

## IDILEN EMPIRE. POLSK. DENTHARS

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### Souls(WIP)

Although the blood had dried, it still felt fresh to Helen. She hadn't seen the blast coming. They were marching towards the Polskian capital of Grankeep when they were ambushed. What was at first thought to be a small raiding party, or scouts, turned out to be the mass of the Polskian Army.

The waves of Polskian calvary hit the unformed, crisscross Idilen legion like the waves of an angry furious sea. Until finally the Idilen spearmen fell into formations and repelled the attack. It seemed half the Idilen forces were left by the time of the rally.

Helen, thankfully being one of them.

No man could help but shield their eyes from a light witch in deadly stride. From launching solid white lines of light from her eyes cutting a group of men apart, to summoning a two-horse wide beam of light, which looked to come from the heavens themselves, incinerating any men caught in the deadly illumination. Helen was especially trained in the skill of refraction, seemingly able to set any surface on fire around her in a split second, by creating bends and warps in the rays of the sun.

First, she was blinding soldiers in front of her, searing the flesh from some. Using basic skills with extra Soul in them. Then she was crawling for her life, blown back from some icy explosion to her right. Almost as if to emphasize the memory, the spike of ice

jutting from the right side of Helen's chest began pulsing with pain again.

Now the witch laid back against a splintered wall, in a simple wooden shack. The battle having moved further afield, she could hear the distant din of sword fighting and the occasional blast of magic. It felt like twelve hours since she had crawled to the safety of the shack, but it had only been three. The ice spike was slowly melting and without bandage or a healer, she would bleed out. The ice is the only thing plugging the blood in her system, stopping it from gushing out of her like a red tide.

Helen chose the Light Cadre, so she knew nothing of healing arts. She preferred to use the destructive part of light. The part that could rend flames from any source, even water. "What good does any of my studies do when I have a 3-foot ice spike sticking from my ribs?" She could not help but think, uselessly to herself. She would have chuckled if it wouldn't have hurt so bad.

She was beginning to slip in and out of consciousness. Memories of her life before the war began flashing in her mind. Her old teacher, the Sunburner, repeating his mantra "By the light of the Sun we shall defeat those who stand before us." It was a tradition to recount the saying before a sparring match or duel. Although now all she could think about was how the "Sunburner" never bothered to teach her any damn healing.

"So much for the light of the su-" Helen said to herself, being cut off by a particularly strong wave of pain and gushing blood. Hearing a complaint about the quality of its light, the sun's final rays kissed the battlefield for the last time today and sunk

below the mountains around the valley the battle was taking place in.

"Great. Not a soul will find me now" she said aloud, losing any ounce of hope, finally relinquishing to her fate.

"Not so fast, *witch*." A voice gurgled from Helens left, startling her. Making her start to drag herself to the far corner of the shack.

A few inches worth of progress to her right later, a crawling figure appeared through the hole that Helen had dragged herself through. The wounded witch had no additional Soul in her, but through her years spent training, she had mastered one spell requiring no extra Soul power. After a lethargic and shaky set of hand movements, a small dim ball of light began sputtering into existence on Helen's left, near her head.

She crept the sphere closer to the movement she could see, it blinked in and out lazily. Before seeming to hum in the air, with no fanfare, creating an overall dimmer light than the flashing from before.

The image the ball revealed was not a pleasant one, though not unexpected. The soldier was missing most of his face, where his right eyebrow and cheek should have been, frostbite-purple skin remained. And the right side of his lips were fixed in a seemingly permanent frown, its skin red and splintered where it met the warmer side of his face. He kept dragging himself hand over hand. Whatever had done that to his face must have crippled his legs.

Helen remained tensed; her breath held, ready for a sudden attack. This soldier was not an ally but a knight of Polsk, the enemy. Polsk was the small hardy kingdom to

the north, it was said Polskians had strong accents and even meaner armies. It was a rocky cold land of stooped up lords and blood thirsty barons.

She knew his allegiance immediately, the deep purple color of the Polskians coat of arms could not be mistaken. The insignia upon his surcoat was the Polskian Rider, black on purple. There was no chance he could mistake her for Polskian, though. Her Idilinese battle dress was yellow and white, with the Idilinese star, black on her chest.

But no attack came instead just very labored breathing and a horrible, frozen visage illuminated by her own dying light. She began to ease slightly, and the man choked on his words, but finally was able to splat out "Healer?"

She shook her head, being sure to illuminate herself so he could see her answer. She was not exactly trusting of this soldier, but she realized he wouldn't be able to do much. The light had revealed his legs.

In the softly bobbing luminance, his legs appeared twisted and mutilated. The right one encased in ice, stuck in its horribly warped position. The left one laid limply as if no life remained. Helen found herself trying not to look at it.

He coughed lightly and Helen could hear the blood chortle from his mouth. In the weak light Helen could see he was clearly in much worse condition than her. If a healer found her, she could make a recovery. If a healer found him, he would, at best, be a cripple for the rest of his life.

"If only she had studied even a little healing in her youth." Helen found herself criticizing. "Hell, if only I hadn't been drafted. I wanted to be a monster hunter, not a

killer of men." Although when the spell was cast and destruction ensued in front of her, the training remained the same. Whether it was man or beast did not matter. At least to the recruiters.

"Well since we're dying together, we might as well die as companions, right?" The soldier said through labored breaths and spits of blood. She looked at him, but no answer came from her. Only a flat face in the washed-out light looked back at the soldier.

"Why the solemn face friend?" He choked out. Seeming to smile with the half of his face that worked.

"You attacked us, I have no words for an invader." Helen said seeming even harsh even for her.

"That's the problem with you Idilenese. Everything is so-ACK ACK- right and wrong with you... We needed the food... Our children... starving... " He struggled out between coughs of blood. Even through the crimson spray, Helen thought this man seemed well spoken, he must have been an officer or general.

"Why not do it diplomatically like the easterners had, we were more than willing to give them a trade route to the Dentha-"She clutched her side in pain mid-word." ars!" Denthars being the open and fertile plains to the south. Home to huge swaths of wheat fields and dense thickets of berry bushes.

"We tried. Someone in the High Idilen Monarchy doesn't like us." He spat out passionately, despite the clear pain it brought. "What's your name witch?"

She chose not to respond at first, deciding to study him. Helen saw no hate or even anger on his face. Before long she responded "Helen. And yours?"

"Lestem, fourth officer of the Polski calvary. Not that that matters much anymore" He replied, easier than before. "Perhaps his pain is lessening" Helen thought. "Or he is growing numb."

They sat there, silent for a while. Nothing but the dim bobbing light illuminating their shared shack. Slowly the stars began to come out, Helen could see them through a gap in the roof she was under. She remembered her teacher saying that despite us drawing power from the sun, truly talented witches could draw from the stars. They were apparently distant suns, but Helen had a hard time believing that.

"Do you think the stars are distant suns?" Helen finally broke the silence, but she was not sure why. (NEED WORK)

Lestem seemed to snap awake from her sudden question, looked up but could see no stars, as he was under the intact roof. After processing her question, he chuckled slightly. "What a place to discuss history."

Through the soft light Lestem could see a look of confusion on Helen's face. "We believe the *stars*, are our ancestors looking down at us at night. Keeping us safe from the terrors of the dark."

"So, your people have no telescopes or astronomers?" Helen asked, genuinely surprised.

"What use is looking up, when the things that matter are around us?" Lestem asked soberly.

Helen, taken aback by the honest insight, sat silent. She honestly had no answer. "I'm not sure. Pretty hard to think deep thoughts with an ice spike in my side."

"Ha this is where I feel most in touch with my scholarly side" Lestem responded with a slight grin on his face. "Nothing gets me thinking like being hours if not minutes away from my death." He said this rather coherently before a sudden wave of pain took over. Which left him grunting and panting.

Once his deadly fit passed, they sat silent again, were they not both dying it would have been an awkward silence. Helen gasped lightly as a shooting star streaked across the pinpricked oblivion. But in a blink, it was gone and only the lights of the stars remained.

"And those... Are our ancestors... They are guides... helping us choose." Lestern croaked out. "How did he know what I had seen?" Helen thought to herself.

Lestern replied "Us Polski have a sixth sense for auguries. What your people call shooting stars. Well, that's what my father always sa-ACH ACH" He began coughing roughly, although less blood came up. He appeared pale, even considering the diminutive light.

Once he recovered, he continued in a much softer, weaker voice. "My father always claimed the sixth sense, but I think it's something even more abstract than that. When one goes over my head I swear I can hear the voice of my ancestors."

"What are they saying?" Helen asked.

"It's different every time. One time I was hunting deer and a star streaked across the sky. I could have sworn I heard the word '*Left*' and sure enough there was an enormous buck to my left. Needless to say, our village ate well that night." Lestem answered, somehow proudly despite the situation.

"What do you people believe?" Lestem asked

"That's a loaded question." Helen said.

"It's not like we have anywhere to be..." He ended in a wheeze and a strange smile with the functioning part of his lips.

"Well through my education, I know everything has a soul... Rocks don't like to be malleable... Tables love to hold things... Human souls are different, they can warp, change... Particularly in response to circumstance ... I, as a witch, harvest and control these souls..." The bloody light witch said through long pauses and raspy breath.

"You're about to kill me with boredom ... Helen... What does *Helen* Believe?" Lestem said, emphasizing her name with a cough and a gurgle.

Helen did not respond at first, taking the question in. "I don't know... I believe that there is value in souls... in the research... progress." she seemed to push out from her mouth.

"Have you even taken into account what those souls want to do?" Lestem asked, clutching his side.



"Well yeah, earth mages... can't liquefy rock or shape it... they can throw it though... quite hard I might add." Helen said and Lestem chuckled painfully.

"Ah... but do you think those souls... if they could choose... would want to be used? Would the Soul of light... want to be used... to kill men and create widows?" Lestem said through pained heaves and breathless huffs.

Helen, almost disgusted by the question, responded sadly, "Probably not."

Silence was the only answer to her epiphany. Maybe the way of progress was not harvesting souls.

Lestem finally asked through broken lips "What about human Soul magic? Is there such a thing?" His voice seemed distant.

"For human souls there is mending... and reforming... for light souls... darkness... and illumination." she said finding it hard to find a good deep breath. Through the labored breathing she looked for a face of understanding.

The witch saw one, alongside a pained look. The ice had melted considerable around his leg, and he was holding it, clearly in pain. "Can I see the stars... once more... " He almost whispered.

Realizing he was asking for permission to sit next to her to view through the open section of roof, she nodded slowly. Helen inched to her right, giving him room, as he began to crawl through gritted teeth.

He sat back with a final sigh as he took the stars in. They seemed to shine brighter

through his eyes than in the gap in the roof.

Lestern could sense the darkness coming to the edges of his vision, he knew this was it, he had lost way too much blood. "Please," He found himself saying. "Keep my soul... I'm not ready... nor worthy..." he said so low Helen almost missed it.

"What? What are you talking about?" Helen asked, snapped into the sudden reality of the situation.

One last breath ushered from Lesterns lungs and a missing heartbeat later, a small blue light escaped from his chest. Helens eyes were wide with shock, the pain forgotten she reached out to touch the light and it repelled her touch at first but eventually clung to her like a weak magnet. Helen had only learned of human Soul magic never experienced it, much less held human soul in her hand.

She found tears on her cheeks as she slowly and gingerly placed the Soul in her lantern she had forgotten. Regardless of the Cadre, mages kept the Soul, and thus their magic power source, in lanterns looped around their belt. She noticed in the silence; the din of swords and yell of men was over. She thought she could hear footsteps approaching her shack.

The last images she could remember were the Idilene banner, a bright white star on a field of midnight blue, lit by her own dying light. And a healer dressed in white and red rushing to her. Drawn by the dim light surrounded by the countless dead.