

PART THREE:

AVENGER IN A
HATEFUL WORLD

A Shadow Culture

April 17th

Year 2120

The Gap

Southern Wastes, Gartaena

Kayline stared at Merdilen as he stood in the middle of their camp-turned-battlefield, three human corpses lying in the ground around him.

“What have you done...?” she asked in a whisper.

“I did what needed to be done,” he replied. “They were monsters.”

“Yeah, but still...” she muttered. “It isn’t right.”

“They were my enemies. They wouldn’t have hesitated in killing me, so I didn’t hesitate either.”

“That doesn’t mean it’s correct,” Kayline argued.

“I finally stood up to my enemies, Kayline,” he declared. “I finally found a permanent solution for them. You wouldn’t get it. You don’t know how it feels like to be a Transmutator. You don’t know how it feels like to get lynched whenever you enter a village. You don’t know how it feels like getting your arm cut off. You don’t know how it feels like being arrested by the very villagers you just saved. What’s worse than all that, is being able to just bear with it, to man up, not doing anything else about it. Since I left my home, everything I have felt is hate. The whole world except for you is

trying to kill me. Do you know how that feels? Do you know how it feels to not be able to do anything about it? Do you?”

“W-well, of course not, but...” She hesitated, not knowing what to say.

“It is terrible, to know your enemies can and will kill you and knowing that you can’t kill back. I won’t survive by being soft. I had always ignored that fact, but not anymore. Alvoren died because I was soft. Alvoren died because I didn’t have the guts to kill my enemies. If I had started killing before, Alvoren wouldn’t have died. And *I* am *not* going to die. I’m going to survive this world. By any means necessary.”

“Having power does not give you the right to judge people,” Kayline muttered.

“But if I don’t judge, then who will?” he countered.

Kayline answered nothing.

“Go back to sleep, Kayline,” he said. “It’s not your guard shift yet.”

She tried to argue something else, but couldn’t think of anything else to say, so she did as told.

Merdilen stayed in his guard shift, pondering about what had just happened.

He had meant everything he had told her. He knew it to be the truth. But, he was afraid to change. He was afraid of what he would become if he followed that path. But he had no choice. Not if he wanted to survive. It was simple logic: if his enemies never died, they’d kill him eventually, as they’d have infinite opportunities to do so. Merdilen’s arm had been cut off because of that. Alvoren had died because of that. And Merdilen wasn’t going to die yet. Neither him nor Kayline. He wouldn’t allow it. Therefore, if he wanted both of them to survive the journey, he’d have to be ruthless. Even if that might change who he was. He had to survive.

And, now with his Transmutation at range, he’d be able to. He didn’t exactly know why he had been able to Transmutate at

range back in the battle, but he had one theory: he had hate. Hate gave him determination, and determination gave him power. Merdilen had never been so powerful before. He didn't know if he'd be able to do it again. But, he would try. Tomorrow. Because, if he was actually able to, it'd be an invaluable resource in his fight against the world. And, being stronger meant that it would probably be easier to adapt to the new power he'd probably get when they reached the fortress.

It wouldn't be long now before they reached Morkilen Farenthar's fortress. It was hard to pinpoint exactly their location on the map because of the lack of information, but he knew it would be a week at most before they reached it. Their seemingly infinite journey was coming to an end. He didn't exactly know what he would do after he got the power. He was afraid to think about it.

But he knew one thing: for good or ill, everything would change.

Kayline couldn't go back to sleep. She just lay there in her bedroll, thinking. She kept thinking about the same thing. Merdilen... had actually killed people. Even if they were crazy and psychopathic cultists, they were still human beings. Whether they deserved to die or not was not up to any of them. But she was worried about something else. The Fergahnian army was Merdilen's enemy. Given the chance, would he kill all of them too?

Of course not, Kayline forced herself to think. He'd surely understand them.

Even though they were Kayline's enemies, she didn't want them to die. She'd once fought alongside the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team, even if she had deserted them in the end. She knew how human they were.

Had she been wrong to side with Merdilen? Was the rest of the world actually right? No, no, she couldn't think that. Those thoughts would lead to no good. This had been just one individual

event; that didn't mean he would stay this way forever. Merdilen was right in one thing; she had to get some rest. So, trying to push her thoughts out of her mind, she fell asleep once more.

The next day, at the end of Kayline's guard shift, Merdilen woke up. He seemed to act normal, and while they ate breakfast, completely ignored the events of last night. Maybe he *did* feel regretful after all, Kayline thought. Maybe even ashamed. Whatever the reason, he seemed to be completely normal today, fully unlike the dark Merdilen she had seen the night before. She preferred him this way, but deep down, she knew they'd have to address the event eventually. Eventually. But not yet.

"Kayline, last night, I discovered something," Merdilen told her while they ate. "I discovered the reason the shadow monster riders always seemed to somehow find us. But first, I gotta tell you something. I-I Transmuted at range last night."

"You Transmuted at range? Wow!" she said, genuinely impressed. "How did you do it?"

"I-I think it's because I was angry," he muttered. "It gave me the determination to defeat those guys, and that gave me power."

"Oh. Merdilen... I gotta ask you something." She hesitated before going on. "If—when—we fight the Fergahnian army, or a subsection of it... Will you kill them?"

His face darkened. "I will treat them like they treat me. It is only fair."

"B-but you're way more powerful than them! You'd deal too much damage!" she protested. "They're humans, same as us."

"The last time I spared someone's life, my best friend died," he said in a serious tone.

"Do you want to become a monster?" she muttered.

"O-of course not," he said, his voice shaky. "But I don't have a choice. Not anymore. Neither of us will die. I won't commit the same mistake twice."

They ate in silence for a few more minutes.

Merdilen does not want to kill, Kayline realized. *He feels forced to*. And, if he got to Morkilen Farenthar's fortress, he'd get too much power to be stopped by anyone. She suddenly came to a realization. If Merdilen kept thinking how he was thinking right now, then there'd be a mass murder. The Fergahnian army wouldn't give up in trying to kill him, and he'd in return kill *them*. If the battle between mankind and Merdilen continued, who knew how many people would die before it was all over? It'd be absolute carnage. A mass murder.

"Hey..." she started. "Maybe... it is not such a great idea to go to that fortress."

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"You don't *want* to kill. You feel *forced* to," she continued. "If you get all that power, then you'll be much more prone to killing than now. Maybe... maybe there's another way to survive. What if you retire? What if you go to some faraway village, where you can live in peace and happily ever after?"

"Do *not* ask me to do that. Do you want to make Alvoren's sacrifice mean *nothing*?" he accused. "Do you really want to give up on your hopes and dreams so easily?"

"Of course not, but I don't want to be indirectly guilty of mass murder either."

"Look, the Fergahnian army asked for it," Merdilen countered. "They are willing and ready to die. It's not like I am killing innocents or anything."

"Yes, but it's still mass murder," Kayline argued. "Besides... the whole world would be against you, more than it is now. Not only would the whole kingdom of Fergahn be after you, but probably every single kingdom in the South too. That's a *lot* of killing. Would you really kill all of them?"

"If they don't give up, I'll do what I have to do. But I *won't* die. ...Why are you asking me these things anyway?" he then

asked, narrowing his eyes. "Do you no longer want to ally with me?"

"Of course I do! It's just that... I'm trying to make things right."

A few silent moments passed, until Kayline asked, changing the subject, "So, what about what you said earlier? About knowing how the shadow monsters always found us?"

"Right. So, I did some experiments during my guard shift last night, trying to Transmutate at range again," Merdilen said. "I wasn't able to, but I felt something else. I felt the presence of shadow monsters far away, farther away than I had ever felt them, and after all that, far in the distance, another presence. A powerful one, like the one I felt in your father when he was still a Manipulator, and what I feel in you. I think that that presence might be able to feel us too, and track us down."

"Ohh, it'd make sense," she agreed. "I can't feel anything, not even from you, but I'm guessing that's because I'm not experienced enough."

"You're probably right," Merdilen said. "Anyway, as long as that presence still has its power, we're gonna keep getting attacked over and over by shadow monsters. The only way to stop that is by defeating that presence. From what I feel, it should be somewhere to the west of here."

"...Okay," Kayline nodded. "Let's go. But, please... try not to kill."

Merdilen remained silent for a few moments, until he finally said, "...I'll see what I can do."

They started walking towards where they felt the presence, and a short while after leaving their camp, got to a small village. They looked at it from afar, and noticed something. This was no normal village. All its buildings were taller than normal and crudely made, as if made in a hurry, with space to host some big creatures. Soon enough, they saw what the space was for. Shadow

monsters, prowling around and populating the whole village, being almost as many as the villagers themselves. All villagers had strange black tattoos on their heads and shoulders, same as the ones they had met on other occasions.

“Of course,” Kayline muttered. “The city with shadow monsters we saw the other day wasn’t just one individual settlement. This is all a region with this terrible culture. A whole shadow culture.”

“...Right,” Merdilen agreed while they sneaked away from the village. “We gotta be extra careful here. Coming to think about it, we should probably keep moving around in order to avoid shadow monsters, but not actually approach the presence until it is asleep, so it can’t feel us and be ready for us.”

“Makes sense,” Kayline said. “All right.”

So, they spent the rest of the afternoon walking around, evading patrolling shadow monsters, until the sun set. They waited for a few more hours, and when it was about midnight, they kept going on their journey. Getting any close to the presence in plain daylight would have been dangerous, especially considering it had clearly been sending shadow monsters after them.

After a few more hours, after passing a few more shadow villages, they finally arrived at what seemed to be it. A massive city, completely dark. Not a single light shone on that city. It was all cloaked in the shadows. Made sense, after all, considering they seemed to consider shadow monsters superior beings. Apart from that, and the fact that all buildings were taller than they’d usually be, it looked pretty normal. Normal except for the massive presence emanating from it. It felt kind of what Merdilen sensed in Kayline, except that many times bigger.

“Do you have any way of knowing what kind of power this presence has?” Kayline asked.

“I don’t really know,” Merdilen admitted. “But it seems similar to what I feel from you, and considering it’s the thing your

father found in the fortress, I'd guess it's some kind of Manipulation."

"Gaseous matter Manipulation?" Kayline mentioned.

"Could be," Merdilen said. "I don't know. I guess we'll find out soon enough."

With that, they walked the last stretch towards the shadow city. It had no walls; no one would dare attack a culture that could tame shadow monsters. No one except for Merdilen and Kayline. Still, this was meant to be a stealth mission, as, needless to say, they would never be able to face off against a whole city by themselves. Fortunately, the city was big enough that, in the darkness, no one would see or care about two strangers in the night.

Still, they approached as silently and fast as they could, quickly taking cover behind a house. Terrifyingly enough, the streets were not being roamed just by mere human guards, but by the shadow monsters themselves. A quick stealth takedown would not work on them. If they were spotted, they'd die. But they had no choice. Not if they wanted to survive and evade any further shadow monster attacks.

They started to sneak through the shadow city with ease, evading the few shadow monsters they saw. On an occasion, they were almost spotted, but Merdilen used his Transmutation to make a small wall in front of them, hiding them from sight.

Soon enough, they saw it. A giant building in the middle of the city, taller than all others. It had some weird spires jutting outwards at certain points of the architecture, which seemed to have no purpose other than looking imposing. It succeeded. It towered over all the rest of the city, giving it a sense of power and superiority. And, within it, came the evil presence they had been searching for. The building reminded Merdilen of the House of Records, albeit this was a much more wicked and crooked version of it.

"Okay," Merdilen said, taking a deep breath. "Let's go."

They headed in a crouch towards one of the black walls, and as soon as they reached it, Merdilen Transmuted it momentarily into sand, quickly stepping in.

“W-whoa!” he exclaimed as soon as he saw the inside of the tower, swinging his arms around for balance.

All the lower floor of the structure was crossed by thick rivers of lava flowing in all directions, as if the place was built upon a volcano. Thin obsidian bridges crossed the room alongside the lava, held just above the deadly liquid. One misstep in that place would be mortal. Bracing himself, he walked slowly towards the nearest bridge, and after making sure Kayline was following, closed the entrance behind them.

Merdilen and Kayline walked quickly through the bridges towards a set of stairs at the end of the room, both wanting to get to it fast but trying to keep their balance. Fortunately, there were no guards in that room; no one would want to risk staying so close to lava for long. They were incredibly lucky in that sense: a battle in that place would be way too dangerous. Soon enough, they reached the stairs, and after breathing out in relief, started the long climb upwards.

It seemed that all guards were posted at the bottom of the tower, as they found no guards in the stairs while going up. In order to try to fight as little as possible, they’d check the top floor first. That was where the presence felt stronger.

“So it seems that this presence, whoever he or she is, is the ruler of this culture,” Kayline mentioned.

“Yeah, seems like it,” Merdilen nodded. “It makes sense, considering it had the authority to send shadow monsters after us and all.”

“True.”

As they walked, they noticed something. The walls were all painted, depicting scenes of a seemingly religious nature. Merdilen realized with a start he recognized some of them.

One of them depicted a man with his hands raised into the air, looking upwards, while hundreds of shadow monsters kneeled before him. Morkilen Farenthar, commanding the shadow monsters. The next one depicted two human beings fighting, each with a massive giant in front of them. Kateko Arthenmon versus Morkilen Farenthar. The last image depicted a destroyed world, both Transmutators fallen to the ground, and the shadow monsters roaming wild. The aftermath of the Transmutation War, and what the world would come to be.

“They seem to venerate the Transmutators too,” Merdilen muttered.

“Well, it makes sense for them to venerate the shadow monsters’ creators and masters if they venerated the shadow monsters themselves,” Kayline said.

“Yeah. Still, it feels weird. It feels... wrong.”

They kept going upwards, until the stairs came to an abrupt stop. In front of them were two massive obsidian doors, with intricate carvings and designs similar to the ones on the people’s tattoos. Merdilen checked it. It was, predictably enough, locked from the inside. Merdilen pressed his hand against the lock, turning it into sand, and after receiving a curt nod from Kayline, pushed the twin doors open.

Inside, they found a royal bedroom, its walls lined with tapestries and other decorations. In the middle was a giant silk bed, in which a man they couldn’t see well lay.

“Stop right there!” a guard standing at the other side of the now-open door exclaimed when he saw them. “You are infiltrating the holy bedroom of His Majesty Jrondelon Herdeen!”

Another guard came towards them. There were two of them, and although they were armed with swords, shields, and full iron armor, they were no match for a Transmutator *and* a Manipulator.

“Leave this to me,” Kayline muttered. “You close off that entrance so no reinforcements come.”

“Right,” Merdilen agreed.

Using his Transmutation, he blended the two doors together, turning them into a single massive obsidian slab.

Meanwhile, Kayline attacked the two soldiers. She attacked with Manipulation-infused backhand strikes, which were so powerful that each sword knocked out a guard instantly by precise hits in the head. Both fell to the ground with a thump. In that moment, the presence, seemingly called Jrondelon Herdeen, woke up. As soon as he did, he got out of bed desperately, but instead of attacking them, he pushed the bed to the side, revealing something neither of them had expected.

A hole, going down to the lowest floor of the building. Jrondelon jumped downwards, not seeming to care about the dangerous height. Merdilen and Kayline rushed over, peeking into the hole. The man fell into a small lake, but as he fell, it seemed as if the water... engulfed him, embracing him and preventing him from taking fall damage.

Kayline jumped down the hole too, pushing Merdilen into it with her.

“Whoa!” Merdilen exclaimed, falling downwards at perilous speed and spinning wildly in the air. He had no control over his body. He wouldn’t be able to Transmute a safe fall for them.

“Don’t worry,” Kayline said, and before they reached the wet bottom of the hole, she Manipulated, the winds pushing upwards and slowing down their fall. They fell peacefully, both on their feet, immediately dashing in close persecution after the man.

But it seemed that Jrondelon’s move hadn’t been just a desperate attempt at escaping after all. He stood in the middle of the lava-filled chamber, stepping on the middle of the intersection between all bridges. He grinned maliciously. And then, he raised his hands, and... the lava obeyed.

All the liquid lava in the room rose and started to levitate in the air, obeying his hand motions, in a surreal image of

destruction and power. Merdilen suddenly realized. Kayline was a gaseous matter Manipulator. This was a liquid matter Manipulator. And he was smart.

Does that mean there's a solid matter Manipulator too, somewhere? Merdilen wondered, but then immediately pushed those thoughts away. This was no time to get distracted.

Jrondelon suddenly motioned towards them with both his hands, and all liquid lava in the room flew towards them at perilous speeds. Both Merdilen and Kayline yelled, and Merdilen quickly Transmuted his clothes into solid full-body obsidian armor, which would block the lava off, but making it impossible for him to move in the process. The lava reached him first, but it flowed harmlessly against his hard obsidian armor.

The lava then reached Kayline, and she desperately raised her hands, Manipulating. The wind complied, flowing forward to push the lava away. It became a battle of Manipulators, Jrondelon Manipulating the lava to push it towards her, and Kayline Manipulating the wind to push the lava away from her. And Jrondelon was clearly much more experienced than she was. She wouldn't last long.

"Big push!" Merdilen called out to her, his voice muffled by the heavy armor. "Retreat!"

She looked confused at first, but then got it. Channeling all her Manipulation power into one big push, she yelled, pushing all the lava outwards, away from her. In those precious few seconds of freedom, Merdilen Transmuted his obsidian armor back into his usual clothes, and dashed for the closest wall, gesturing for Kayline to follow, the lava quickly coming up once more behind them.

Both jumped away from the bridge they were standing on and towards the wall, Merdilen ready to Transmute it into sand to escape. Kayline used her Manipulation to push her above the lava, but Merdilen wasn't that lucky. He couldn't Manipulate. But, concentrating hard, he imagined his power flowing towards the

wall, making a bridge towards him. In that desperate moment, Merdilen Transmuted at range once more, creating a bridge that shot out from the closest wall and under his feet, allowing him to not fall into the lava.

They reached the wall, and Merdilen immediately Transmuted it into sand, both of them dashing out of it. Merdilen blocked the wall once again, leaving on the other side a chamber full of lava and a furious Manipulator. But they hadn't escaped yet.

Waiting outside were about twenty shadow monsters, each with a rider, who had come by hearing the sounds of battle. Way too many for them. Thinking quickly, Merdilen Transmuted the whole wall of the tower behind them into sand, gesturing for him and Kayline to run to the side. As they ran, the whole tower, now missing a wall, toppled behind them, crushing under it all of the shadow monsters and their riders. Unfortunately, Jrondelon hadn't died in the wreckage, as Merdilen could still feel his presence.

Merdilen and Kayline disappeared into the night, escaping behind alleyways until they were out of the city. They kept running for a while, until they were certain no one was following.

They both sat down on the very outskirts of the city, catching their breath.

"A liquid matter Manipulator, huh," Merdilen muttered. "With a lava pit, no less."

"Yeah..." Kayline said. "How are we meant to defeat lava itself?"

"I... don't know," Merdilen replied. "We gotta make up a plan."

But he seemed troubled. Worried about something.

"What is it?" Kayline finally asked.

"I... realized something, during the battle," he told her. "If there's a gaseous matter Manipulator, and a liquid matter

Manipulator, then that'd mean there's a solid matter Manipulator too, right?"

"Probably," Kayline nodded.

"Then... that would be a perfect counter for my powers," he muttered. "A solid matter Manipulator would be able to push away whatever I threw at him, not to mention any solid weapons. I wouldn't be able to attack him with anything Transmuted, as he'd probably be able to turn the tables by throwing it right back at me. I doubt I'd be able to take him on with my current abilities."

"Oh..." Kayline said. "You're right... But you have something he or she wouldn't have."

"What is that?" Merdilen asked.

"You have me," she said, smiling slightly. "Together, I'm certain we can take him."

"That's right," Merdilen agreed, now smiling too.

"Oh, and I think I've got a plan," she said. "I think I can hold off Jrondelon's lava with my Manipulation for a few seconds. If I push all lava away from you, you can attack him and defeat him in the few seconds that that'll grant you."

"You're right!" Merdilen said, impressed. "That'd be perfect."

"When should we attack?" Kayline asked.

"When he least expects it," Merdilen said, grinning. "In the chaos all the tower's collapse is causing. Right now."

Decisions

April 19th

Year 2120

The Gap

Southern Wastes, Gartaena

Merdilen and Kayline headed back towards the shadow city, ready to strike once again at its ruler, Jrondelon Herdeen, the liquid matter Manipulator. The city was in chaos. People filled the streets, all curiously trying to see what was going on at the palace. Soldiers ran between the people, frantically searching for the two people that had just tried to kill their ruler. That meant there would be fewer soldiers protecting Jrondelon.

Merdilen Transmuted his clothes into simple farmer robes, raising a hood over his head, and did something similar for Kayline. No one would stop to check on two random farmers among all the population.

“How are we going to deal with all the remaining guards?” Kayline asked in a whisper. “You thought of something, didn’t you? Please tell me you did.”

“Yeah, I have a plan,” Merdilen whispered back. “And if it works, we’ll have killed two birds with one stone.”

Kayline cocked her head, looking at him with a questioning look, but he didn’t elaborate any further.

They kept walking towards the palace at the very center of the city, and soon arrived. As most guards were searching the city for the intruders, there were much fewer guards than there should have been, but they were still too many to fight. Behind the guards, the fallen tower lay, at the middle of which stood Jrondelon Herdeen himself.

“Showtime,” Merdilen said.

To that, they climbed through a nearby alleyway to the top of a building, and jumped towards the fallen tower. Kayline boosted herself with her Manipulation, jumping high over all the guards, and Merdilen did the same thing by Transmutating a massive spring under his feet. They both fell inside the base of the fallen tower, standing perilously on one of the bridges. Without missing a beat, Merdilen Transmuted, blocking off all entrances.

Jrondelon spun at them when they fell, surprised, but then he saw that all entrances had been blocked, and grinned.

“You’re trapped with me,” he said in a strong accent, preparing to Manipulate.

No, Merdilen thought. You’re trapped with us.

With that, Jrondelon Manipulated, and all the lava in the room rose once more, shooting towards Merdilen and Kayline. But this time, Kayline was ready. She Manipulated, shooting air towards the lava, pushing it backward and creating a small bubble of air where both of them were. They started to dash towards Jrondelon, Kayline pushing lava aside in her wake, until they finally got to the surprised man.

Merdilen sprang at him, putting his sword against Jrondelon’s neck.

“Y-you can’t do this!” he exclaimed, now scared. “My whole army will kill you if you do!”

“I fear no army,” Merdilen muttered at the fallen ruler. “Not anymore.”

“Don’t kill him,” Kayline reminded him. “Try to somehow extirpate the Manipulation from him.”

“I-I will be good! I will serve you!” Jrondelon exclaimed.

But, as he did so, he Manipulated the lava strongly in a certain spot, and it burst through Kayline’s Manipulation, shooting towards Merdilen. It was a basic rule for any power: the smaller the surface, the stronger and more concentrated the power would become, as it was the same amount of power divided in less space.

To that, before the lava reached them, Merdilen ruthlessly slashed at the man’s neck, killing him. The lava all around them fell harmlessly back into the pits. Kayline gasped.

“You said you wouldn’t kill him!” she scolded him.

“My life was on the line,” he countered. “It was either me or him.”

In that moment, they heard something. The blocked entrances were booming and shaking, as if something extremely strong was pummeling against them from the other side.

“Those walls won’t last much more,” Kayline mentioned, trying not to show her fear. “If you’re going to do something, do it now.”

“Right,” he said.

With that, he Transmuted the ground, raising a feet-wide tower from the ground, with him atop it. Kayline jumped to the top of one of the walls, ready to see whatever he was planning to do. The tiny tower kept going up and up, until Merdilen could be seen clearly from up to several blocks away.

“People of Gartaena!” he exclaimed, addressing the whole city, although Kayline was unsure of how many people could actually hear.

The whole army outside the tower stopped, looking at the suddenly-formed tower and the man atop it. They looked shocked, in awe.

“I well know whom you worship,” he continued. “Morkilen Farenthar, one of the two Transmutators that lived during the Transmutation War. The strongest Transmutator of all time. I was sent by him. My name is Merdilen. Merdilen Farenthar,” he lied,

while flashily Transmutating his farmer clothing back into his usual black attire. “And I am the Heir of Morkilen. The Heir to the Transmutation. I am a Transmutator myself. And therefore, you must bow before me.”

It was a massive gamble. Either they would actually obey him as the descendant of a supposed god, or they would hate him even more for his seeming blasphemy.

He’s making himself a god, Kayline thought, frowning. He’s making himself look like a deity before these people. She wasn’t sure if she liked that. If it worked, he would have way too much power. Too much power for a single man to handle.

After several tense seconds, they began to actually bow before him, slowly, one by one. It had worked.

“What do you wish us to do, Holy One?” one of the army officers asked.

Merdilen grinned maliciously. It had been so easy. He almost felt the urge to laugh at how simple it had been, but stopped himself, lest they think he was mocking them.

“I have one command for your army, officer,” he replied, trying to sound as divine as possible. “There’s an enemy army hunting me down, trying to eradicate the Heir to the Transmutation. I want you to go with your army and defeat them. They should be somewhere to the southeast of here.”

“We shall do as you say, Holy One,” the officer said, and started giving orders to his soldiers.

“The rest of you, you are dismissed,” Merdilen told the astonished and still-bowing populace. “You shall receive my call when I need your aid once again.”

The people stayed for a few more minutes, staring at Merdilen, until they finally started to retire from the place.

Merdilen started to Transmute his tower back into the ground, lowering it. He headed towards Kayline with a smile. But, she didn’t smile back. Instead, she looked worried, even a little angry.

“You made yourself a god,” she said with a shake of her head. “Something no human should ever attempt to do. And you... you ordered the whole Fergahnian army killed.”

“I didn’t order them killed,” he countered. “Just defeated. There’s a difference.”

“You know as well as I do that those shadow monsters will have no mercy with those poor Fergahnian soldiers.”

Merdilen remained silent.

“...At least, we get to live another day,” he finally said.

“By the blood of innocents,” Kayline muttered.

“They were *not* innocents!” Merdilen exclaimed, getting angry. “They knew damn well what they were getting themselves into!”

“Calm down,” Kayline told him with a disapproving glare. “You don’t need to get angry.”

Merdilen thought about replying something, but stopped himself.

“...Sorry,” he finally said. “Now let’s leave the city before anything else happens. We’ve got a fortress to reach.”

Kayline stood in the darkness, watching the night during her night guard shift, making sure they weren’t attacked by anyone. There had been a time, about a week ago, when they’d been attacked by shadow monsters nearly every day. But that time seemed to have passed. Most shadow monsters were tamed in the territory they were now in, and with Merdilen making himself some kind of god, no one would dare attack them now. She should have been glad that Merdilen had that much power and influence now, as it would mean they’d be way safer from now on. But she wasn’t.

Merdilen had ordered the Fergahnian army killed. And, even though a few hundred shadow monsters probably wouldn’t be able to completely annihilate the thousands of Fergahnian soldiers, most of them would die. Merdilen... was now guilty of

mass murder. But he didn't seem to worry about that. He seemed to genuinely feel that was the only way.

They asked for it, he had said earlier when she had once more confronted him about it. *It's their fault this is happening*. And, in a way, he was right. Merdilen hadn't been born this way. He had been born an excellent person. But, due to all the hate the world was throwing at him, he was slowly becoming eviler and eviler. Maybe... maybe if they had at the beginning shown him support instead of hate, things would have been different. The world hadn't worked that way. Merdilen was different. And humans hate what is different.

Due to their own prejudices and attitudes, they were now creating what they had most feared. They were creating the very thing they had sworn to destroy. They had created a monster. And there was no way back now, not anymore. Deep down, Kayline knew it. Neither of the two factions would back down. They would fight until one of the two was destroyed. And the world would be the one to be destroyed in the process.

Kayline was the only one close enough to Merdilen as to do something about it. But, what? She now knew it. Power was corrupting him, was making him ignore the consequences and just do what he felt he had to do. She now knew something, something she had been trying to ignore for the past few days.

Merdilen couldn't be allowed to reach Morkilen Farenthar's fortress.

Kayline had to make him see reason again, make him give up the ways he was following. She knew there was still hope for him. She knew he was just committing mistakes. But, Alvoren's death was just too big a motivation for him. She had no idea whether he'd listen to her or not. She... doubted it, now. And if he didn't listen... then she'd have to make a decision.

The decision that would change the world.

The next day, Kayline woke up early and prepared breakfast while Merdilen slept. The better the mood he was in when they spoke, the bigger the chances were that he'd actually listen. Soon after she had made breakfast, he woke up. They ate in relative silence, until Kayline finally spoke in a careful tone.

"Merdilen..." she started. "I gotta tell you something... but you have to listen to me. Can you do that?"

"Huh?" he asked, confused. "Sure. What is it?"

"Look... Maybe... it is not such a good idea to get to Morkilen Farenthar's fortress after all."

"Again with that?!" Merdilen exclaimed, getting angrily to his feet. "I told you, I *am* getting to that fortress! No matter what you, or anyone else, say!"

"Do you know why I agreed to ally with you?" she muttered, ignoring his comment.

"Because you wanted me to heal your mother," Merdilen replied.

"That's just a part of it," she said. "It was... because you seemed to be a good person. Someone that, no matter how wrong things went, would remain being a good person and doing good things. You were a hero. I want you to keep being one."

Merdilen's expression softened for a moment, looking at her, but then his eyes hardened once again. "That person changed. You wouldn't get it. I don't expect you to get it."

That felt to Kayline like a slap to the face. She looked at him with sad eyes. Had she really changed that much since Alvoren's death? There had been a time when Merdilen, Alvoren, and herself had almost gladly crossed the world, traveling south, telling each other about their problems and their insecurities. They had been the best friends Kayline had ever had. But Alvoren was now dead, and Merdilen didn't look to her as a friend anymore. She felt like a stranger to him. No, worse than that—an enemy.

"You really *have* changed," she whispered.

Merdilen answered nothing, instead getting up and leaving her, and the half-eaten breakfast, behind. Kayline quickly followed, a part of herself breaking inside her.

Merdilen and Kayline kept walking south for the better part of two days, until they exited the shadow culture's territory completely. They didn't know whether the shadow army's attack against the Fergahnians had been effective or not, but being honest, Kayline didn't really want to know. The landscape was as inhospitable as ever, but still, it provided a bit of relief to know that they had left that cursed culture behind.

After a few more hours of walking, they saw a castle in the distance. To the right, about half an hour away, was a small normal-looking village. They headed to the village; it would be good to get some fresher food and water again. As they approached it, they could also see better the castle. It was massive, and it looked terribly out of place, between all the spiked rocks, odd and unnatural mountains, and deep craters. But the strangest thing about the castle was that it seemed to be carved out of some mountain. It seemed to be normal stone jutting upward in the form of a castle; it didn't look man-made at all. Still, they were too far away to notice any details, so they kept moving forward, towards the village.

They arrived at it a short time later. It seemed pretty normal, with its houses of normal size, unlike the ones in the shadow culture's territory. There were crops and plantations all around it, but strangely, there was no one to tend to them. There were no villagers in sight. Merdilen and Kayline approached the curious village, and when they got a bit closer, a man came out from one of the houses, heading towards them. He was young, but seemed nervous. He was constantly looking around with nervousness, as if he was expecting some shadow monster to spring out of nowhere and attack him.

“Hello, people,” he greeted them when they met. “How can I help you?”

“Hello,” Kayline replied. “We were just wondering if we could get something to eat and to replenish our supplies.”

“Oh. Sure come on in,” the man said, gesturing towards one of the houses. “We’ve been in a bit of a... tight spot, lately, but I guess I can afford to give a bit of food to some wandering adventurers.”

“Tight spot?” Merdilen asked. “What do you mean?”

“Let’s hurry inside,” the man said. “We can talk there. Outside is not safe.”

He headed in a hurry towards the house, and the three of them entered. The house, although small, was quite cozy, and it had a fire burning in a corner, warding off the increasing cold autumn was bringing. Merdilen and Kayline sat down in chairs around a table, while the man headed to a small kitchen next to it and started to prepare some potatoes for them to eat.

“So, are you in some kind of trouble?” Merdilen asked.

“Oh, totally,” the man replied. “So, you see, that castle over there was owned by a solid matter Manipulator, who-”

“A solid matter Manipulator?!” Merdilen interrupted. “What happened to him?”

“Let me finish. So, this Manipulator was in charge of a group of bandits, who all lived in the castle. We had an agreement with them: we gave them constant food, and in exchange, they would neither attack nor raid us. It wasn’t perfect, but it was stable and peaceful. But, a few days ago, an army came. They seemed to be looking for someone. They attacked the bandits, killing the solid matter Manipulator.”

So what’s where they were, Merdilen thought. It makes sense. While we turned sharply west to attack the liquid matter Manipulator, the Fergahnian army kept going south and arrived here before us.

“That’s great,” Kayline mentioned. “But... you still seemed afraid. What happened?”

“You see, the agreement we had was mainly with the Manipulator. With him gone, there’s nothing stopping the bandits from stealing whatever they want from us. They already raided us once. They’ll probably do so again.”

“Oh,” Merdilen muttered. “That’s problematic.”

“We can stop them,” Kayline said.

Merdilen shot her a look of disapproval, but then Kayline added, “You wanted to be a hero, right, Merdilen? This is the time to prove it.”

“...I guess you’re right,” he muttered.

“You’d really do that for us?!” the man said, shocked.

“Of course,” Kayline said. “We’ll beat them up so hard they’ll never want to come near this village again. But we won’t kill them; we don’t do that.” She glared at Merdilen with that final sentence.

“Thank you so much!” the man exclaimed. “I’m guessing they’ll raid again today; they didn’t take that much the other day. If you wait, you should be able to catch them.”

“I have a better idea,” Merdilen said. “We go to them. That way, we’ll make sure the village doesn’t get hurt during the battle.”

“I’ll go with you,” the man said with determination. “And I’ll take some of my men, too. It’s the least I can do.”

“Great,” Merdilen said. “Let’s go.”

Merdilen, Kayline, and fifteen villagers armed with farmer tools headed towards the castle, ready to fight the remaining group of bandits. In reality, Merdilen doubted that they’d really need the villagers, but a little extra help wouldn’t hurt. The castle was an immense structure, with several towers, spires, and wings. It was all made from the ground; now they understood that it had been created by the solid matter Manipulator. Soon enough, they saw the bandits. It was a group of about thirty bandits, all armed. The

villagers would never have had a chance on their own. But now that Merdilen and Kayline were with them, it was the *bandits* who didn't have a chance.

As soon as they got close to them, Merdilen and Kayline charged, taking them by surprise. The villagers followed immediately after, scared but determined. Merdilen jumped in the midst of the bandits, Transmutating the ground into sharp metal spikes that pierced the bandits from underneath, wounding them and throwing them to the ground. He then Transmuted his Transmutation glove back into the sword, slashing at bandits he imprisoned with his Transmutation. Meanwhile, Kayline hacked and slashed through the ranks of the remaining bandits, knocking them out one by one.

After a short while, all of them were down. The villagers did little more than support Merdilen and Kayline during the battle, but Kayline appreciated their help anyway. Still, there was something that gave the victory a bitter taste.

The vast majority of the bandits Merdilen had attacked were now dead.

"I-I didn't mean to," Merdilen said as he noticed Kayline looking with disgust at the corpses. "I got carried away."

Whether he meant what he said or not, Kayline did not know.

The villagers were not cheering. They were staring instead at Merdilen, their expressions troubled.

"Y-you're a Transmutator," one of them muttered. Not grateful. Horrified.

Uh oh, Kayline thought.

"You're a monster!" another man exclaimed. "Go away!"

"Yeah!" a third man said. "Leave us alone!"

Kayline looked at the man in whose house they had eaten. He was staring at Merdilen with a look of betrayal in his eyes. As if Merdilen had betrayed them just for being who he was. She then

looked at Merdilen. He was looking silently at them, angry, his fists clenched.

“You’re going to respect me,” Merdilen finally said. “You’re going to treat me like a hero, because that’s what I am! I will have no more of this monster talk. You hear me?!”

The villagers seemed taken aback. One of them tried to protest, but Merdilen Transmuted, quick as lightning, raising a spear from the ground and leaving it just inches away from the man’s neck.

“You hear me?” he repeated coldly.

“Y-yes, sir!” the man exclaimed, and the rest repeated it.

Merdilen Transmuted the spear back into the ground, seemingly satisfied.

“Okay. You’re going to give me and Kayline enough rations for a week, and we’re going to get going. Any objections?”

No one objected. Kayline looked at him, worried. Even she was getting a little afraid of him now. He was acting like a dictator. He could *not* be allowed to become omnipotent.

They returned to the village shortly after, and a fifteen-year-old boy approached Merdilen soon after.

“Y-you’re the Transmutator, sir?” he asked innocently.

“I am,” Merdilen replied with a hard look on his face.

The boy looked at Merdilen for a few seconds, then whipped out a dagger from his belt, trying to stab him.

Merdilen was faster. He grabbed the boy’s arm in mid-air, and after turning his Transmutation glove into a massive steel gauntlet, broke the boy’s arm, making him scream.

“What have you done?!” Kayline exclaimed as many of the villagers rushed to help the boy.

“I demand *respect*,” Merdilen declared.

Later that day, long after leaving the village, while having dinner, Kayline started to think once more about what to do.

She could *not* allow Merdilen to reach the fortress. She knew that, if she stopped him from doing so, many people, including her family, would suffer, but if she did allow him, many more would die. And she couldn't allow that. But still, it was a tough choice. But, no matter what she *wanted* to do, she had to do what was correct, for the greater good, and for the world. Even though it might hurt. A lot.

Merdilen could not be allowed to reach Morkilen Farenthar's fortress. And he wouldn't be convinced to give up. Kayline understood that. But maybe, with a little more time... All she needed was time. And she seemed to have a plan. This was the moment. It was now or never. She would knock Merdilen unconscious and run away with him, far, far away from the fortress, and there, with no risk of him getting to it, she'd talk some sense into Merdilen.

Taking a deep breath, she stood up.

"Hey, Merdilen, I have something I have to tell you," she started.

"What is it?" he asked, confused, getting up too.

Then, she suddenly hugged him, throwing her arms around his neck. She had to get him to lower his guard. But, deep inside... it felt good. They had truly been good friends. And now... after she did what she had to do, Merdilen would feel like she had betrayed him. She had to do it, for the good of all mankind, but still... She would lose her only friend. By doing so, she would lose her only friend, her family, and the prospect of a perfect life.

Damn it! she thought. *I can't give up now!* It hurt. She felt like she wanted to cry. She started to tremble. She knew she would save a big part of the world, but... she might end up destroying her own life in the process.

"What is it?" Merdilen asked, worried, awkwardly returning the embrace with his only arm.

"I-I'm sorry..." she muttered. "You know, I really care about you, and I really consider you my friend, but still..."

sometimes there are things one just *has* to do. This is one of them.”

“Huh?” Merdilen asked.

“I care a lot about you, and my family, and everything, but...” Saying the words hurt. “The greater good, and the world, comes first.”

With that, she prepared to punch him, fueling her right fist with Manipulation.

In that very moment, she heard a roar behind them. The distraction had been *too* good. Merdilen had lowered his guard so much they hadn’t heard nor felt the wild shadow monster approaching them.

“Don’t worry,” Merdilen said. “I’ll take care of this.”

With that, he slowly approached the shadow monster, Transmutating his sword into his hand.

This is my chance! the logical part of Kayline thought. But she couldn’t do it. Merdilen was fighting for *her*. He was doing it to protect *her*. Even though he might be evil against his enemies, he really did care about her.

And she was going to betray him.

What am I thinking?! I can’t do this to him, the emotional part of Kayline thought.

She just stood there while Merdilen fought the shadow monster, thinking about what to do. A few more seconds, and her opportunity would be lost. She had to make the decision, and *now*.

She remembered the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team. Even though they were hunting down Merdilen, they had all had their hopes, dreams, ideals, and bonds. They were humans, just like they were. And thousands of others would also be human too in the Fergahnian army. She couldn’t let them all die. Guided by instincts more than by logic, she charged Merdilen, her fist full of Manipulation energy.

I’m sorry, Merdilen, she thought, a tear slipping down her cheek.

But she hadn't thought about Merdilen's lightning-fast reflexes. All that Merdilen sensed was a sudden powerful presence approaching rapidly from behind.

And he confused it for a shadow monster.

Reflexively, he slashed backwards with his sword to defend himself from the supposed second shadow monster. And Kayline was just with her bare fist. She was wielding no sword. She couldn't block.

The backward slash caught her directly in the neck, and cut through skin, flesh, and bone. Her head fell from her shoulders, rolling on the floor.

Kayline Sherdaine fell to the ground, dead, accidentally killed by her best friend.

Master of Matter

April 21st

Year 2120

The Gap

Southern Wastes, Gartaena

Kayline is dead. Merdilen thought about it once more, trying to assimilate the situation. He swept off more tears from his face. It was hard to think she was gone. He had just barely been able to get over Alvoren's death, and now this...

Kayline had been one of his only friends, and they had grown quite close. They had truly confided in each other, and along with Alvoren, Merdilen had never been truly alone. To now think she was gone... it was as if fate itself was laughing at him.

But what bothered Merdilen the most wasn't the fact that she was gone. It was the fact that he himself had killed her. He could still vividly see the moment in which he had cut off her head. He had been so certain it had been another shadow monster... And so, in a rush to protect her, he had ended up doing the very opposite. He had killed her.

Damn it! he thought, punching the ground. After that, everything seemed blurry. He had somehow killed the shadow monster, then wandered off into the night. Now, the next morning, the realization hit him hard. Everyone that had ever been close to him was dead.

Merdilen was alone. And it was his fault.

Damn it, he thought once more, and started to silently weep again, clenching his teeth. What hurt the most was what he had seen Kayline doing in those last moments. She had been running towards him, her fist ready to strike.

Kayline had tried to kill him.

Why would you do that, Kayline? Why?! Because he was a menace? Everything he did was for their own good. Couldn't she see that? Did... did she even care about him at all? In fact, had she *ever* cared about him? Or had she always only seen him as a tool, to be used and then discarded when she felt like it? The truth was, he'd never know. He'd never know.

But she had really seemed to care about him at those last moments. She had hugged him.

I care a lot about you, and my family, and everything, but..., she had said, the greater good, and the world, comes first. She had seemed truly sincere at that moment. Then, why? Why?! Merdilen had done so much for her...

It doesn't make sense! he thought in frustration. *It doesn't make sense! Why? Why?!*

It just didn't seem like her. She wasn't the type to do what she did. Suddenly, a thought occurred to Merdilen.

The world. It wasn't like her, because it wasn't her idea. It was the world's. This world is wicked. It has hated me all along, and has made everyone hate me as well.

If it hadn't been for the world's corrupt brainwashing, Merdilen thought, Kayline wouldn't have tried to kill him. She wouldn't have hated him. She would have loved him.

"Damn you all!" he shouted at the top of his lungs to no one in particular. Another tear spilled down his cheek.

Because of the world, he was alone. Because of the world, he was hated. Because of the world, he was broken. It hadn't been just the bandits, or the cultists, or the soldiers. It had been society itself. The world had killed Alvoren. The world had killed Kayline.

The world had tried to kill him. But it hadn't succeeded. It would *never* succeed.

He stared silently at Kayline's tomb, erected a short distance from where he was, her twin swords on top of it.

It's okay, Kayline, he thought, trying to console himself. *I know it wasn't your fault. I forgive you.*

Now, his determination was bigger than ever. He *would* get to Morkilen Farenthar's fortress, whatever it took. For them. And then... he didn't know how, but he would impart justice. He would make things right. Because he had determination. And a Transmutator, with determination, could do anything.

Merdilen saw it. A day after he left Kayline's tomb, he finally saw it, towering at a distance. The thing he had been walking towards for the entirety of the past month.

Morkilen Farenthar's fortress.

It rose as a towering mountain of black obsidian, like an ancient temple, a memorial of times long gone. It was like some massive obsidian pyramid-like block cut in half, with all its upper half missing, leaving a massive black area on top of it. Tall black spires jutted upwards, one in each corner, with another one rising high in the middle. And, inside it, the army stood. The Fergahnian army stood guarding the fortress, with guards posted at all entrances, in the balconies, and probably in every hallway as well.

A good five hundred of the soldiers had survived the shadow monster attack. It was only a small fraction of the original army, but more than Merdilen had thought would survive. And leading the army would be the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team itself. The biggest enemy. The final challenge.

But he knew he couldn't face the whole army on his own. Not yet, at least. And he wasn't fond of sneaking either. That left him with only one choice. It was a gamble, but one that would probably pay off. Probably. He'd rush the front door, running past all the guards, then get to the closed wall Kayline's father had

spoken about. He'd pass through it with his Transmutation, sealing it off behind him. And then, he'd get all of Morkilen Farenthar's knowledge and power. Next time he faced the Fergahnian army, he'd be nearly omnipotent. He grinned to himself in satisfaction.

He first approached in a crouch, trying to scout a little the fortress before rushing in. Hiding behind a rock, he took a peek through the front entrance. Its double doors were wide open, revealing a long black passageway on the inside, with another passageway leaving the room on either side. It was lined with thick pillars, and in the end, there was a massive entrance, decorated with intricate carvings. Except that there was no door. It had the carvings of an entrance, but a big obsidian wall obstructed it.

That's it! Merdilen thought. That must be the office of Morkilen Farenthar, where he kept all his knowledge. And in front of it, lining the hallway, were ten guards, five on each side. Rushing past them would be easy. Sure, the guards would call the alarm, but once they did, it would be too late. Once he got his power... it would be too late.

Taking a deep breath, he stood up, and ran. He ran towards the entrance, and as he did, he heard a guard shout.

"There he is! The Transmutator! Call all troops!"

Two of the guards raised bows, aiming them towards him. Merdilen focused, visualizing the arrows as they left the bows, shot towards him. Then, he Transmuted once more at range. The arrows became specks of sand, falling harmlessly to the ground.

Another two guards stood in his way with swords, trying to cut him off. But Merdilen didn't have to fight yet. He just had to run. He Transmuted a small set of stairs going up as he ran, jumping from the stairs over the heads of the astonished guards. He hit the ground with his feet and kept running. Two more guards tried to cut him off, but before they did, he Transmuted at range once again, turning their armor into hard rock, making

them lose their balance. He ran past them, grinning. He was getting good at this.

He was about to get to the entrance-wall, when suddenly, a pillar erupted out of the ground in front of him, blocking his way. He slammed face-first into it, and turned around, dazed. At the other side of the room, facing him, was Sir Grendar Bartel himself, raising his left arm and grabbing his Blademasher with his right. The commander of the Fergahnian army.

Merdilen suddenly realized. The solid matter Manipulation serum had been stolen by the army from the killed Manipulator. And who had injected it into himself... was no other than the leader of that army. Sir Grendar Bartel. *He* had become the solid matter Manipulator.

“It’s been a while, Transmutator,” Sir Grendar said in a monotonous tone.

“Not *nearly* long enough,” Merdilen retorted, bracing himself for battle.

He Transmuted the pillar into small stones, and threw them at Sir Grendar as projectiles. As he did, he Transmuted the stones in midair, turning them into sharp and thick spikes that flew against the knight. Sir Grendar rushed Merdilen, heading head-first into the rain of metallic spikes. Right before he impaled himself with them, Sir Grendar Manipulated them, throwing them back at Merdilen.

Merdilen grunted, Transmutating his jacket into steel armor, brushing off the metallic missiles. Sir Grendar used his Manipulation to push himself up from the ground, jumping high and raising his Blademasher above his head with a roar. He slashed downwards, at Merdilen.

Merdilen rolled out of the way, but Sir Grendar Manipulated the Blademasher to the side, towards Merdilen. Merdilen in turn Transmuted the greatsword, turning it into sand before quickstepping away. He then turned Sir Grendar’s

plate armor into sand too, leaving the knight in just his normal clothing, and grinned.

But Sir Grendar, without missing a beat, raised the ground into several individual stone projectiles, hurling them at Merdilen.

He must have practiced nonstop since he became a Manipulator, Merdilen thought with amusement as he Transmuted the projectiles into sand.

Sir Grendar hurled projectile after projectile at him, Merdilen Transmutating them all into sand. It'd become a battle of endurance. No, more than that, a battle of wills. And, even though Merdilen was certain he was more powerful in terms of raw strength than his opponent, he wasn't going to take any chances. He dashed for the farther wall.

Before long, he reached the wall, and without stopping, he ran through it, Transmutating it into sand as he did and then back into obsidian once he was on the other side. He heard the muffled shouts of the guards behind him. He Transmuted several more layers of obsidian in front of it, until almost half the room was covered. Even with a Manipulator, there was no way they'd be getting through that obsidian wall anytime soon. He took a look at the room in front of him.

As the rest of the fortress, it was all black. It had several pillars supporting its roof, and on the middle, a platform that rose several steps. On it, there was a lectern. On the lectern, a book, and a serum. Merdilen's heartbeat quickened. Slowly, carefully, he walked towards the platform, then up its steps, one by one. He reached the lectern. The book was titled 'Transmutation.' Next to it there was a serum.

"Yes, yes, yes, yes, YES!" he exclaimed, grinning. He had finally done it. All the power of Morkilen Farenthar, the greatest Transmutator that ever lived, was at his fingertips.

He opened the book and started to read.

The first few chapters were about the basics of Transmutation; pretty much everything that he already knew.

After that... it started to get interesting. The techniques and uses it showed started to get more and more advanced, being on a whole different league. A certain specific portion caught his attention. It was labeled 'Imperium.' It read,

Transmutation is not absolute. It never has been. As it has one flaw: it can't Transmute neither liquid nor gaseous matter. But I have devised a way to get past that weakness. It is called Imperium. A Transmutator's ultimate form. Imperium creates a sort of cognitive field thirty feet around the Transmutator, allowing him to sense with superhuman cognition everything in it. This also empowers enormously the Transmutation itself, allowing the user to Transmute much farther, much bigger, and much more than usual. But the biggest feat this Imperium gives, is the ability to also Transmute all solid, liquid, and gaseous matter. The ultimate creator. And the most dreaded destroyer. With this, I will finally be able to become the god of the new world I'm creating. And then, the world, and myself, will finally have peace.

What the book said was true. Overcoming that one weakness, a Transmutator was completely unstoppable. Merdilen grinned once more, and kept reading.

But I fear that what I am doing will not be enough. I fear that Arthenmon will somehow devise a plan to kill me. So, I have thought of a way for my power to never die, for my legacy to endure. If you are reading this, then it means I am dead. But my power will never die. For I have discovered a way, a backup plan, for it to endure. Once I'm about to die, I will channel the entirety of my power into the serum that comes along with this book. Use it wisely. It

is a part of myself. With it comes my power, but also my dreams, my ideals, and my determination.

Continue my legacy. Follow my dream. Create a new world with an absolute, omnipotent ruler, a world with no wars or conflict, a world where the ruler rules and the subjects are ruled. A world where everyone has peace. That is my dream. I trust in you, Transmutator.

Merdilen picked up the serum, feeling it in his fingers. It had a purple liquid floating inside it. *So this is where Morkilen Farenthar stored his power when he died.*

He knew that, once he injected it onto himself, he would be almost omnipotent. But, for some reason, he hesitated. There was a part that bothered him. 'With it comes my power, but also my dreams, my ideals, and my determination,' the book read. Did that mean Merdilen would become like Morkilen?

Not if I'm able to control it, he thought. He remembered Alvoren's dream. A world with no shadow monsters. He remembered Kayline's dream. A world with no sicknesses and hunger. He remembered his own dream. Becoming a hero. Merdilen would fulfill their dreams.

With that determination in mind, he injected the serum with his right hand into his left shoulder. He screamed.

Suddenly, his whole body became filled with insurmountable amounts of power. The secrets to Imperium. The secrets to Transmutating life. The secrets to transforming human beings into shadow monsters.

Then... A lifetime of memories passed before him in quick succession. It started slowly.

Two boys playing in a park. Kateko Arthenmon and Morkilen Farenthar. Those same two boys going to school. Having a normal life. The boys growing up, having dreams. Morkilen, with dreams of a world with an absolute ruler, with no war, pain, or suffering, but no freedom either. Kateko, with dreams of a

completely free world, where everyone could be what they wanted to be, but with people with conflicting opinions. Both going to university. It started to get quicker. Studying science. One of them making a discovery. A discovery that would change the world. Transmutation. Both of them talking about it, then arguing, then fighting.

The memories passed by quicker, quicker, quicker. Morkilen stealing the Transmutation serum. Kateko confronting him about it. An explosion caused by instability of the serum. The first innocent death. Both blaming each other for it. Both becoming Transmutators. War. Best friends fighting each other. Death, death, death. Suffering, suffering, suffering. Destruction, destruction, destruction. A massive explosion. Kateko crying. Morkilen dying.

The succession of memories then ended. Merdilen lay down on the obsidian floor, gasping. He felt... different. And it wasn't just the extra power. All the destruction he had seen in those memories... it changed him. It intensified his feelings of anger, vengeance, and hate, making him someone that he had always been deep inside but had never truly demonstrated. He felt... like he wanted to fulfill Morkilen's dream. But, the truth was, it wasn't just Morkilen's dream.

Part of it had been his own dream too. Of being respected, of being important, of being loved. The two dreams merged, becoming one. And Merdilen stood up. He now knew what he had to do. He now understood his duty.

He had to conquer the world.

The soldiers stared at the massive obsidian wall, trembling. Behind it was the Transmutator. Behind it was death. They waited, waited, waited. And, after a few hours, it happened. The wall suddenly turned into fog. And, from within the fog, emerged an obscured figure that slowly walked forward, step by step. It had its fists clenched and was dressed all in black. The Transmutator.

And, in front of the thirty soldiers, the unexplainable happened. The Transmutator's severed left arm started to grow again, as if Transmuted right from the air, and it turned into a full-fledged limb, as if it had never been cut. The Transmutator flexed the fingers of his left arm, feeling it, smiling.

The soldiers charged, yelling. Thirty grown men, all in full iron armor, with swords and shields.

They didn't last a minute.

Swords materialized in the air out of nowhere, falling towards them. The whole room became black swords in the air, which fell downwards, in the heads of the screaming soldiers. They all died instantly. The Transmutator slowly walked out of the fog, heading towards the outside of the fortress.

It feels good, Merdilen thought. He now had the power of both Morkilen Farenthar *and* himself. He was twice as powerful as any Transmutator before him had ever been. And he meant to enjoy every last bit of it. He was a Master of Matter.

He walked among the corpses of the soldiers, exiting the fortress. Outside, waiting, was the rest of the army of the kingdom of Fergahn. They had probably waited outside as being in the open would give them a better fighting chance, Merdilen thought. But it didn't matter. It didn't matter where they were. They were already dead.

As soon as he stepped outside, about twenty archers pointed their bows at him. In front of the archers stood Sir Grendar, Jarleren, and Salvatore. The Anti-Transmutation Strike Team.

"This is over," Sir Grendar said in a solemn tone.

"Surrender now, and we will grant you a swift and painless execution. Fight, and you won't enjoy such privileges."

"You're right. This is over," Merdilen said. "But not for me."

The archers fired. The old Merdilen would never have been able to stop all those arrows, not even with Transmutation at range. But he wasn't the old Merdilen anymore. He muttered a single word.

“Imperium.”

With that, he felt his whole body fill with power, and his cognition augmented massively. Suddenly, he felt everything. He felt small insects in the ground, he felt the presences of all the soldiers near him, and he felt the arrows flying towards him, all irradiating individual presences. He raised a hand towards the arrows, and all twenty of them turned into air itself.

Merdilen Transmuted the ground into a tall platform that rose high above the ground, high above all the lines of soldiers. When he was far above that he could easily see the whole army under him, he concentrated, and prepared to Transmute.

There had been something else Morkilen had written about Imperium, a sort of side effect. When one Transmuted at too much range, extended his consciousness too far, there was a risk of losing one's consciousness to the world, of one's life leaving the body with the power. No one knew what happened then. But, when the consciousness went too far to Transmute, sometimes, there was no coming back. Still, that meant that, if one was able to keep control of one's self, the range of Imperium could be extended indefinitely. Infinitely, even. But he wouldn't go that far. Not yet, at least.

He extended the range of his Imperium to some sixty feet, struggling to keep hold of his body, and Transmuted the air into massive fiery rocks, rocks bigger than any normal man, surrounded in fire. Meteors. And he let them fall towards the army as a massive meteor swarm. The meteors fell, absolutely destroying the battlefield, making soldiers scream as they were smashed down by the massive burning rocks. He kept Transmutating, more and more, until he could no longer see the army under him. He kept going, wrecking, smashing, destroying.

He felt a sharp spike of pain in his head as he felt the deaths, but ignored it.

After several rounds of meteors, he stopped. He looked downwards, and his eyes widened when he saw the result. Massive craters now littered the battlefield, giant holes going down into the earth. The army was no longer visible. But, more astonishing than the destruction itself, was a group of three people standing in front of the remains.

The Anti-Transmutation Strike Team.

Last round.

“This should be some fun,” Merdilen muttered to himself, grinning.

He lowered the platform, going down towards the knight, the assassin, and the archer.

“You killed Kayline,” Sir Grendar said. “You murdered your own ally.”

Merdilen’s smile vanished.

“*I* killed her? *I* did?!” he exclaimed, hot with rage. “It was *you* people who brainwashed her, *you* who made her betray me, *you* who sent her to die! And now... it is *you* who will pay!”

Merdilen prepared to fight. He was no weakling anymore. He was not the innocent kid who would let himself get destroyed anymore without fighting back. He knew there were probably tens of ways he could annihilate them all on the spot, but he gave them a chance. He would enjoy this. He would make them suffer.

Simultaneously, Salvatore shot three arrows towards him, Jarleren flanked him, and Sir Grendar rushed him. First, Merdilen turned all three arrows into thin air, then he Transmuted the air next to Jarleren into a small roofless rock box, trapping him inside, then Transmuted a wall in front of himself, blocking Sir Grendar’s Manipulated rock attacks. Sir Grendar with a sweep of his hand Manipulated the wall, throwing it to the side, and attacked again.

Merdilen Transmuted Sir Grendar's glove into burning-hot lava, and Sir Grendar screamed, letting go of it, his hand partially consumed. The projectiles fell to the ground, having been released. Sir Grendar grabbed his arm, stumbling several steps backward. At that moment, Jarleren jumped out of his roofless rock box, stabbing at Merdilen. Merdilen then Transmuted several feet of the ground into air, and Jarleren fell, not being able to complete his attack. Salvatore fired six more arrows in blurringly fast succession, but Merdilen simply turned them into sand.

Sir Grendar had his whole hand burning, but still, he rushed towards Merdilen, Manipulating sharp rocks towards him in a futile attempt to reach him.

"No matter what you do..." he groaned while Manipulating, "the world... will always... have heroes."

"You're right," Merdilen replied nonchalantly. "And that hero... is me."

With that, he Transmuted the air into a blade right in front of Sir Grendar's shoulder, and he ran right into it. His arm was severed completely. Just as Merdilen's arm had been severed by Sir Grendar.

"How does it feel, Grendar?" Merdilen asked in a mocking tone as Sir Grendar screamed.

Jarleren jumped out of his hole by jumping from wall to wall and threw a pair of daggers towards Merdilen. Merdilen mercilessly turned the ground under Jarleren into a lava pit. He fell right into it.

Jarleren slowly burned to death.

"Jarleren!" Salvatore exclaimed, shooting several more arrows towards Merdilen in determined but futile attempts. Merdilen then Transmuted a massive chunk of dirt right in the place where Salvatore was, making him drown in it.

Salvatore Arneret slowly drowned to death.

“Damn you!” Sir Grendar exclaimed towards Merdilen, slowly getting to his feet once more. “You are a monster. A monster! And always have been. But monsters... monsters never will-”

Merdilen cut him off, stabbing his longsword towards Sir Grendar’s chest. But Sir Grendar Manipulated a wall from the ground in front of him, blocking the strike. Merdilen Transmuted blade after blade towards the knight, with Sir Grendar blocking attack after attack. He was in a fully defensive position now. He couldn’t even *wish* to attack anymore. A silent testimony to the enormous power gap now between Merdilen and Sir Grendar.

Enough, Merdilen finally thought, and Transmuted out of the air at both sides of Sir Grendar a massive greatsword that pierced through him, impaling him.

Sir Grendar Bartel let a final roar of pain, and bled to death.

Merdilen looked in horror at the corpses, in a sudden moment of lucidity. *Did I... really... do this?* he thought.

Yes. They deserved it, he forced himself to think. *They deserved it.*

Merdilen started to rise once more in a Transmuted crystal platform, getting high in the air. Then he started to walk forward in the air, Transmutating the air below his feet into a bridge as he walked. As he walked towards civilization.

Merdilen arrived at the shadow culture’s territory, with its tall houses, ruined buildings, tattooed people, and shadow monsters.

This culture is wicked, he thought with disgust. *It sacrifices people to those monsters. It deserves to die. And Alvoren deserves to be avenged.*

He then activated Imperium once more, raining blazing meteors unto the unsuspecting people and shadow monsters. He

felt the pain in his head as thousands of people died, but ignored it.

It is for the good of the world, he forced himself to think. I am a hero.

During the next day, he traversed the entirety of the shadow culture's territory, erasing it entirely from the map.

Merdilen later arrived at the Crimson Ruby bandits' mountain lair, where about a hundred of the world's most vile thieves, murderers, and robbers lived.

This organization is evil, he thought, remembering his imprisonment and the pain it had put Kayline through. It, too, deserves to die.

He again activated Imperium, throwing rounds upon rounds of meteors upon the mountain, until it was completely destroyed. He easily ignored the pain in his head the deaths caused. He was getting used to it. He kept walking.

Merdilen kept moving forward, until he left the Southern Wastes and entered the kingdom of Fergahn. He ignored the small villages and cities he passed. He had only one objective as of yet: the city of Cornaler, capital of the kingdom of Fergahn. There, he would threaten the rulers, and make himself king. Somehow, deep inside, he knew that that wasn't what he wanted, but somehow, he felt the urge to do it.

During his journey towards Cornaler, pangs of nostalgia hurt him. He recognized several of the places in which Alvoren, Kayline, and himself had set up camps, where Kayline had drawn, Alvoren had talked about his adventures, and Merdilen had read. A sudden burst of sadness welled up within him, but with it came determination. He'd make their journey worth it.

Merdilen kept walking towards Cornaler in his crystal bridge, and several weeks after he left Morkilen Farenthar's

fortress, he arrived. He had absolutely no problems, as he was walking high above ground level in his bridge, so no bandits or shadow monsters could attack him.

The big city of Cornaler loomed before him, with its big houses, noble keeps, and imponent castles.

He heard shouts below him, in the city wall. A guard had seen and recognized him. Let them come, he thought. There would be about ten thousand guards in the city, all of them coming to fight him. He liked those odds.

The guards started to fire arrows at him, arrows that barely reached him, and that he Transmuted into air as soon as they entered the range of his Imperium. He counterattacked, acting completely on instinct, not holding back, Transmutating and throwing meteors, swords, and rocks at the guards. Soon enough, a whole portion of the city wall collapsed.

As a toy structure would collapse with the hit of a kid. Merdilen started to chuckle.

So easy! he thought.

But then, he saw something that caught his attention in the city. A small red-haired boy and his mother, running away. The mother seemed to have some serious illness, as it was walking with difficulty and with his son's help.

Huh? The mother seemed familiar somehow. Then he realized. He gasped.

Kayline's family! She had talked a lot about them, before she... died.

Kayline. Kayline...

Thinking of her, a bit of lucidity returned to Merdilen. He looked around, shocked, as if he had just escaped some kind of trance.

What... am I doing?

Somewhy, he remembered what he had first thought when he met Kayline. *I won't kill*, he had thought. *I will be a hero, not a monster.* That young and innocent version of him hadn't lived long

enough to find out how wrong he had been. A single tear slipped down his cheek. Somewhere along his journey, he had forgotten what he wanted to do. He hadn't originally wanted to gain fame and respect. He had just wanted to be a hero.

You are a hero! he tried to convince himself. But, seeing the horror in Kayline's family's faces, he realized that wasn't the truth. He had become the very thing he had sworn to destroy. He looked horrified at his own hands. Hands almost as if they were covered in blood. Somewhere along the road, he had become a monster. He forced his evil personality out of himself, thinking back to how he once thought.

Merdilen realized something. True, maybe he wouldn't survive if he stopped killing. But, was it really worth it living as a murderer? As a monster? Was he even worthy of surviving after all? After all, if he fought evil with evil, evil would prevail no matter what. The world would keep being evil, even more so if he brought more evil into it. He just had to sparkle it with what little good he had left.

He finally acknowledged something that had been on the back of his mind since he had first killed those three shadow monsters and his riders. He wasn't a hero anymore. He was a monster. A monster. A monster. He started to cry.

Maybe... Kayline had been right. No, it wasn't a *maybe*. Kayline *had* in fact been right. He had become the very thing he had tried to prove he wasn't. His life didn't seem like some grand adventure anymore. It now seemed like a tragedy. From hero, he had become a monster. And there was nothing he could do about it.

Or... was there?

Merdilen looked around, at all the destruction and chaos. Not only the ones he had created, but the world itself, with its unnatural craters, peaks, and mountains. The chaos created by the Transmutators.

Merdilen gasped, coming to a realization. During his whole journey, he had always wondered one thing. Why had Kateko Arthenmon, his ancestor, destroyed all things concerning the Transmutation in his fortress? He understood now. Kateko Arthenmon had discovered the truth.

The Transmutators were monsters.

Because power corrupts people. It causes wars, destruction, and hate. That's why his family had stayed in exile, too.

Merdilen had been a monster, but... maybe there was something he could do about it. Something to mend all that the Transmutators of old destroyed. He remembered a certain passage from the book he had found in the fortress. If one was able to keep control of one's self, the range of Imperium could be extended indefinitely. Infinitely, even. That meant... there was still hope for the world. He didn't know if he would survive his attempt, but he realized with surprise that he didn't truly care anymore.

Merdilen started to extend the range of his Imperium. That would allow him to Transmute at a much bigger distance and amount of mass. First, he decided to cover the whole city of Cornaler. He kept going, going, going, covering all the houses, keeps, castles, and basically every building in the city. He found out that the more he extended the range of Imperium, the less he felt in control of his own body. He started to feel it less and less, as he extended his cognition. Soon, he didn't feel his own body at all. But he felt absolutely everything else.

He kept going, covering with his Imperium farther, and farther, and farther. He first covered the entirety of the city of Cornaler. He kept going. He didn't know how long it took, but after a long while, he had covered the cities of Mithforden, Rarbeng, and Arthol, along with the entirety of the kingdom of Fergahn. He kept going, covering what was beyond the kingdom, until he had covered every single kingdom in the South. He didn't feel his body at all. But he didn't care. Not anymore.

Then, when he had covered everything that had been damaged during the Transmutation War... he Transmuted. Merdilen's last Transmutation. He Transmuted everything into how it should be: he filled the craters, he leveled the spikes, and he made the mountains rounder. He created a paradise, a perfect planet, with everything being how it should be. No more shadow monsters, no more chaos, no pain, and... no more Transmutation. He didn't know if it took days, months, or years, but when he was finally done, he smiled to himself.

Sure, maybe he had done terrible things during his journey, but now... he could die a hero. Now... he could die at peace. Smiling, he let go.

Here I go, Alvoren, Kayline. To where you two are.

With that, he lost consciousness completely, and the new world he had created was finally at peace.

THE END

Appendix A

Glossary of Names, Places, and Objects

Alvoren Vandmorn: Young swordsman with *chunibyo* syndrome, codenamed Axerhos.

Anti-Transmutation Strike Team: Group of four elite fighters dedicated to killing the last Transmutator. Consists of Kayline Sherdaine, Sir Grendar Bartel, Jarleren, and Salvatore Arneret.

Arthol: City at the southeast of the village of Berken in the kingdom of Fergahn.

Axerhos: Alvoren Vandmorn's hero codename.

Berken: Small village at Fergahn's western border.

***chunibyo*:** *Chunibyo* is a colloquial term typically used to describe early teens who have delusions of grandeur, who so desperately want to stand out that they have convinced themselves they have hidden knowledge, secret powers, and/or powerful enemies. The term translates literally to "middle-school second-year syndrome." Can also apply to adults, although less often.

Cornaler: Capital of the kingdom of Fergahn.

Crimson Ruby: Most renowned criminal guild in the world of Gartaena, one of which's main bases is the city of Rarbeng in the kingdom of Fergahn. Its members are nicknamed 'Rubies.'

Erthen: High-ranking noble, member of the government of the kingdom of Fergahn, resides in Cornaler, founder of the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team.

Fergahn: Kingdom in the west of the continent of Gartaena.

flanking: A movement of an armed force around an enemy force's side/flank to achieve an advantageous position over it. Flanking is useful because a force's fighting strength is typically concentrated in its front, therefore to circumvent an opposing force's front and attack its flank is to concentrate one's own offense in the area where the enemy is least able to concentrate defense.

Garnent Sherdaine: Kayline and Torlen's father, left when Kayline was little.

Gartaena (*Gart-ay-hena*): World ravaged and destroyed in the Transmutation War, divided into kingdoms.

greatsword: Any double-edged sword large enough that it requires the use of two hands to wield it effectively.

Jarleren: A small and quick rogue, member of the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team.

Jennifer: Villager from the village of Berken, saved by Merdilen.

Kayline Sherdaine (*Kay-leen*): Young red-haired swordswoman, member of the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team.

Kateko Arthenmon (*Kah-teko*): One of the Transmutators that fought in the Transmutation War, Merdilen's ancestor.

King's Road: Long and ancient road that crosses the whole kingdom of Fergahn.

longsword: A sword used for hewing, thrusting, and slicing. It is well suited to two-handed use in combat, but can also be used in one hand.

Merdilen: The main character of the story and the last Transmutator.

Mithforden: The City of Knowledge is known for its universities and home to many kings and great minds. Its main element is the House of Records, a massive tower in which every single piece of relevant information from the world of Gartaena lays.

Occisor: Nickname Jarleren used while a member of the Crimson Ruby, meaning ‘Killer.’

Rarbeng: Poor city at the south of the kingdom of Fergahn, home to the thieves’ guild Crimson Ruby.

Salvatore Arneret: A blonde ranger, member of the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team.

shadow monsters: The monstrous remnants from the armies the Transmutators of old once had.

Sir Grendar Bartel: A big and strong knight who fights with a massive greatsword named the Bladesmasher which, according to popular legend, can break any sword it crosses. Member of the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team.

Sonic Blade: A Sonic Blade is any sword coated with a special chemical component that activates with kinetic energy, therefore, when the wielder attacks especially fast, the chemical is triggered, letting out an extremely high-pitched ring, which momentarily stuns opponents and unables Transmutators to Transmute.

sparring: To fight using light blows, as in training.

tackle: Movement used in certain sports consisting of jumping at an opponent, grabbing his legs, and shoving him to the ground.

Torlen Sherdaine: Kayline Sherdaine’s younger brother.

Transmutation: An ancient art used to use the power of the mind to transmute objects and living beings. Transmutation users, called Transmutators, caused the Transmutation War, the biggest and most chaotic war the world had ever seen, and were thought to be extinct after the end of the war.

Verline (*Ver-leen*): Small village located north of the city of Arthol.