

Transmutation

March 17th

Year 2120

West of the Village of Berken

Kingdom of Fergahn, Gartaena

The sandy desert wind spun around in the air, whipping against the barren land. The sun, just rising, mercilessly burned the world. Strange echoes filled the landscape, and small animals scurried around in the sand. And in the middle of it, moving forward, there was a man. A blond man dressed in black.

Merdilen got down cautiously from the massive rock finger he was on, and kept walking. This rock giant had been especially large. Here was the top of the thumb of its right hand; and far away, one could see the top of its left hand; even farther away, its head. A silent monument to times far gone, buried deep beneath the sands of this desert. The rock giant's head rested close to a strange-shaped and partially collapsed rock triangle—a mountain, turned upside down. And somewhere behind the great giant's foot, lay an unnaturally deep crater.

A grim reminder of what would happen if anyone were to gain too much power.

Transmutators—beings with unimaginable power who could use the power of the mind to Transmute the world around

them to their liking. Beings who could polymorph the world around them to fit their needs—and their desires. A few lucky humans had discovered the secrets to this ancient and forgotten art, and once they started mastering the Transmutation, they became unopposable. But, as it is natural, the Transmutators' desires collided, and they didn't want to share power. And when two powerful beings oppose each other, no one can stop a war from erupting.

The Transmutators learned of a dark branch of the Transmutation, which allowed them to polymorph living beings as well as objects, and with it, they started to create armies of monsters Transmuted from human and beast alike, forming the most terrible armies the world had ever seen. The Transmutation War left the world of Gartaena ravaged and deformed, an utterly chaotic place left with no two mountains alike nor a plain hectare.

The Transmutators had ended up killing each other, and only one had survived, never to be seen again. Almost three hundred years had passed since that world-shaking catastrophe, but even though the Transmutators themselves were gone, the world itself became a fearful reminder of what would happen should the Transmutators ever rise again.

Merdilen stopped looking at the buried rock giant and kept pushing forward. Although he was only twenty-two years old, Merdilen used a walking stick the length of a longsword, which helped him a lot, as he had been walking for days. He breathed in and started walking again, leaving a path of fresh grass behind him in the heat of the desert.

After a few more hours of walking through the chaotic terrain, he finally got to a road. It was a plain dirt road, but it wasn't as rough as the desert sand. Of course, that didn't bother Merdilen, but he started walking on the road anyway.

Merdilen supposed it was the King's Road, the long and ancient road that crossed the whole kingdom of Fergahn, and it should lead him right to where he wanted to go. It would be easier

to get to the village of Berken that way. Soon, the desert started to end, and grass started appearing naturally on the road. There were more trees now too, and the shadows provided a comfortable relief in contrast to the heat of the desert. He kept walking a while longer until he heard a voice from somewhere within the ever-growing forest surrounding him.

“That’s a nice jacket ya got there, ain’t it?” said the voice, coming out from within the trees. It was a tall man with dirty clothes and face, carrying a shortsword in his hand. He looked at the long black jacket Merdilen was wearing, and added, “Don’t ya think you’re too young to be carryin’ around something expensive like that?”

“He’s got a walking stick, too,” added another man, coming out next to the first man and also carrying a shortsword. “Someone your age shouldn’t be carrying something like that yet. Let’s help him with that.”

And with that, the two men, along with a third man that also came out of the trees, started walking towards him, their shortswords ready. Bandits. Merdilen didn’t look towards them, but he pointed his walking stick’s head towards the ground, as a confident fighter would with a sword. He clenched his walking stick tightly, and when he did, the walking stick transformed into a long sword of pure black steel. One of the bandits gasped at the sight, but another told him,

“Can’t ya see it’s just an illusion? The boy’s trying to trick us. Ignore it.”

Then, the bandits attacked, rushing towards him with their swords raised high. They were quite clumsy, but as normal townspeople didn’t know how to fight at all, Merdilen supposed they were pretty efficient in their job. Merdilen turned to face the first bandit and raised his walking stick, now a black sword. The bandit ran with the sword raised high, and slashed downwards toward Merdilen. Merdilen slashed upwards, contrary to the bandit, and parried the sword easily with his own blade, which

surprised the bandits, as they thought the blade was just some kind of trick.

The clash of steel rang loud, scaring nearby animals. The swords pushed against each other for a few moments, and Merdilen hit the enemy sword backward. The bandit stepped back, surprised at the stranger's strength, and one of the other bandits attacked from the back.

Merdilen didn't have time to turn around completely and block with his sword, so he raised his left hand, leaving it in the path of the bandit's sword. The bandit slashed towards Merdilen's hand, but instead of cutting through it, Merdilen caught the blade with his bare hand. He gripped the sword tightly, and the sword quickly began to crack. A few seconds later, the sword collapsed and fell to the ground. It had turned into sand. The bandit's eyes widened in shock and fear, and Merdilen slashed diagonally across the man's chest with his own blade, throwing him backwards.

"I-is that what I think it is, boss?!" the other bandit asked the third one, seemingly the leader of the group.

"Of course not," the bandit leader said in a despective tone. "Don't be fooled by fairy tales and old legends."

Then he rushed Merdilen, his sword held up high. But Merdilen crouched and pressed his hand on the ground right below him, then backed out. The bandit ran over the spot in which Merdilen had stood just seconds ago, and his knees bent. The ground was giving way as if it were quicksand, and the bandit jumped to the side trying to get out. He got out of the quicksand just before it swallowed his feet completely, but tripped in the process. Then Merdilen jumped towards him, and slashed with his blade through his back. The bandit leader screamed, and one of the other bandits muttered,

"I-it actually is. We can't fight him," and started backing away into the trees, scared. "It is Transmutation."

The bandit leader looked at him wide-eyed in fear and started to half-walk half-crawl away from Merdilen, following his

partner and the other bandit who was now trying to escape too. The last Transmutator let them go, turned his black sword back into a walking stick, and kept walking down the road.

After a little more walking, Merdilen started seeing the farms and crops that composed the outsides of the town of Berken. They were few and far apart, but as he kept walking, the farms and crops increased, and he started seeing numerous little wooden houses, until he arrived at the village itself. It was pretty small—only a few dozens of houses—and it had only one plaza, in which were the main shops and buildings, along with a small but beautiful fountain and an announcement board next to the town hall, the biggest building of them all. That’s where he was headed to. If he wanted to become a hero, helping a village with its problems was a good starting point. The announcement board contained mainly some trivial and relatively unimportant matters and announcements, along with a sign that caught Merdilen’s attention.

“Jennifer and her son still missing,” he read out loud. That would be a good way to start saving people. He walked towards the small townhall and knocked on the thick wooden door.

“Yes?” he heard a man’s voice ask from inside.

“Hello sir, I am not from here, and I am looking for more information about the case of Jennifer’s disappearance you have on the announcement board,” Merdilen said.

“Come on in,” he heard the man say, and the door opened. The townmaster was a middle-aged man with short black hair and a beard trimmed short. He went to sit on a desk at the end of the room, and Merdilen followed. The town hall was pretty small—only a few chairs and a desk, with a stair at the end that Merdilen supposed led to his bedroom—but it served its purpose. Merdilen sat down on one of the chairs, in front of the desk, and the townmaster started to tell the tale.

“Jennifer, the widow of a farmer that used ta live here, went to take a walk with her son a few days ago, walking toward the desert. This is usually a very calm place, y’know... Away from all the politics and complications of the world. So, no one thought anything bad could happen to ‘em. But, the thing is, they ain’t come back yet. Some evil bandits that had been terrorizing the King’s Road since a few weeks ago sent a message shortly after, sayin’ they had ‘em held prisoner until we paid ‘em a very big amount of money.

“But that’s the problem right there, I tell ya. We don’t have that much money. Us villagers have been saving money these last few days, but it’ll take a while to get all that money, I tell ya. Good ol’ Jennifer and her son must be suffering a whole lot, and that makes the whole village suffer. We ain’t know what to do anymore.”

Merdilen sat down thinking for a bit, and then said, “I’ll do it. Don’t worry, I’ll bring them back.”

“For real?” asked the townmaster, amazed. “Sorry pal, but we can’t afford to pay you much for it. You don’t even know ‘em, do ya?”

“No,” confirmed Merdilen. “But it’s what a hero would do.”

Later, the townmaster invited him gladly to have lunch with him, still surprised to know someone would do such a service for them without asking for anything in return. The food wasn’t that special or tasty, but it was good for its simplicity, and Merdilen enjoyed not having to strive to get something to eat. But he ate quickly, and when he was finished, he stood up.

“Don’t worry,” he assured the townmaster. “The sun will not set without this town having those two villagers back.”

“Thank you very much, kind stranger. We will receive you back as a hero,” the townmaster said, and Merdilen went out the door. He started walking towards the road where he had come from, determined to do some good for these poor people. The

townmaster didn't know where the bandits' lair was, but he remembered the general direction in which the bandits had fled after their short encounter, so Merdilen supposed going that way would be a good start. He got back to the place in which he had first battled the trio of bandits, which he recognized because of the quicksand in the ground, and after turning it back to normal, he turned to the trees. He still had his walking stick as such, but he was clutching it tightly in anticipation.

Merdilen started walking through the maze of trees in the direction the bandits had fled before, and he shortly found a well-hidden dirt path meandering through the forest. He walked through the trees parallel to it just in case, and after a few more minutes of walking, he spotted a small cave on a hillside which, like many other elements in the world of Gartaena, was completely out of place. It had a bandit he hadn't seen before guarding the entrance. To his disappointment, he could not see what lay inside the cave, as it took a turn a few meters in, but he approached nevertheless.

When he got a few meters from the bandit, he crouched. The bandit had not seen him yet, and it was better to keep it that way. As he now had time to prepare, things should be easier now, and leaving his walking stick in the ground, he put his two hands in the ground and started concentrating. After a few seconds, the ground next to the bandit erupted, and the earth went upwards as two pillars and covered the bandit completely, sealing him inside a box of pure earth. Unlike his ancestors, Merdilen couldn't use his Transmutation at range yet, only with objects he could touch with his hands, but as it turned out, earth was an excellent conductor, so with a little extra effort, he rendered the bandit completely useless, without him being able to give as much as a shout.

He turned his walking stick into the black sword once more and entered the cave. He stopped on the place the cave took a turn, and cautiously peeked inside. It was a very spacious cave on the inside, in which there were five bedrolls and numerous chests with

different implements and stuff. The cave was fully rock, but he was already a bit tired from the time he had used his Transmutation on the other bandit, and couldn't risk his powers failing him now.

Inside the cave, sitting on chairs, playing with their shortswords, and doing different activities, were the other four bandits. On one corner of the cave was the woman he identified as Jennifer, along with her young son. They weren't tied up, but with the now four grown men with swords, it would be just foolish for them to try anything. On a box were several bottles of wine, one of which was being drunk from by one of the bandits at the moment.

Merdilen gripped his black sword firmly at his side and ran towards one of the bandits. The bandit's eyes widened in recognition, and he rushed to get his sword, but it was too late. Merdilen slashed through him with his black sword, and the bandits weren't wearing armor of any sort, so the blade bit deep. The bandit screamed in pain and staggered backward, where he came to a stop next to the cave wall. The other three bandits had already gotten their swords, and were waiting defensively for Merdilen's attack.

But one of the bandits was still standing next to the bottles of wine. That was his last mistake. Merdilen took a smooth and round stone from the ground, and gripping it hard, he concentrated and the stone erupted in flames. But before the flames could hurt him, he threw it with precision, not towards the bandit, but towards one of the bottles of wine. The alcohol, when it got into contact with the fire, exploded, launching the bandit all the way to the other side of the cave, where it fell to the ground, unconscious.

He then rushed the other bandits and slashed high with his blade. The bandit he attacked raised his blade instinctively to parry the attack, but then Merdilen moved forward with his left hand, gripping the bandit's blade with his hand and turning it to sand. He then slashed across the stomach of the bandit, making him fall backwards. He then ran to the last bandit, who was visibly

terrified, but made a stand nevertheless. Merdilen attacked sideways with his blade, an attack which the bandit blocked with his own, and then he gave a long swing, which the bandit dodged by just a few inches.

The bandit then thrust his sword into Merdilen's stomach, but Merdilen could just in time put his hand in the way to block the attack, turning the tip of the sword into dust. The bandit retreated his sword immediately though, so the rest of the sword left unharmed. The bandit then slashed at Merdilen sideways, and Merdilen parried it with his own blade. Merdilen then started a quick combo of easily-blockable attacks, which weren't able to actually hit the bandit, but forced him to move backward. Before the bandit noticed, his back hit the cave's farther wall, and Merdilen thrust with his left hand towards the wall behind the bandit.

He then retreated his hand, and the earth moved with him, following his command. The earth quickly trapped the bandit, rendering him as useless as the bandit on the entrance. Merdilen breathed slowly, and let his sword down. Although all the bandits were now defeated, none of the wounds had been fatal, so they should be able to recover eventually. His head ached because of the mental strain his Transmutation always caused when he used it too much, but he looked towards the now-free family and smiled.

But his smile faded quickly as he looked at Jennifer, the mother. She was looking at him terrified, as if a pack of wolves had just entered the cave and killed the bandits instead of a young man trying to be a hero.

"You're a Transmutator," she muttered, horrified. "You killed our people. You destroyed our world."

"It wasn't me," Merdilen tried to explain, his happiness at the victory fading as quickly as it had arrived. "I'm not like past Transmutators. I'm trying to set things straight."

"You're a monster," she said, hugging her son close.

“Please, listen to me,” he said, taking a step closer to them with a pleading face.

“Get away from my son, you monster!” shouted the woman as she stood up. “I won’t let you kill *my* son!”

“I was just trying to help...” Merdilen muttered, as the woman ran out of the cave with her son, with an expression of horror and hate he would never forget.

After the battle, Merdilen hadn’t gone back to the village. He had kept going back through the King’s Road, in the direction of a close ruined tower he had spotted on his way to the village. He was unsure of what to do next, and he didn’t want to face the townmaster again. He was afraid to see the same expression he had seen in the woman’s eyes.

I was just trying to help, he thought to himself, his heart filled with sadness and disappointment. He hadn’t expected that reaction at all. *The Transmutation War happened almost three hundred years ago. I had nothing to do with that. Why couldn’t she understand that?*

He kept walking, confused and disappointed, until he reached the tower he had seen before. It was a wide and ancient tower, with only five floors, most of them ruined. It had probably been an outpost once used by a long-gone king, Merdilen had reasoned. All he wanted now was to be alone. Everything would probably be better by tomorrow, once he had properly slept and eaten. He went to the top of the tower and sat down. It was filled with desert sand, which was exactly what he wanted.

He could only alter already existing matter with his Transmutation powers—he couldn’t create anything new. So, with enough sand, he could do anything. Transmutating the sand into food, he took it and began to have dinner. He wasn’t traditionally a good cook, so he, therefore, couldn’t transmute anything into actually tasty food, but it fed him well enough, and that was what mattered. The food tasted bitter to him though, and that wasn’t

because of his skills. He later formed a simple but comfortable bedroll with the sand remaining at the top of the tower and went to sleep.

Kayline Sherdaine ran through the rooftops of the city of Cornaler at night, chasing her prey, her long red hair flying behind her and her twin longswords ready in her hands. Her prey was running desperately a few rooftops ahead of her, and she was quickly catching up. She wasn't a bounty hunter; she didn't like to call herself that anymore. She was more of... someone who made sure justice was served. She ran behind the man in the darkness, barely seeing him, running through the rooftops mainly by instinct.

Kayline followed her prey for a few more rooftops, until he grabbed on to something in the darkness. A rope, crossing to the other side of the street. The man slid himself through it, attempting to get to the other side and escape. Kayline dashed towards the rope, just in time to cut her end of it with one of her swords. The man fell to the ground below, but as the buildings there were just one story high, he didn't get gravely hurt. He got up with difficulty and kept running down the street.

Kayline jumped down behind him, slowing her fall on a nearby canopy before going all the way down. But, when she got to the street, her prey was already far. He skidded into an alleyway, out of her sight. But the man hadn't counted on Kayline's knowledge of the city. This was her home. She knew it as the palm of her hand.

She ran into another alley, running through a complex maze of alleyways and secondary streets, until she came out on a small plaza, and saw her prey arriving from another alleyway seconds after her. She cut him off.

"Game over, thief," she said.

"Fine, fine," the man replied, sighing.

He approached her, seemingly giving up. But as he did, he whipped out a dagger from his belt, attempting to stab her. Lightning fast, she hit the dagger off the man's hand with her right sword, knocking him out with the left one. She started to bind his hands with a rope.

Mission accomplished, she thought, satisfied.

"Are you... Kayline... Sherdaine?" a man's voice asked from behind her, panting.

She spun around, surprised. The man had a sack of letters hanging from his shoulders, and was struggling to catch his breath. A messenger, who had clearly been running after her.

"Yeah," she answered, raising an eyebrow. "What is it?"

"A letter," he said. "From a nobleman called Erthen." He handed her one of the letters.

"Oh, thank you," she said, taking the letter and opening it. She read it.

Kayline Sherdaine, the letter read. Meet me at the palace as soon as you can. I need your help... to save the world.

"We have summoned you here today because you are the best fighters we could find, and we will therefore assign to you a task of immense importance, a task in which the whole future of mankind may lay," a man, apparently called Erthen, was saying.

Erthen was a short and fat man, wearing expensive clothes and a long rapier strapped to his side, which Kayline Sherdaine suspected he never actually used. She was sitting along with three other people in a big audience chamber in the palace in the capital city of Cornaler, listening to him as the letter had requested.

"For almost three hundred years," he continued, "the world of Gartaena has lived in peace, the Transmutation War only a faint memory in the hearts of the people. But that peace has ended. The Transmutation War is brewing again. And it's up to you four people to stop the world from ending."

The man then paused dramatically to let his word sink into his little audience and, from Kayline's point of view, it worked. The four people sitting there all showed some level of surprise, with the blond man overexaggerating and the little man in the corner showing almost no emotion at all. Erthen quickly wrote down some key words on a chalkboard on a wall. When he saw his words had gotten the reaction he expected, he kept talking.

"Reports have arrived to us from a desperate and quick messenger, who started riding towards here from the small village of Berken in the west a few days ago. He reported of a mysterious man, who after showing signs of being a hero, turned out to be a monster. Although none of us thought it was possible, the man, as the report backed up by some other reports specify, was a Transmutator, a monster of the ancient world."

"B-but, that's impossible, isn't it?" the blond man asked. "Weren't they extinct?!"

"That's exactly what we thought too, young Salvatore," agreed Erthen up front. "But, as a few scholars thought, the Transmutator that disappeared at the end of the Transmutation War seemingly had a son, and his son another son, and so on and so forth. During all these years, his line, which inherited the ability to control the Transmutation, survived unopposed."

"It can't be..." muttered Kayline. "But, if he's a true Transmutator, then how can we stop him? If they could topple mountains and destroy cities, what hope do we have?"

"That's exactly it, young miss," agreed Erthen, again making himself look more experienced than everyone else. "This Transmutator, as reports indicate, is still young and inexperienced. He hasn't unlocked his full power yet. Therefore, we still have hope. We have to stop him now, before he becomes more powerful. Because if he becomes as powerful as the Transmutators of old, then there is nothing we can do that can wish to stop him. If we can't stop him before he gains his full

power, it's game over for us, and for the world. Therefore, you have one mission.

“To kill the last Transmutator.”

It can't be..., thought Kayline, trying to digest all the information. *A Transmutator? Now?* She remembered all the terrible tales she had heard about the Transmutators, and she shivered at the thought of one rising again. The Transmutators were the sort of tale adults told children to scare them, all the while being scared themselves too. They were the fuel of nightmares, the chaotic world a silent reminder of the truth in those tales. One of them coming back could very well mean the end of the world. But that gave her determination. Determination to not let her world be destroyed by anyone, no matter how powerful that someone could become.

“Don't worry,” she told Erthen. “We will stop that monster, no matter what. Where is he?”

“He was last spotted on an abandoned tower west of Berken,” Erthen replied. “But, you have to know this: this first encounter is a recon mission. It is vital for you to get all the information you can out of him, and bring it back. We have to know what we're going up against if we want to have an opportunity to defeat a Transmutator. If you fighters seem to be losing the battle, retreat immediately. You all must survive so we can fight him later on again, better prepared and ready to win. You should depart as soon as possible. Through the next weeks, you will have but one objective: killing the last Transmutator, and thus restoring peace to the world. Anti-Transmutation Strike Team, you are dismissed.”

“Sir, yes, sir!” the four of them said, saluting and ready for anything.

Kayline left the room Erthen had spoken to them in and started walking down the hallway, in direction of the exit of the big government building they were in, followed by the rest of the

newly-established Anti-Transmutation Strike Team. The palace hallway was richly decorated, with tinted glass covering the windows and banners and paintings spread throughout the walls. Kayline kept walking, ignoring the decorations. She wanted to check in with her mother and brother before departing, and as worried as she was, she didn't notice Salvatore until the rest of them almost bumped into him.

"Hey, guys!" he greeted them. "The sky will be beautiful tonight. Wanna get some dinner?"

"Are you kidding me? Of course not," she said, looking incredulously at the man, and then added. "Humanity might be on the brink of extinction and we might all die tomorrow, and you are trying to have fun? Don't you know what's at stake here?!"

"Okay, okay, sorry!" he answered. "I just wanted to cheer up the ambiance a little."

There were people like him that just didn't understand the gravity of the situation, she thought. Sir Grendar Bartel, the big and strong knight who had also been at the meeting, was always serious, and Kayline supposed he really understood the gravity of this problem. Jarleren, the small rogue who had been sitting at the corner, didn't show any emotion, but she thought he recognized the threat they were facing as such anyway.

In the original Transmutation War, as there had been two opposing Transmutators, the war had eventually ended, leaving the winning one extremely weakened and forcing him to abandon the fight. But now, there was only *one* Transmutator, so if they didn't stop him before he rose and unlocked his full power, no one would be able to. There would be no one to challenge him and leave him weakened this time.

With these troubling thoughts in mind, Kayline kept walking, until she crossed the big doors of the government building. In front of her was the massive city of Cornaler, the capital of the kingdom of Fergahn. It was the biggest city in Fergahn, and the inner district, the one closer to the government

buildings, was full of massive and beautiful houses, parks, and shops, all of which became progressively smaller as they started getting farther and farther from the center.

The sun was already setting, giving a beautiful and glorious glow to the rooftops of the city. She started walking down a side street, and after a little less than half an hour later, she arrived at an ugly and small building. It wasn't the worst place in town, but it was far from being the best one too. On a wooden sign hanging from the wall, it read, 'The Drunken Warrior Inn,' with a sword and a beer depicted in it.

She opened the door and stepped inside. It was a small inn with very few customers in its wooden tables, and an old and rusty sword hanging from a wall, therefore its name.

"Hello, young miss!" greeted the bartender while serving a drink. "Come to see your mama, don't ya? Do you want something to drink first?"

"I'm fine, thank you," said Kayline, and headed towards the stairs at one corner of the room. She didn't like this inn, but it served its purpose, and the problem was, her mother was sick. She had a chronic illness no doctor had ever seen before, and the exclusive medications for it were extremely expensive. Because of that, her mother wasn't able to work, and their father had left them when she was younger and her brother Torlen a newborn, so it was up to Kayline to provide for the family.

Her expensive medications left little money for paying rent, and therefore they had to live in this inn. But Kayline was worried, because even though she consumed her medications every day, she wasn't getting any worse, but she wasn't getting any better either. She didn't know if the medications were actually a cure or just something to slow down the process.

"I'm back!" she said, opening the door to their room and entering. Her little brother ran towards her and hugged her, and her mother smiled at her from her bed. It was a relatively small double room, with their mother's room where she slept and they

cooked and ate, and their room, where Kayline and Torlen slept and generally lived. Torlen and her mother both had red hair and blue eyes, but she had red hair and black eyes. Those black eyes were the only thing her father had left her when he left.

“How was work?” her mother asked her with a weak voice.

“It was great, actually,” she said, trying to sound calm. “I got a new job, and the government is promising big money for this one. If I am successful, we will probably be able to leave this place at last.”

“What is it about?” her mother asked, worried. “Is it safe?”

“I’m sure it is. A small group of fighters and I are meant to find information about some kind of monster near the village of Berken in the west, but it shouldn’t be a big deal. Don’t worry, I’ll be okay. I’ll be leaving tomorrow morning, though, and I’ll probably return in about five days.”

“Be very careful,” her mother told her.

“You know I will.”

After that, they had dinner and went to sleep. Kayline went to bed early, but it took a while for her to fall asleep. Even though she had told otherwise to her mother and brother, she was filled with anxiety about how it would go. They would be the first people to fight a Transmutator in centuries, so they had no idea what they were getting into. The good news was this Transmutator had appeared a few days ago and had done nothing big so far, so if he was powerful, they would probably know about it already. The problem was now to keep it that way. And she was not sure they would be able to. With those anxieties in mind, she finally fell asleep.

Kayline woke up early in the morning and entered her mother’s room. Even though they usually woke up late, she found her mother already making breakfast with Torlen’s help. She smiled at them, and after helping them finish the meal, they had breakfast. While they ate, Kayline tried to keep a positive and

cheerful attitude, but inside, she couldn't be more worried. She finished eating and hugged her mother and brother hard.

"See you in a few days!" she told them, and strapped to her back the two long and thin swords that rested in a wall near the table they ate breakfast in. Then she opened the door and left the inn with determination in her eyes.

A few hours later, she was already riding. Along with the rest of the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team, they had left early for the village of Berken and would arrive in about two days. Although they would have obviously preferred to go along with an army, it'd be impossible to reach the Transmutator without him noticing from miles away with one, and they couldn't risk him getting away.

They had to get as close to him as possible without him noticing and try to get as much information as they could from him if they wanted to eventually rid the world of the menace he was. The atmosphere was gloomy that day, and no one spoke much during the trip, everyone focused on being brave. They were going in totally blind, but they had to. They had to get that information about him and test his power. For the sake of mankind and her family, they had to.

A Wolf Among A Flock Of Sheep

March 20th

Year 2120

West of the Village of Berken

Kingdom of Fergahn, Gartaena

Merdilen stood up from the place he was sitting on and looked around. He still was on the top of the ruined tower since three days ago, when he had left Berken. He had Transmuted the sand into a stool, a bedroll, and a little roof. It was all he had been able to do with the sand that was on top of the tower, and he didn't want to carry stuff all the way from the desert floor, nor Transmutate the stone tower, in fear of it collapsing. Still, it was enough. During those three days, he had just been waiting for the people of Berken to forget the incident, and he supposed they would be calmer now and he would be able to explain his innocence. He again started walking down the King's Road, same as last time, but slower and more hesitant this time. There were no bandits this time, but now he was afraid of something else.

But he had no reason to, he thought. It would be better now. He kept walking until he arrived close to Berken. He was almost at the plaza when he heard a scream.

“The Transmutator!!” shouted a man, pointing at him. At that moment, all the villagers looked at him simultaneously, gasping, and looking at him with horror and hate.

“You monster!” someone shouted at him from the crowd. They hadn’t calmed down at all. A tomato flew at him from somewhere in the crowd, an act repeated quickly by other villagers. Because of the distance, none of the fruits or vegetables hit him, but he stayed still nonetheless.

“You traitor!” someone else shouted. It was the townmaster, who had been so kind to Merdilen before. “And to think I let you have lunch with me... how could you fool me like that?!”

Merdilen didn’t say anything. He didn’t know what to say. He just stood there as the townspeople released all their hate and anger on him. But then, a man started running towards him with a knife. He was younger than him, and his green eyes were full of determination.

He probably thinks he’s a hero for trying to kill me, thought Merdilen with sadness. But, even though he wouldn’t let the man kill him, he wouldn’t harm these innocent villagers. When the young man got to him, he thrust towards Merdilen’s chest with his knife, but Merdilen blocked it with his hand with ease. He grabbed the blade hard, and it turned to sand. The man looked at him terrified and took a step backward. But instead of counterattacking, Merdilen took advantage of the opportunity and ran away into the woods. He ran without stopping or looking back until he could no longer hear the angry shouts behind him.

Maybe I came too early. If I wait a few more weeks, they will probably calm down, he thought, trying to convince himself of what he knew was probably a lie. He walked gloomily back to the ruined tower and climbed to the top. Although it was a very thick and big tower, it was far enough from the village of Berken that villagers wouldn’t accidentally stumble into it. Here, he had peace.

It was getting late, and so, he ate and got into his bedroll. The last few days had been nothing like what he had expected. They had not treated him as a hero—they had treated him as a monster. But, this had been just the beginning. As they started seeing how he was more hero than monster, they would probably start considering him a hero too. He had just been unlucky. So, trying to comfort himself, he fell asleep.

Kayline and the rest of the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team had been riding for two days, and finally, they were arriving at the village of Berken. It had been a comfortable journey, because as it was March, it was still warm, although summer had already ended and autumn was beginning. They hadn't talked much during the journey, each preparing him or herself mentally for the incoming battle, until they arrived at the village of Berken.

It lay on an unnaturally flat valley between two upturned mountains, next to a strangely-shaped river. It was pretty small, and they got quickly to the town hall. As it was a small village, horses weren't common there, and the villagers were staring curiously at the armed and riding newcomers. They dismounted, but before they could knock on the door, the townmaster opened.

"You're the people the government was going to send, ain't ya?" asked the townmaster, and without waiting for an answer, added. "Thank god you're here! That Transmutator's scared the hell out of us poor villagers."

"Don't worry," answered Sir Grendar solemnly. "We'll take care of it. Please tell us all you know about the subject."

"Sure, come on in, come on in," said the townmaster, re-entering the building, now followed by the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team. The townmaster sat in a chair behind a desk, and the rest sat in chairs in front of it.

"The Transmutator sat on that very chair, y'know," he then said, pointing at the chair Jarleren, the small rogue, was sitting in. "He first arrived here about four days ago, pretendin' to be a good

guy. He asked me about Jennifer, a woman who had been missing for a while, and then left for the cave some bandits had her in. He was probably thirsty for blood, y'know. In my opinion, he did it because he just wanted ta kill, and used saving Jennifer as an excuse for his bloodlust.

“He left poor old Jennifer and her son completely terrified, and she said he even tried ta attack them, but they ran away. He returned a few days later, two days ago, probably to kill even more people. But he underestimated us. We scared him off with fruits and vegetables, and young Tim even tried attacking him with a knife, which of course didn't work. I'm sure that if we hadn't stood up against him, young Tim and the rest of us would already be long dead.”

“That's terrible,” muttered Kayline. “Were you able to see where he ran off to?”

“None of us was dumb enough ta follow him,” said the townmaster, “but he ran west. There isn't much that way, just a big desert full of ruins from the Transmutation War, so it shouldn't be hard ta find him.”

“Don't worry,” repeated Sir Grendar. “We'll take care of him. It's getting late. Thank you for your services, we'll depart immediately.”

“Thank you very much.”

So, after that short rest, they left riding the village of Berken. Even though they would probably be more noticeable while mounted, if the Transmutator tried to escape, they would probably be able to catch up to him with their horses. Still, she thought they would be able to survive this fight, if not win.

Sir Grendar Bartel's greatsword, the Bladesmasher, was said to be able to break any sword it crossed, and along with Sir Grendar's strength, it was unstoppable. Jarleren was extremely stealthy, and he should be able to attack the Transmutator fatally before he even noticed Jarleren was there. Kayline Sherdaine was very fast with her longswords, with extremely quick reflexes. And

during the whole time, Salvatore Arneret would be covering them from afar with his deadly bow and arrows. But if this Transmutator was half as powerful as the Transmutators of old, all that would mean nothing. They could only hope he was still weak.

After a little while of riding through a small forest, the trees started disappearing, giving way to desert sand. They got to the desert the townmaster had mentioned. In effect, the Transmutation War had left this desert way more scarred than other places, and most mountains there were overturned, with some giant stone body pieces lying here and there. From the information they had gotten at Cornaler, the Transmutator had been sighted directly west of Berken, so that would be a good place to start looking. They turned away from the King's Road, and after a while, spotted a partially-ruined tower on the horizon.

They started riding towards it, and after a few minutes, realized it was pretty big. It seemed to have been some kind of watchtower, as it went straight up, with several windows in each floor, battlements on top, and almost no decoration.

No one was in sight, but when they got closer, they saw a lone figure rising and standing to look at them. It was a young man of medium height, with white skin, wild golden hair, and deep black eyes. The last Transmutator. He was wearing a long black coat with white edges, and he had a long wooden walking stick in his right hand.

"It's not a walking stick," Jarleren muttered to no one in particular. "Be wary of it."

"He's but a boy!" Salvatore exclaimed. "Is he really the cause of all this trouble?!"

"A boy that could probably beat you up in a matter of seconds."

"He's no mere boy. He is the last remaining Transmutator, the heir of the ones who destroyed the world, whose kind killed millions," added Sir Grendar. "We mustn't underestimate him."

Then, Sir Grendar gestured silently towards the tower, and they divided. Salvatore headed towards a big rock a little distance away from the tower and quickly dismounted, taking out his longbow in the process. Jarleren rode towards the back of the tower, and Kayline and Sir Grendar headed towards the front, everyone ready to battle.

Merdilen stood up on the top of the tower, looking at the newcomers. He had spotted them from a sideways glance, and it seemed like they were headed directly towards him. That was strange, as there was nothing here, so they were probably coming because of *him*.

There were four of them: a small man dressed in black and gray, seemingly unarmed; a girl with long red hair, with two thin longswords strapped to her back; a big and strong man with black hair cut short and a massive greatsword in his back, wearing full plate armor; and a blonde man with a longbow and arrows. Merdilen supposed they came to talk about the incident in Berken and he would finally get a chance to explain, so he got hold of his walking stick, but didn't turn it into the black sword.

He stood at the top of the tower, far from the stairs, and got mentally ready to fight if things went wrong. He stood there for a tense few seconds until he saw something and stepped backward. The big man had jumped out towards him from the stairs, roaring and with his greatsword high in the air. Merdilen raised his walking stick while turning it into the black sword, and was able to clumsily parry the attack. But the man's strength was too overwhelming, and although the black sword kept up thanks to his Transmutation's fortitude, his arms soon started to tremble under the pressure, so he jumped backward, towards the tower's battlement.

The big man swung his massive greatsword towards him again, and as Merdilen wasn't fully facing him, he was unable to parry the slash with his own blade, so he quickly pressed his left

hand against a part of the battlement and jumped to the side. The battlement eroded in the place where Merdilen had touched it, forming a stone wall high enough to block the attack.

Merdilen turned towards him, but before he could take a breather or counterattack, he saw the red-haired girl running towards him with her two longswords ready, and got ready to block. The girl started with a quick slash from the right with her left sword and then from the left with her right sword, and luckily, Merdilen was able to block both attacks. She then slashed sideways with both of her swords at him at the same time, and as he parried the attacks, he felt a sharp pain in his side tearing through his flesh, and saw from a sideways glance the small man dressed in black, wielding a dagger covered in Merdilen's blood. Merdilen took several steps backward, wincing in pain.

He had already realized these people would not be open to talking. He couldn't give up. His life probably depended on it. He quickly ran a few steps backward, ignoring the burning pain in his side and forming a small wall that stood in the girl's way. It wouldn't give him much time, but it was enough.

As he saw the big man charging him again, he ran again towards the girl, and while touching the ground with his left hand, started forming a small stair going upwards with each step that he took. When he got close to the girl, he jumped upwards, getting a good six feet's height from the ground because of the stairs. He raised his black sword with both of his hands and got ready to slash down towards the girl with all his strength. He felt two arrows fly past him a few inches from his nape, and ignoring them, fell with exploding force because of the massive momentum.

He slashed down with all his strength diagonally from right to left, and the girl barely blocked it, getting pushed a few feet backward. Her left side was vulnerable now, but as Merdilen had his blade locked with her swords, he probably wouldn't be able to swing his sword quickly enough to explode that weakness. But a stone would be quick enough.

Concentrating hard, he Transmuted his black sword into a stone the size of his open hand and swiftly tossed it from his right hand to his left. The girl lost her balance because of the sudden change of pressure, and Merdilen, grabbing the flying stone with his left hand, turned it back into the black sword. The girl was completely vulnerable now, and Merdilen slashed towards her neck. But, instead of decapitating her, as he would have been able to, he stopped the blade just a few inches short of the neck.

Everyone froze, none of Merdilen's enemies wanting to risk moving and him killing their companion. The girl's eyes widened in shock and fear, and she looked towards the ground.

I won't kill, Merdilen thought. *I will be a hero, not a monster.* And, taking advantage of the distraction, he quickly crouched and, touching the ground under him, turned it into sand, letting him fall through the hole under his feet towards the lower floor of the tower. He turned his black sword back into a walking stick and, leaving it behind, rushed towards one of the few windows that still had glass in them with both his hands in front of his body. When he reached the window, he touched the glass with his hands and jumped out.

The glass Transmuted into stone, and he Transmuted it into a stone bridge that kept growing as he ran out of the tower. After a few feet of running, he jumped out, aiming his body into a small nearby lake. Because of the height, the water would probably destroy his body if he crashed against it, so he curled up into a ball, trying to absorb the damage as much as possible. He could just Transmute solid matter, not liquid—he wouldn't be able to Transmute the water below him. Ignoring the sharp pain in his side the dagger had left and a few arrows that flew past him, he kept falling, rolling in the air. He fell to the lake, and as he was curled up in a ball, he was fortunately able to absorb most of the damage.

As he was curled up in a ball, he didn't fully crash, and the hit dealt little damage to him. He immediately started swimming

towards the other side of the lake, leaving a trail of blood in his wake. But with all the distance he had made in his run and the time it would take for the killers, as he was now calling them, to get down the tower, it'd be practically impossible for them to catch up to him. He had escaped, at least for now.

When he reached the other end of the lake, he half-walked, half-crawled into the forest, and after making sure he was not being followed, he fell to the ground, breathing with difficulty, his head aching terribly because of the excruciating mental effort. But still, he pressed his hands to his side, and after a while, his deep wound started to close and heal, leaving little more than a scar. He couldn't do anything else with living beings apart from healing small wounds, but for now, it was enough. Even though he didn't appreciate it at all, he could understand why people would be afraid of his presence, but sending *assassins* after him? Wasn't that too much? This time he had been lucky, as the killers hadn't known what he was capable of, but he didn't know if he would fare as well if they ever fought again.

Especially since Transmutating always required him to *touch* things, and he was completely vulnerable while he crouched. But Transmutating at range was something extremely hard and complicated to do. If he could just touch things to Transmutate without having to crouch or compromise himself... He would have to do something about it if he wanted to survive a possible future battle, he thought, staring at his left hand while laying in the forest ground.

“Kayline!” Sir Grendar exclaimed for the third time, finally catching the attention of the shocked girl. “I asked, are you okay?!”

“Yes... yes, I am okay,” Kayline replied. “That’s why I don’t understand. Why didn’t he kill me?”

“He was at a disadvantage,” Jarleren muttered while cleaning his dagger with a handkerchief. “He preferred to stay alive and not killing anyone rather than killing you and dying. A

reasonable decision—we would all have done the same thing. That doesn't make him less of a monster.”

“He looked human to me,” Kayline said.

“The real monsters aren't always ugly and deformed monstrosities,” replied Sir Grendar. After that, he headed towards the stairs and small walls that the Transmutator had made, and started examining it. “This is incredible. Everything's completely solid. It looks as it had always been here.”

Those things didn't look like some kind of weak illusions. They were fully formed objects, Transmuted out of the tower.

“Even though he escaped, we got a lot of information about him,” Kayline said after a few moments. “I'd consider it a success.”

“True,” Sir Grendar agreed. “Let's go.”

And so they got down from the tower and, mounting their horses along with Salvatore, started riding back towards Berken and then Cornaler as the sun set.

They slept on the village of Berken, and on the afternoon two days later, arrived at Cornaler. They all felt refreshed and relieved, because even though they hadn't killed nor imprisoned the Transmutator, they had been neither wounded nor killed, and they had gotten a lot of valuable information out of the fight. The general impression was that the Transmutator wasn't that strong yet and that they would have a real chance of victory the next time they fought. Even though it was getting late, they headed to one of the government buildings first. They had to deliver the information as quickly as possible if they wanted to stand a chance later on. As they entered, all the nobles and servants looked at them surprised and amazed, not expecting them to come back unscathed.

“We got the information we needed, sir,” said Sir Grendar when they arrived at Erthen's office and saluted, a gesture that was repeated by the rest of the group. “The mission was successful.”

“Excellent!” Erthen, sitting in a big chair at the other side of a desk at the end of the room, said. “What did you find?”

“The Transmutator is still pretty weak,” said Kayline, “and it seems like he doesn’t know how to fully use his powers yet. From what we saw, he can only use the Transmutation on things he touches with his hands for now, which reduces immensely the threat he poses.”

“Yes,” agreed Salvatore. “If we stay away from his hands, we should be okay.”

“But, there’s a problem with that,” said Sir Grendar. “To keep his hands away from us, we should block with our weapons. And, at the end of the fight, he escaped by turning the ground below him into sand. How do we know he can’t turn our *weapons* into sand? That would render us completely useless and vulnerable.”

“That’s true,” agreed Erthen. “We have to find a way to kill that monster and not die in the process.”

That left everyone thinking, and after a few minutes, Kayline spoke in a low voice.

“But, how do we know he’s really a monster? I mean, he didn’t look as much of a threat yet, and he didn’t try to kill us at all. He could have killed me, but he didn’t. And he hasn’t committed any crimes, has he? We have no way of knowing if he’s actually evil.”

“Tell me, young miss,” Erthen said, as a father would instruct his young child. “If a wolf got close to a flock of sheep, what would the shepherd do? Would he wait until the wolf started killing the sheep to find out if he’s evil or not, or would he kill the wolf *before* it caused any damage?”

Kayline pursed her lips, but said nothing.

“We’re not doing this out of hate for that Transmutator,” Erthen added. “We’re doing it out of love for mankind.”

“That’s true,” Kayline agreed at last. She couldn’t risk the rest of humanity and her family’s lives to give the benefit of the doubt to a stranger whose kind had destroyed the world.

After that, they gave the rest of the information they had found to Erthen, but it was nothing as important as what they had already said. They got paid, and although the money wasn’t the total yet, as the full payment would come when they killed the Transmutator, it was enough to survive through the month.

“I’m sorry, but I also have to ask something else from you,” Erthen then said, his face serious. “And you’re not going to like it.”

“I’m back!” Kayline announced happily once she crossed the door to their room at The Drunk Warrior Inn. Once again, both her mother and Torlen greeted her joyfully, and she hugged them both.

“We got the information we needed,” she told them, “and I got paid. It isn’t the whole payment yet, but we should be okay throughout the rest of March and part of April.”

“That’s excellent,” her mother said, and then immediately asked. “But, are you okay? Did you get hurt?”

“No, I’m okay, but I have to tell you something...” she said, and after a while, added. “We can’t afford to let this monster free. The government asked us to be away for as long as it takes for us to kill this monster. It shouldn’t take more than a few weeks, though. I’ll be leaving in a few days. And when I come back, we’ll have the full payment and will finally be able to leave this inn for someplace better.”

“But Kayline...” her mother said, worried. “I prefer having you over this big payment by far, no matter how much money it is.”

“Don’t worry,” answered Kayline, full of determination. “Once I’m done with this, you’ll have both.” She didn’t fully know if that was true, but she was relieved to know a deal she had made with Erthen was still up. If they completed the work and killed the

Transmutator but Kayline died in the process—which she didn't intend to—her family would get the full payment. If they killed the Transmutator, no matter what happened later, her family would be able to live in peace, at least for a while.

“What is this monster?” her mother asked at length.

“Torlen, it's getting late,” Kayline told her little brother.

“Go to sleep.”

“But it's not past my bedtime yet!” protested the boy.

“Torlen,” warned their mother, and so he headed to bed.

“This monster we're facing...” Kayline started in a low voice once her brother was gone, and hesitated before proceeding, “is a Transmutator.”

Her mother looked at her terrified and gasped audibly as if she was about to faint.

“But don't worry,” Kayline quickly added. “This Transmutator is still weak and inexperienced, so it shouldn't be much of a threat. That's why we have to stop him now, *before* he becomes a menace.”

“You can't fight a monster like that!”

“I have to. If it weren't for those terrible Transmutators, our world would be way better than it is now, and we would live way better than we do now, as there would be more land available for crops and farms, therefore offering an incredibly better lifestyle. They ruined the world. And if we don't stop them, they'll ruin it again.”

Her mother kept silent for a while, but then spoke again.

“Okay... I-I get it. Just... come back to me.”

“Don't worry. I will.”

This world isn't worth saving, Merdilen thought bitterly as he sat in the little shack he had made in the middle of the forest near Berken. *It doesn't even want me to help. Why should I?* His first mission as a hero, a few days ago, had been an absolute disaster, and not only did the whole village of Berken hate him

now, but they had also sent assassins to kill him. Did he really want to be a hero in a world like that?

Yes, I do, he thought with determination. *I have to be strong*. Because being strong didn't mean killing a hard-to-kill monster. It meant taking a hard-to-take path. Since he was a child, he had always wanted to become an adventurer, a hero. His family line had lived in exile for centuries, not doing anything, just trying to survive. He would never say so to his father, but he hated that. Someone as powerful as a Transmutator wasn't meant just to grow up, get married to some innocent villager, have an only child, and die. It was meant for things greater than that, and he knew it.

Merdilen had once told his father their lifestyle was like a caged lion living in a zoo. It could do amazing things, but it didn't. His father hadn't spoken to him for days after that. But his determination hadn't wavered. As he didn't have any friends because of living in exile and he was an only child, the only things he could do throughout the day were practicing with a sword, training his Transmutation, and reading.

He read a lot, and he discovered countless great heroes who rose up to the challenges the world made them face, no matter what. As every child ever, he wanted to change the world, but unlike most children, he knew that thanks to the Transmutation, he would actually be able to. He knew he could do that. He saw no reason to waste his life living in a big mansion forever.

His father never understood his desire to leave their peaceful lifestyle, but as he had bore Merdilen when he was pretty old, Merdilen didn't live much with him. Just a few months ago, Merdilen had sat next to his deathbed as his father suffered from the sicknesses of old age. As the generations went on, the bloodline of the first Transmutator had become mixed and defiled, and therefore, the power had been majorly lost. And as the whole family line had just been living in exile, no one had done anything to recover the power. Therefore, the secrets to eternal life, to

limitless Transmutation, and to the alteration of living beings, had all been lost. Therefore, all of them were doomed to die, wielding the power but not using it. But his father had understood Merdilen at the end.

Be a hero, he had told Merdilen. *Go out into the world and demonstrate how amazing you are. Become the hero we both know you can be.* And so he intended to do. He wouldn't give up his childhood dream because a small village didn't like an ancestor of him that lived centuries ago. And if he wanted to be a hero, he would need more power. Most Transmutation abilities, like Transmutating at range or Transmutating living beings, were still far away from him, but there was something he could do. He couldn't allow himself to show any weaknesses during battle. He pressed his hand hard against the ground and concentrated.

Transmuted from the ground came a long glove of fine but strong black cloth, that covered Merdilen's left arm completely up to the elbow. It was full to the brim with compartments, all filled with compacted sand. As the cloth was very thin, it was as if his left hand was touching the sand, and therefore he could Transmutate it. With this, he would be able to Transmutate the sand that was in the glove's compartments into anything as big as a space completely covered by it without having to crouch and become vulnerable to attacks.

He spent the best part of an hour practicing with his new glove, because as it was already morning, he hadn't thought of anything better to do yet. But as he Transmuted the glove's sand into various things, he suddenly started feeling an eerie sense of danger. As Transmutation involved connecting one's mind to the world to alter the physical composition of things, sometimes when one spoke to the world, the world spoke back. He could sense changes in balance or the atmosphere, as he had to be permanently attuned to his surroundings to be able to Transmutate. And he didn't like what he sensed now.

He felt a chill running down his spine, and a heavy and cold presence lingering somewhere south that made it feel as if someone had turned off the sun. He grabbed his walking stick, turned it into a black sword, and got up from the rock-Transmuted-into-chair he was sitting on. He started walking warily towards the evil presence he felt, earnestly looking around. He walked towards the south of Berken for the better part of an hour, determined to find whatever was irradiating that presence. Although he had been walking for a while, he felt the unmistakable presence ever stronger and closer to him, so he was certain he would get to it any moment now.

He had been walking through a forest, and when the presence's intensity reached its peak, he saw a massive black figure a few dozens of feet away from him. He crouched and walked stealthily towards it to get a better look at the thing he was facing. It was a massive pitch-black beast with no glow or shadow in its body, only black. It looked like a massive hyena, with large claws and sharp fangs. If it had eyes, they were indistinguishable from the rest of the body. It was a shadow monster.

Shadow monsters were horrible abominations left from the Transmutation War, unnatural creations that were never meant to exist. They were the remnants from the armies the Transmutators of old once had. At the end of the Transmutation War, one of the Transmutators died and the other one disappeared, but their armies had remained, and it was rumored large numbers of shadow monsters still roamed the southern wastes of the world. Although Berken was far from the southern wastes, Fergahn was in fact the southern kingdom, and as the western and southern limits of Fergahn were mainly poor, it was possible that a shadow monster had found its way here.

Shadow monsters were incredibly strong, way stronger than any other beast, and if one of them reached the village of Berken, it'd probably be catastrophic. He couldn't allow that, could he? Those villagers clearly hated him, and they wouldn't want him

to try and help them at all. But he wanted to be a hero. And he would be. He had to kill this shadow monster before it harmed the innocent villagers. He knew they probably wouldn't thank him, much less treat him as a hero as he had hoped when he had first arrived at Berken, but it was the right thing to do. He had never fought nor seen a shadow monster before, but there was a first time for everything.

Remnants From The Past

March 23rd

Year 2120

**South of the Village of Berken
Kingdom of Fergahn, Gartaena**

Merdilen made sure his glove's compartments were full of sand, gripped his black sword tight, and rushed the shadow monster. He thrust his blade directly into the massive beast's side with what became a direct hit, but even though Merdilen put his whole strength into it, the blade penetrated only about ten inches into the monster's thick and resistant skin. Against a human, that would've been a lot, but against this massive shadow monster, it seemed like it did nothing at all. The shadow monster looked at him suddenly, and roaring, attacked with a giant clawed paw towards Merdilen.

Merdilen raised his black sword clumsily, and blocked the slash just in time. He never had and never would use permanently a shield or another sword, because that would occupy both his hands and would refrain him from Transmutating, stripping him from his biggest skill. But there was something else he could do now. Something he had thought about a while ago. When fighting against the bandits and against the killers, he had never wanted to

kill them if he had a choice, because, no matter what their intentions were, they were as human as he was.

But this monster was different. He wouldn't limit himself now. He concentrated on his black sword to Transmutate it, and it burst into flames. It was extremely hot blue fire, circling around the black sword but not burning anything else. He slashed again at the shadow monster, and this time, the blade bit deep. It caused a long cut along the monster's side and made the shadow monster roar once again, but this time in pain. Merdilen quickly slashed again, this time vertically, forming a deep cross in the shadow monster's side.

But, even though the shadow monster was clearly damaged, it wasn't relenting or showing any signs of weaknesses. It was acting exactly the same as at the beginning of the fight. It turned suddenly to face Merdilen and jumped towards him, its massive jaw open wide. Merdilen instinctively took a step back, but he knew he probably wouldn't be able to evade the attack. It was too quick and sudden, and because of the size of the shadow monster, he probably wouldn't be able to get out of the way in time. And he couldn't try to block with his black sword either, because even though the blade itself was practically indestructible, the sheer strength of the shadow monster combined with its momentum would force his arm to give way, probably causing the beast to chomp Merdilen's whole head out. There was no way out but forward.

Merdilen took a step forward towards the beast, preparing his left hand to punch the shadow monster with all his strength. Of course, his bare fist would do nothing against that monster, but that was what the Transmutation glove was for. He concentrated on the compacted sand filling the glove's compartments and Transmutated. Out of the glove came massive steel spikes that covered his left hand, and he threw his punch with all his strength towards the shadow monster. The monster kept jumping towards him with his jaw open wide, and Merdilen punched directly *into*

the beast's mouth. The massive and sharp steel spikes cut cleanly through the monster's mouth, and it jumped backwards, roaring louder than ever in pain.

Merdilen turned his glove's steel spikes back into compacted sand in the compartments, but then heard something behind him. A crackling and roaring sound filled the air, and he looked backward, his eyes wide open. Because of his still-ablaze black sword, the massive tree behind him was now on fire. And he was in the middle of a forest. He looked quickly back and forth between the burning tree and the shadow monster, considering what to do.

He could attack the shadow monster now, and as the monster was still weak and groaning in pain from the spiked fist attack, it'd probably end the fight. But if he took the time to attack the monster, the fire would spread to the rest of the forest, including the village of Berken, which would render his efforts to save them from the shadow monster useless. He couldn't allow that.

He put the flames of his black sword out, left it hanging from his belt, and ran to the burning tree. The tree itself was technically alive, so he wasn't able to Transmutate it, but the tree bark wasn't. He pressed with his both hands hard against the tree bark, and ignoring the burning heat, concentrated. Although he was touching it with both his hands, he had never Transmuted something so large. The tree was gigantic. He concentrated hard and Transmuted. Using his hands as an epicenter, the tree bark quickly and steadily started turning into freezing, cold, pure ice. The ice started putting the fire out as soon as the bark turned into ice, but it wasn't quick enough.

After a few seconds, Merdilen heard a roar behind him, and a sharp and burning pain as the shadow monster slashed with his claws against his back. The claws bit deep and tore his flesh, making him hold back a scream. The impact almost threw him off his feet, but he managed to endure the pain and keep holding on to

the tree. The tree bark kept freezing until, to Merdilen's relief, the tree was completely covered in ice and the fire was no more.

Merdilen's back hurt terribly, but he couldn't afford to try and heal himself now, because he suspected healing that would take a while, and if the shadow monster attacked him again while he healed himself, it would do no good and just burn time. He stood in front of the tree and grabbed his black sword, bracing for the shadow monster's attack. The monster charged him once again with his jaw open wide, but as he was now farther away, he was able to sidestep and evade the attack. But, with all the accumulated momentum, the monster couldn't stop himself and crashed head-on into the massive tree. Of course, it wasn't enough to topple the massive tree, as only the tree bark was ice, not the whole thing, but the ice was extremely slippery.

As the shadow monster didn't hit the tree directly in the middle, it slipped because of the ice, and the momentum sent it tumbling to the side and into the ground. Merdilen, without missing a beat, rushed it, and jumped. As the monster was now prone, Merdilen was able to get on top of it, and before he fell, thrust his black sword down into the beast's body. Merdilen put all his strength into his blade, and this time the blade bit deep. The monster roared, but as it was still stunned from the charge against the tree, it did nothing. Merdilen buried his black sword deep into the monster, and after roaring once more, it finally stayed still.

Merdilen sighed, and after turning his black sword back to a walking stick, fell to one knee on the ground. His back was bleeding badly, but he didn't have the strength to heal himself yet. He stood on one knee on the ground, catching his breath, until he heard shouts from the north.

"This way!" he heard a man shout. "The roars were coming from over here!"

"Oh no," muttered Merdilen. He tried to stand up by putting his weight into his walking stick, but the wounds in his

back made his vision blur. He fell once again to one knee, and as he looked up, he saw several villagers running towards him.

“It’s the Transmutator!” another exclaimed while looking at fallen Merdilen and the dead shadow monster, making the rest gasp. “He was bringing a shadow monster to the village! He was trying to kill us all!”

“I wasn’t—” Merdilen muttered half-conscious, trying to explain. “I was trying to—”

“Shut up, you monster!” another villager yelled and hit him hard in the head with something he wasn’t able to see clearly because of his blurred vision. He fell backward, and he barely felt sharp pain when his wounded back hit the ground before he lost consciousness completely.

“The Transmutator has been captured,” the messenger told them, the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team, while they rode towards Berken. “He was found gravely wounded after a fight with a seemingly rebel shadow monster he was taking to the village of Berken to slaughter the villagers. He is heavily chained and temporarily imprisoned in Arthol’s federal prison. The prison chief is waiting for the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team to arrive before they execute him, in fear he somehow escapes when they unchain him to execute him.”

“Thank you, sir,” Sir Grendar told the messenger. “We’ll take care of this.”

They had been riding towards the village of Berken for more than a day, but as they weren’t there yet, they were able to change course. The city of Arthol was southeast of the village of Berken, and therefore, it was closer to them than their original destination. Arthol wasn’t as big as Cornaler, the capital of the kingdom of Fergahn, but it was still way bigger than the village of Berken. As far as Kayline knew, the village of Berken had only a small cell, and it would never be enough to hold a Transmutator for more than a few minutes.

“The Transmutator was captured!” said Salvatore cheerfully. “Our work is done! We’ll get paid!”

“The Transmutator was captured,” pointed out Jarleren. “Not killed.”

“We may have new weapons, and he may be chained, but we mustn’t underestimate him,” agreed Sir Grendar. “As he was able to escape from us, it is strange he was suddenly captured, and we must accept he will probably try to escape, and that we will have to fight him once more.”

“Killjoy,” muttered Salvatore.

“Our work won’t be done until he is dead and we see and confirm it for ourselves,” scolded him Kayline. “And you shouldn’t say ‘Our work is done! We’ll get paid!’, you should say ‘Our work is done! Mankind will be able to live in peace!’”

Salvatore looked at her irritated but said nothing. They kept riding towards the city of Arthol, ready to put an end to the Transmutator’s menace.

Merdilen woke up, and what he first felt was the soreness. His wrists and shins were extremely sore, and he felt like they were burning. He felt heavy iron shackles in his wrists and shins, stretching his body completely and hanging him in the air. The iron pressed hard against his skin, burning it. He was in a stone cell of some kind, and it was getting dark, with faint light spilling in from some kind of window behind him he wasn’t able to see. They had also taken his clock when they had captured him, but because of the light, he supposed the sun would be setting soon, so it was probably late afternoon of the same day he had fought the shadow monster and been captured. The cell wasn’t very big, and it had a heavy iron door in front of him.

He tried to turn around in his hanging position to look out the window, and barely managed to hold back a scream. His back was sticky, and he realized the people who had imprisoned him hadn’t even bothered to bandage the massive cuts that covered his

back, much less stitch them up. His wounds weren't bleeding anymore, but had started bleeding once again the moment he had tried to turn around. He looked around in pain, trying to move his head only.

The room had nothing else apart from the shackles he was hanging in—no bed, no food bowl, no potty, no nothing. His long jacket, Transmutation glove, and walking stick were gone too. He recognized that as meaning only one thing—they weren't planning to keep him in there for long. Either they would set him free soon, or they would execute him, and he didn't think they would set him free that easily. They would probably try to get rid of him as soon as they could, and executions usually didn't happen at nighttime. The day was already ending. They might wait until morning to execute him, but given their hatred and fear of Transmutators, he didn't think so. He probably had less than an hour left. He had to think of something, and quick.

The obvious choice would have been for him to Transmutate the shackles into sand, but mankind had clearly learned from Merdilen's fight with the killers. No iron was touching his hands, and the shackles were around his wrists in such a way that his hands were left hanging, but weren't able to reach the shackles, so he wouldn't be able to Transmutate them. He tried to turn around once again to see if there was something behind him that might help him, but once again, the agonizing pain in his back stopped him. He was having trouble breathing, and his vision was blurring. Still, he didn't think anything behind him would be of much help, as he was completely chained and unable to move, and he wasn't able to Transmutate at range yet.

The logical answer to his problem would be to Transmutate the shackles with his wrists, but he had never Transmutated with anything that wasn't his hands. While on his long trek from the home of his forefathers towards Berken, he had been Transmutating the burning sand into grass to keep his feet cool, but that was about it. He had never Transmutated anything bigger

than that without his hands. But then, he realized. If he was able to Transmutate sand into grass with his feet, then that meant that, even if it was hard, it was *possible* to Transmutate without his hands. He just wasn't able to do it because he had simply never tried hard enough. Following that theory, it should be possible to Transmutate with any part of his body, even... his back.

Merdilen hadn't thought about it before, but if he could barely turn around with his back hurt like that, then he wouldn't even be able to get out of his cell wounded. And if—once—he freed himself from his shackles, it would be too late for him to heal his back using the Transmutation. As he could tell from watching through the tiny window in his cell's iron door, guards passed by his cell every few seconds at uneven rates. Once he freed himself from his shackles, he would probably have only a few seconds before the guards noticed, and he wouldn't be able to fully heal his back *and* escape the cell unstopped. He had to use the Transmutation to heal himself *through* his back, and quick, before he bled to death or was executed. He remembered the words of his father, one of the first lessons he had given him when he had taught Merdilen the basics of Transmutation.

Transmutation depends on the power of one's mind, his father had told young Merdilen, so many years ago. It doesn't rely on the strength of your sword arm or the speed of your feet. It relies on the power of one's will. With enough determination, no matter how experienced he is, a Transmutator can do anything. That's why the Transmutators of old were so powerful and why the world fears our return—our only limitation is, quite literally, our own minds. Transmutation depended on one's will and determination, and Merdilen was full of it. This was more important than a training lesson. His life depended on it. And he would survive. He would become a hero. He would overcome any challenges that crossed his path.

Merdilen concentrated hard and imagined the power flowing through him as a golden stream flowing through his veins.

But instead of directing it to his hands, he directed it to his bleeding and wounded back. He kept concentrating hard, and he started replacing and reconnecting the wounded tendons, veins, blood vessels, and more. As they were several deep cuts, it took him several minutes, but as it was completely out of sight from the guards that passed by the cell on the other side, they offered no problem at all.

He finally finished healing himself, and focused on his shackles. He first directed his power to his shins, and after turning the shackles into dust, he quickly did the same thing with the shackles in his wrists.

I did it! he thought, full of adrenaline. *I Transmuted with something that wasn't my hands!* It was a true achievement, something that, properly mastered, would give him a massive advantage in combat.

When he was completely free, he fell to the ground, and the moment his sore feet touched the stone floor, he sprang to the far wall. He could only pray that on the other side of that prison wall he would be in the open, and not on another cell or, even worse, on a hallway.

The moment he touched the prison wall, he Transmuted with his hands, and in a matter of seconds turned the heavy stone bricks into his trusty long black jacket and clothes, Transmutation glove, and black sword. From now on, he had to be ready for anything. Because of the momentum he still had from his jump, he went straight through the now-missing prison brick wall and started falling through the air. Fortunately, he was effectively in the open now, and he was in some kind of big city, although he wasn't able to recognize it. The prison seemed to be some kind of tall tower, but he hadn't been locked up that high, so the closest rooftop was close enough for him to make the jump.

Merdilen jumped with all his strength, and barely made it to the closest rooftop. The hit would have probably broken his arm, but with his newly discovered ability, he turned his jacket's

left arm into a soft and thick cushion, shielding him. He stood up quickly, and turning his jacket's left arm back to normal, started running to the far side of the rooftop. When he got to the end, he hesitated for just a moment before jumping to the next one, which was pretty close. But then, he realized something. He didn't have to live as a fugitive forever.

As he had been captured, it was reasonable to think the killers knew he was there, as they clearly had very good intel about his whereabouts. He didn't want to kill anyone, and he didn't know if he would be able to kill them if he tried either. But he didn't want to live running away forever. So the perfect choice would be to try to make them stop.

He didn't know if he would be successful, but if he was able to talk them into realizing he wasn't evil as the Transmutators of old, becoming a hero would become a thousand times easier. Who knew, maybe they'd even agree to become his allies after they found out he was trying to be a hero and he had the potential to help a lot of people. Talking to them seemed like the only good answer to his problem. He looked towards a big and thick tower, and realized what he had to do.

Kayline and the rest of the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team dismounted from their horses and headed towards Arthol's federal prison. The city of Arthol wasn't as big as Cornaler, but it was still massive. The federal prison was in a very poor suburb, as no one who could afford a home somewhere else wanted to live near it. It was a tall stone tower that rose high over all the other buildings, with very few windows to be seen, as the cells didn't have any. This prison was known to be one of the most secure prisons in the kingdom of Fergahn, and it was said to be inescapable.

Every hallway was rigorously guarded, and the guards didn't provide as much as spoons for the prisoners in order for them not to escape. Also, with the elaborate chain system,

dangerous prisoners could barely move, far from being able to escape. They would now execute the Transmutator, and the world would be at peace once more. The sun was already setting, and the sooner they did it, the better. But as they reached the bottom of the tower, a guard came running towards them.

“Thank goodness you’ve arrived!” the guard said in a fearful voice.

“Where’s the Transmutator?” Jarleren asked in a low voice.

“I’m so sorry, it all happened in a matter of seconds!”

“Where is he?!”

“He’s gone,” the guard muttered.

“What?!” exclaimed Salvatore.

Then, Kayline started running up the stairs as quickly as she could, followed by the rest of the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team. The Transmutator’s cell was located on the prison’s third floor, and several prisoners looked at them surprised as they raced by. On the third floor, there was a massive commotion, and most of the prison guards were standing outside one of the cells, which seemed to be the one the Transmutator had been in.

They made their way through the sea of guards and entered. The cell had big chains and shackles hanging from the ceiling and sprouting from the floor, all of which had missing the parts in which the limbs would have gone. On the far stone wall was a hole big enough for a man to walk out of, and Kayline noticed the closest rooftop was close enough to be jumped to.

“You shouldn’t have allowed him to *touch* the shackles!” Salvatore exclaimed.

“We didn’t,” a guard answered. “He clearly Transmuted with his wrists or shins.”

“Well, you should have been more careful!” Salvatore accused.

“If *you* had told us he could Transmutate with the rest of his body too, we would have been!” countered another guard.

“How were *we* supposed to know?!”

So, while Salvatore argued with the guards about whose fault it was, Kayline took several steps back, and then ran towards the hole. The rest looked at her surprised, and she flew out of the hole only to land cleanly on the closest rooftop. If she had stopped herself when she hit the rooftop, her feet would have been damaged, so she just used the momentum of the fall to keep running, therefore reducing the damage on her feet. As she ran, she unsheathed both of her swords and held them steady at her sides. They couldn't allow the Transmutator to escape any further. The rest of the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team followed her, jumping to the rooftop with a little more clumsiness, and prepared their weapons.

They looked around, searching for the Transmutator, until they spotted a figure clad in black standing on top of a big and thick tower. It was already getting dark, so they could barely see him, but it was unmistakable. The Transmutator. It didn't make sense for him to be standing still over there, but they started running towards it anyway. Salvatore shot two quick arrows at the Transmutator, but suddenly, a small shield shielded the Transmutator's left hand, blocking the arrows and disappearing immediately after.

They ran up the stairs of the tower, and once they got to the top, the Transmutator was surprisingly still there. The Transmutator had his black sword ready at his side, and once they got at ear range from him, he pointed at them with his blade.

"Why are you fighting me?" he suddenly asked, staring at them in the eyes. "Tell me: what is my crime?"

That took them by surprise, but Jarleren answered quickly.

"Existing," he said, and didn't elaborate anymore.

"With my abilities, I can help the world immensely," the Transmutator said. "Haven't you thought about that?"

"A wolf can't help sheep, no matter how sharp its fangs are," Jarleren said in a low voice.

“You are a danger to mankind and the world as a whole,” Sir Grendar declared. “We can’t let you kill people.”

“But I haven’t killed anyone, have I?” the Transmutator reasoned. “In fact, I haven’t done a single thing against the law that wasn’t in self-defense.”

“You were taking a shadow monster to harm the villagers of Berken,” Kayline mentioned.

“No. The exact opposite. I killed the shadow monster *before* it harmed the villagers of Berken,” the Transmutator said, right before realizing his mistake.

“The shadow monster hadn’t done a single thing against the law that you knew of either, right? Then, why did you kill it?” Jarleren countered, leaving the Transmutator with no answer. “That’s why we’re going to kill *you*.”

And with that, they rushed him, ready to kill.

The first to attack was Sir Grendar. He rushed the Transmutator with his massive Blademasher high in the air, ready to slash down. The greatsword was so massive the Transmutator probably wouldn’t be able to dodge it backward or to the side, and Sir Grendar was swinging it with too much strength as for the Transmutator to block it effectively. The Transmutator couldn’t turn it into sand either, as the Blademasher would slice cleanly through his hand. The greatsword slashed down with incredible power, but at the last moment, the Transmutator dodged, not backward, but towards Sir Grendar.

He quickstepped behind Sir Grendar, and as the Blademasher was so incredibly heavy, the knight wasn’t able to change its course. The massive greatsword hit the ground with incredible force, destroying a part of the brick roof and cutting through easily to the tower below. Kayline hoped there had been no one under that portion of the ceiling. The Transmutator then slashed at Sir Grendar’s back with his black sword, but it bounced off the resistant steel armor, without doing as much as a scratch.

Sir Grendar turned with a surprising speed considering his heavy plate armor and slashed horizontally at the Transmutator. The Transmutator didn't flinch though, and unexpectedly enough, thrust his left hand towards the incoming Bladesmasher.

That hit will completely shatter his arm, Kayline thought, bracing for the incoming catastrophe. But, instead of reaching it bare-handed, a black glove that Kayline just then noticed was covering the Transmutator's left hand turned into a massive steel gauntlet, which grabbed the Bladesmasher without suffering harm. The Transmutator's arm started instantly shaking because of the overwhelming pressure, and Kayline knew the maneuver wouldn't give him more than a few seconds. But that was all the Transmutator needed.

The Transmutator turned his black sword into another equal black glove that covered his right hand, leaving it free. He then thrust his right hand into the Bladesmasher, grabbing it with his bare hand. As the greatsword was momentarily held immobile by the steel gauntlet now covering the Transmutator's left hand, his right hand was free to grab the greatsword without the fear of being cut in half. He gripped the blade hard, and most of it turned to dust, rendering it useless.

But the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team had learned from its last battle, and they had supposed something like this could happen. The scientists of the kingdom of Fergahn hadn't been wasting time. So, Sir Grendar took a step backward, and with his thumb pulled a small switch hidden in the sword's hilt, which loosened the hilt and made it lose its grip on the blade. The broken blade fell to the ground, leaving the empty hilt on the knight's hand.

Sir Grendar then took the hilt to his back, as it intending on unsheathing his greatsword once again. But instead, he directed the hilt to a big package strapped to his back, and the hilt clicked perfectly with the support blade all of them were carrying, connecting once more. But it would take several seconds, and they

couldn't risk leaving the Transmutator free during that time, so Kayline rushed in. She had learnt to never fight an opponent a sword-wielding ally was already fighting, as chances were she would get hit by a long swing. It was better for them to fight the Transmutator one-on-one, as that would allow them to go all out and not have to worry about hitting an ally.

Kayline ran to the Transmutator without letting him rest and prepared to unleash their secret weapon. She didn't want to use it, but it was necessary. While she ran, she took two small earplugs from her pocket, and fit them into her ears. She also raised her right palm towards her ear while looking at the others, signaling what they had prepared beforehand. Then, instead of running the remaining distance towards the Transmutator, she changed course towards a small chimney pipe, several feet from the Transmutator. She jumped nimbly on top of it, and using the momentum, jumped upwards, raising her two swords above her left shoulder.

This is our top scientists' newest invention, Erthen had told the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team before they left Cornaler. Sonic Blades. It consists of a special chemical with which you'll coat your swords, and activates with kinetic energy. When you accelerate a certain amount with a Sonic Blade, the kinetic energy generated will trigger the chemical's reaction, letting out an extremely high-pitched ring. As it is only dangerous for people within a few feet's range, only the wielder will wear protective earplugs, but it will be lethal for the Transmutator.

Although we cannot be certain, we believe the Transmutator controls the Transmutation with his mind, so when he is temporarily stunned by the Sonic Blade, he should be unable to Transmutate, weakening him immensely, Erthen had explained. As for now, we have a limited amount of that chemical, so the Sonic Blades will be Kayline Sherdaine's longswords, seeing as how she is the faster one with a sword here.

So Kayline jumped high in the air, and looking at the Transmutator, slashed all the way to her right way before reaching him. As she was in the air, the swing propelled her whole body to the right, and she continued the slash, spinning a full spin in the air to gain momentum and speed, her long red hair flowing in the air behind her. And it worked. Her swords made a low crackling sound, slightly shining silver, and an instant later, erupted into an extremely high-pitched ring. As she was wearing earplugs, her head hurt little, and she was able to easily endure the pain.

The Transmutator didn't. Kayline fell to the ground on her feet, and although she didn't reach him, she hadn't meant to, and she had achieved her first objective. The Transmutator crouched partially, letting out a pained groan and covering his ears with his hands. He should be severely stunned now, and even though he would still be able to fight, although with less strength, he wouldn't be able to Transmutate for a while, as that required focusing with his mind.

Kayline sprang to him with her swords ready behind her without missing a beat and slashed upwards with both. The Transmutator took several steps backward and raised his black sword, clumsily blocking one attack and evading the other. Kayline then slashed twice with her blades in opposite directions, and the Transmutator once again blocked one attack and took several steps back to evade the other.

He was clenching his left fist tight, clearly trying hard to Transmutate, but to no avail. The Sonic Blades had worked. Kayline slashed twice more with her blades, making the Transmutator move backwards. She was attacking with easily blockable but extremely fast strikes, as her objective wasn't to hurt the Transmutator yet but to overwhelm him. Because he was still partially stunned, he would be overwhelmed with ease, and he wouldn't be able to attack at all. Once he was overwhelmed, it would be way easier for her to deal the killing blow.

She kept slashing at him from all angles at high speed with her swords, and he was forced to almost run backwards while holding his black sword in front of him to block and evade the attacks. But the Transmutator would soon have nowhere to run. As they were fighting on top of a tower, he would soon reach its border. She imagined he would be able to do something to stop dying if he fell from it like last time, but the ground would be swarming with guards by now. That was the good thing about fighting in a city: even if he somehow managed to escape the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team, it would be almost impossible for him to escape the guards too. And the Transmutator was clearly exhausted already.

The rest of the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team were standing by, certain she already had the situation under control, and she was sure they would join the fight if she needed it. But then, Jarleren stealthily got next to the Transmutator without anyone noticing, and stabbed him in the side once again. He clearly wanted things to speed up. The Transmutator staggered backward, almost losing his balance.

This is my chance!, thought Kayline, and raised both longswords over her left shoulder. *This ends now*. But, right when she was about to slash downwards, she hesitated. The Transmutator hadn't actually committed any crimes yet. Could she really kill an innocent man?

But, while in her internal debate, she hesitated for just a moment before attacking, and the moment was lost. The Transmutator regained his composure, and clenching his teeth and covering his stab wound with his right arm, thrust his left arm towards Kayline's right shoulder. She realized the Transmutator would no longer be stunned, and suddenly overwhelmed herself, tried to quickstep backward and slash at him at the same time, but as the quickstep would have taken her backwards and the slash forward, she failed both.

The Transmutator reached her, and the moment he touched her right shoulder, her whole leather jacket became stone. Suddenly weighed down, she fell backward, completely defenseless. But once again, the Transmutator did nothing to finish her off. He actually tried to walk backward, but as she fell she saw a lightning-fast arrow flying past her and into the Transmutator's left shoulder.

The arrow buried deep into his shoulder, exiting from his back, and he started to tumble backward in pain, having fully lost his balance. She looked at him from the ground, and he started going quickly to the tower's border. But at the last few steps, it looked like he was actually *trying* to fall from the tower, which made no sense, considering the ground was swarming with guards, several floors below. He then jumped backward, throwing himself off the tower. Salvatore realized the Transmutator was actually planning something and fired two quick arrows at him, but they flew right past his falling body, and he kept falling to the guard-filled ground. Kayline pushed herself to her knees and crawled towards the parapet.

She saw the Transmutator falling rapidly towards the ground, but his face had none of the fear she would have expected. He kept falling at a high speed, but when he reached the ground, he didn't crash. Instead, he seemed to Transmutate the ground with his back, which she thought impossible, and fell *below* it. She was able to see the dirty and wet city sewers through the ground for a fraction of a second, and the Transmutator Transmutated the ground back to stone right after falling through it. The ground once again closed completely, as if it had never opened, leaving the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team and the city guards dumbfounded.

"Go search for him!" shouted Sir Grendar at the guards, but all of them knew it would be practically impossible to find a person in that massive underground maze. The Transmutator had escaped. Again.