of arrows. the one that did make it far enough into the pass to stand a chance to reach the archers was immediately met with a small band of their elite unit, who crushed him in a duel. i've only sent in one or two formations, so i haven't lost a great number of men, but their defenses are frustrating to say the least. it's too much to hold back with magic alone."

kessler's hand wrapped around the hilt of the short part of his blade, feeling the hilt vibrating. it was almost as if it communicated to kessler, who had one desire left in his core. and the blade desired the same thing. the silence grew longer as kessler learned the extent of the power in his hand. "i can get past their defenses. i do require something to make it past the rain of arrows, but once i reach the elites i can take them down." "what do you require, iron-mind?" "i need a single arrow of their archers. if you have a bloodseeker arrow, i need it to get past them." the lady in red gestured to a soldier, who went into a nearby tent and returned with a bow and a red arrow with a small piece of paper tied to it, on which a spell was named. kessler stepped back, gesturing for the soldier to fire the arrow at him. the bow's string was quickly singing in contortion, the arrow ready to be released. the lady asked a single question. "before he fires, what are you seeking to know?" "i wish to know if an arrow cut in two will still combust after impact." "well, then i request you do this outside of the camp, would you kindly?" "of course, my lady." a small bow, a small nod, and the archer and

kessler faced each other outside of the camp. this time the arrow was quick to fly towards kessler. even through the mask, kessler noticed when the arrow went from inactive to active. the metal head of the arrow aligned just a bit tighter to his head. the arrow flew just a bit faster. and at that moment, his arm shot into motion. a clang resounded in the field as the shortsword pierced the air towards his hand. his body moved how his mind commanded. smoke and fog had cleared his mind from everything but his own glorious purpose. metal struck wood as the blade cleaved through the arrow, which split in two under the immensely fast movement. the trajectory altered, causing the tip to fly past his head as kessler completed the movement. he stood still, one arm on the hilt of the long blade on his hip, the other in the air, holding the shorter one. he waited, his ears sharply awaiting an explosion that never came. the bow fell to the ground as the soldier opposite to him nearly fainted. the lady in red slowly began clapping at the display of kessler's speed and perception.