

The Quest For Power

March 23rd

Year 2120

City of Arthol

Kingdom of Fergahn, Gartaena

Merdilen half-threw himself, half-fell from the side of the tower, his right side and left shoulder badly wounded and bleeding. It was most probable he wouldn't have time to fully turn to Transmutate with his hands, so he would have to take a big risk, and gamble his life. Even though he had just unlocked that ability, he would have to Transmutate with his back, so if he somehow wasn't able to now, he would crash against the ground and probably die instantly. He had to time it perfectly, because if he crashed against the ground instead of going through it as he was planning, he would be done for.

Even if he somehow survived the massive fall, he would have to somehow face off against dozens of city guards while heavily wounded. Even if he managed to miraculously defeat them all, he would then have to somehow outrun the killers while on the verge of death. Those were too many *somehows*. Either he perfectly Transmutated the ground with his back, or he died. Still, even if he executed it all perfectly, he could only pray that there were actually sewers beneath them as he had planned. If not, he would just be stuck in a hole a few feet deep, and guards would

pierce him with their swords before he was able to even realize there were no sewers there.

He kept falling, and when he saw he was almost at the ground, he directed all his power to his back, ready to Transmutate. He fell past the surprised but ready city guards, and the instant he touched the ground, he released his power. The whole section of the stone ground he was on turned into sand, and he fell straight through. To his enormous relief, there were actual sewers there. He fell straight into the pile of Transmuted sand, into the sewers. That was enough to prevent him from dying, but he still crashed against the floor with enormous force, screaming. But, he couldn't allow even the slightest moment of hesitation, so he turned part of the sand back into stone, blocking his entrance and leaving the guards out. He had escaped.

Merdilen allowed himself a few seconds to breathe, but then tried to stand up. This place would be swarming with guards in no time, and he had no strength left to fight. When he tried to stand up, he felt a sharp crack in his right side, and felt in agony the fall had broken several bones. He didn't have the strength to walk to a proper exit from the sewers, so he stumbled toward one of the walls, and Transmutating it, entered and locked himself in, as to not be found when the guards eventually checked the place. He sat down with his back against one of the walls of his small enclosed room, and because of the loss of blood, lost consciousness once again.

“What is wrong with you?!” Sir Grendar roared at Kayline, looking at her furiously. She was still looking dumbfounded at the place where the Transmutator had disappeared, not believing how stupid she had been. “You had him right there! Why didn't you kill him?!”

“I-I don't know,” Kayline muttered, not knowing what to say, and started to try taking off her now-stone jacket. “I think I slipped. I-I'm sorry.”

“We thought you had it under control,” said Jarleren in a cold voice. “Next time, I’ll go for the neck.”

“I didn’t mean to!” was all that Kayline was able to say, trying to excuse herself, but she knew they wouldn’t forgive her easily.

“You didn’t *mean* to?!” bellowed Sir Grendar. “My ancestors lost their lives fighting against the first Transmutators centuries ago in the Transmutation War! This is a battle my family has carried down for *generations*, and you just ruined my chance to avenge my forefathers! Not just that, but mankind’s fate is in danger, and you may have just sealed our doom! Because you *slipped*! Besides, if we don’t find him now, we will have no way of finding out where he is, as he will be way more careful now!”

Surprised by his sudden outburst and revelation, she wasn’t able to answer anything, and Sir Grendar left full of anger, probably to start searching once again for the Transmutator. The rest of the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team followed in silence, leaving her alone on top of the tower. She punched her thigh in frustration.

How could I have been so stupid?, she thought to herself, clenching her teeth and fists. *Why did I not kill him?! I know perfectly well I didn’t slip. Did I just show mercy? Did I just show mercy to a potential mass murderer? What Sir Grendar just said is true. We have no way of knowing where he’ll go now!* The sewers were a massive labyrinthian complex spread all below the city. Finding someone there would be nearly impossible.

“Don’t worry,” she then said, catching up to the rest. “It won’t happen again. Next time, I won’t hesitate in doing what’s right.”

Merdilen woke up several hours later, with a blurred vision and his whole body aching painfully. It was a miracle he was still alive. As his improvised cavern had no windows, it was completely dark in there, so there was no way to know with precision what

time of the day it was, but he was starving, so he supposed it was around midnight now. He sat up, barely managing to hold back a scream, tried to direct his power towards his right side, as it was his most-damaged body part, and started to heal. He was now extremely weak, so it took the better part of an hour to heal his stab wound and fall damage. As he was unable to move during that period, he had plenty of time to think.

Why am I alive?, he wondered. The red-haired girl had the perfect chance to kill me. I would have had no way to defend myself. Why did she stop herself? Was it mercy? Was she trying to pay me back for me not killing her the battle before? She clearly did it on purpose. She stopped practically in mid-air. But it doesn't make sense. This is her job, isn't it? Why would she do that? The thing is, I have no way of knowing. I have to focus on what I do know.

She had some kind of coating in her swords, which let out a high-pitched ring which stopped me from Transmutating. That's extremely dangerous. I can hold myself with my sword against a common opponent, but there's no way I would survive another battle against them without my Transmutation. This time, I was just lucky. I have to get stronger, and quick. I already know they aren't open to talking. I have to find a way to defeat the killers before they end up killing me.

He started thinking about new skills, but none of them seemed to be possible for him yet. And as he didn't know when the killers would strike next, he couldn't risk training. He had to be on a constant lookout, and therefore he needed an immediate way of getting power. The logical choice would be to look for notes or something in his ancestors' house, as it had been the dwelling of the first Transmutator, but there was nothing left there. He had never understood why, but his ancestor had completely destroyed everything in his house that might help a Transmutator gain power. As it had been so long ago, he supposed he would never

find out why. The facts were, there was nothing left there that would be able to help him now.

But then, he realized. True, his ancestor had destroyed all the information he had concerning the Transmutation. But if he remembered correctly, the Transmutation War had started from *two* opposite Transmutators. So, although it wasn't probable, the other Transmutator's fortress might have the information he needed. There were many problems with that, though. First of all, he had no clue where to find the fortress. Second, if that was the Transmutator that had created the shadow monsters, all the surrounding area would be swarming with them. And third, he had no way of knowing if he would be able to get to the fortress before the killers found him and killed him. He didn't know if he would be able to outrun them. It would be an absolute gamble. It would be very hard. It could require crossing a world full of enemies. But if he wished to survive, he had to.

Merdilen finished healing his side and turned to his arrow-pierced shoulder. The arrow had completely gone through his shoulder, its sharp metal point sticking out. He Transmuted a stone into pliers and broke the arrow's tip. He then grabbed the arrow's shaft and prepared to pull it out. He clenched his teeth, and pulled. It hurt terribly, but the arrow went out, leaving a long and thin hole in his shoulder, which he immediately covered and started to heal. It hurt terribly.

Why does everyone hate me so much?!, he thought, clenching his teeth with tears of pain in his eyes. *Since I left the home of my forefathers, not a single person who has known what I am has smiled at me. Not a single person. All I have met is hate, and since I left, people have tried to kill me four times, in two of which they were close to succeeding. They should be glad to have someone with my abilities wanting to help them. But now, my objective is to simply survive. This is not at all what I expected to be welcome with.*

So, with those bitter thoughts, he finally got up, and Transmuted his way out of his small cavern and back into the sewers. They were long stone tunnels that ranged the whole city from underneath, filled with dirty brown water with a terrible smell. As Merdilen had seemingly been unconscious for several hours, the guards were long gone, and there was no one close but him. He was almost fully healed now, and he started walking through the sewers, splashing on the brown water and forming echoes through the sewers, that thankfully didn't attract any unwanted attention.

He walked for several minutes until he saw a side stair that spiraled upwards, and headed towards it. When he reached the top, he emerged into a small passage between two buildings, with no one close to be seen. The cool night air felt great in comparison to the enclosed odor of the sewers, and he breathed in, feeling his energy slowly return. As the moon was on the middle of the sky, it was already midnight, and he still felt extremely tired and exhausted.

But he couldn't stay there, and so he started to walk in no particular direction, just to get out of that city. As it was around midnight, there were very few people around, and he was able to evade them easily. He kept walking until he reached a small plaza, full of grass and a few trees, with benches laid out around it and a water fountain in the middle. On one side of the plaza, next to a house, stood an announcement board, from which a certain piece of paper caught his attention.

It was a 'wanted' poster, which depicted a young man with wild blond hair and deep black eyes, wearing a black jacket with a high collar. It was Merdilen. 'The Last Transmutator,' read the caption below the drawing, next to the immense sum of two hundred gold coins, which amounted to about a year's worth of work for a common worker. He was quite a big deal now. But that scared him. It meant he probably wouldn't be able to go anywhere without being recognized now, and that bounty hunters would

probably start searching for him. But he couldn't worry about it now. He couldn't let himself be paralyzed by fear.

Would he want to live in hiding forever? Would that make it worth it for him to have left his ideal life at the home of his forefathers? No. He had chosen to have a life of adventure, and so he wouldn't turn back. He had no friends. He had no family. Not a single person would smile at him. So, he didn't really have anything to live for. More than that, he didn't have anything to risk. If he went down, he would go down fighting. Even though there were probably hundreds of others spread around the city, he ripped out the 'wanted' poster and kept walking.

Kayline woke up and got up from her bed. They were staying at a government-paid inn, still in the city of Arthol, as their mission was now to *kill* the Transmutator, not to bring back information about him, so they didn't have any reason to go back to Cornaler. As the government was paying for their stay, they had the best room in the inn, but Kayline still didn't sleep well. She had slept worried, as the Transmutator could be anywhere now, and if the Transmutator did any damage, it would have been her fault for not killing him. Worst of all, they couldn't even go after him, as they had no way of knowing where he was now. They could only wait for reports.

She got dressed and headed out of her room, up the stairs that led to the inn's rooftop. Sir Grendar was standing there with his arms crossed and looking into the horizon, as if he expected to spot the Transmutator from that rooftop.

"I'm really sorry..." Kayline told him, feeling the need to apologize again. "I don't know what I was thinking, but I will kill him for sure next time."

Sir Grendar didn't say anything for a while, but then spoke.

"October 3rd, 2116. Do you remember what happened that day?"

“Kind of...” Kayline answered. “I remember some kind of accident happened, but I don’t really remember the details.”

“A group of five little kids went on an expedition. They were happily playing around a massive crater, looking into it, dancing around, and enjoying themselves,” he said somberly. “But a section of the crater’s border was unstable, and when they stepped on it, they all fell down. They hit their heads, and they all died instantly. I knew the mother of one of them. She is still going to the psychologist, trying to cope with the pain and grief.”

“That’s horrible...” Kayline genuinely muttered.

“Do you know why there was a crater there?” Sir Grendar then asked, still looking far at the horizon. “It was left from the Transmutation War. It was so massive mankind was never able to fill it up. The Transmutation War destroyed the world, and it’s still taking the lives of innocents to this day. Do you want another Transmutation War to erupt? I’m fighting to prevent the Transmutation War from ever happening again. Aren’t you fighting for the same thing?”

“...I am,” she answered with determination. “I won’t hesitate again.”

“When in doubt, just remember what you’re fighting for.”

“I will.”

So with that, Sir Grendar left her alone and headed back down the stairs. Kayline stayed there, looking at the city. It was very busy and noisy, with the streets full of people going to work and children heading to school. Merchants were advertising their wares and products on the market below, and she noticed the federal prison was covered by people trying to find out the source of all the commotion. Children were playing in the streets, and she could hear their laughter from the rooftop. It was overall a pretty and cheerful sight.

Torlen would love to see this, she thought, thinking about her brother. So, after looking once more at the city, headed down to her room. She reached for her backpack, and out of it took a

medium-sized notebook and a pencil. Her job had always taken her around the world, so she was always visiting new places. Her brother was always interested in her travels, and so she tried to always draw at least one place she visited before going back. She headed back up and, sitting down on the parapet, started to draw. She didn't know when she would go back to her home, but when she did, she would have plenty of stories to tell and drawings to draw. But for now, all the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team could do was sit and wait for reports of the Transmutator.

Merdilen woke up a few hours later, and got up from his soft and comfortable bed in the middle of the woods north of Arthol. Luxuries of being a Transmutator. He hadn't dared to make anything more, though, as he couldn't risk being seen. He sat down on a fallen log, and Transmutating part of the ground, made breakfast. As he couldn't Transmutate anything that had once had life except for his own body, he wasn't able to make any kind of meat, fruit, or vegetables, so he resigned to bread, nuts, and other non-living foods. It wasn't ideal, but he was used to it. He then Transmutated his bed back into dirt as to not arise suspicion, and started walking his long road north.

He didn't have the slightest clue about where the enemy fortress could be, but he knew of a place where he would be able to find out. Mithforden. The City of Knowledge. Mithforden was known to have raised several kings, and it was said to have the best universities, not just of the kingdom of Fergahn, but of the whole world. People claiming to have grown up in Mithforden were hired anywhere almost immediately.

But Mithforden's *crème de la crème* was, by far, the House of Records. The House of Records was a massive tower which, as the name said, was said to house every single record in the world of Gartaena. If the enemy Transmutator's fortress had ever existed, its location would be found there. The thing was, it was four days away on foot and two by horse. But not only did

Merdilen not own a horse, he didn't even know how to ride one. It would be a long trip.

With just the clothes he was wearing, Merdilen left the place he had slept in, and started walking. The day was pleasant, as it was neither hot nor cold, and the shade from the trees let just little rays of sunlight slip through, which along with the melodious chirping of the last birds during autumn, made it a perfect day for trekking. Although he wasn't with his walking stick this time, he had a Transmutation glove on each hand and was constantly on edge, so he would be able to get his trusty sword immediately if he ever needed to.

He kept walking for several hours, and long after leaving the city of Arthol behind him, sat down on what seemed like a comfortable spot to have lunch. He ate a similar menu to his breakfast, and when he stood up, he realized something. He didn't know exactly where Mithforden was located, as he had lost his map when he had been captured. He knew it was about four days north of where he was, but if he started walking just a few degrees in the wrong direction, he would end up somewhere completely different. He would have to stop at the first village he saw and just hope no one noticed him.

After a little while longer of walking, he spotted the first fields and crops that made a village. It was very similar to the village of Berken, and so it should be able to provide what he needed. It had a big road crossing it through the middle, which he supposed was the Prince's Road. The Prince's Road was nicknamed like that by locals, as it ran parallel to the King's Road but it was noticeably smaller. He Transmuted his long black jacket into simple farming clothes in order to not arouse suspicion and headed towards the town. He also Transmuted some dirt from the ground into a few gold coins in order to buy what he needed. He hated cheating the system like this, but it was only for emergencies.

Merdilen arrived at the center of the town, in which were a few shops and small buildings. There weren't many adults to be seen around there, as he supposed they were all hard at work at that time. There were many children playing tag there, though, and they all looked at the stranger with curiosity. He kept walking towards a store called the Verline General Goods Store and entered. A bell rang when he open the wooden door, and an old lady standing behind the counter greeted him.

"Hello, I'm going to want a map of the kingdom of Fergahn, a compass, and four days' worth of salted pork," he told her when he reached the counter.

"Right away, young man," she said, but then suddenly started to inspect his face. "You look familiar... Have I seen you before?"

"...I came to this town about five years ago. You must remember me from back then," he tried to bluff, hiding his nervousness.

"Okay then," she said and turned around, but instead of grabbing the products he had asked her for, she started to frantically ring another bell. "The Transmutator is here!" she shrieked.

Merdilen tensed and turned around just as three men with swords entered the store. 'Wanted' posters with his face were spread all around the kingdom of Fergahn now. Of course everyone would recognize him.

"Transmutator, for failed mass murder and possibility of future attempts at the same charge, you are under arrest," the first guard said. "Kneel down with your hands behind your head."

"Those are not real charges, are they?" Merdilen asked.

"Shut up and obey!" the second man shouted.

"Okay, okay!" Merdilen exclaimed, and raised his hands. But then, he jumped backward and grabbed the map of Fergahn that was hanging from the wall. The guards sprang at him, so he half-jumped half-tripped backwards, towards the farther wall. He

flicked a gold coin towards the old store owner, and Transmuted the farther wall into sand with his back, tripping through it. He then Transmuted it back to stone with his hands and dashed towards the forest with the map grabbed tight in his left hand. He kept running for a while, until he no longer could hear guards behind him. He sat down on a rock to catch his breath, and looked at the map.

It was a detailed map of the kingdom of Fergahn, and it showed all the settlements and roads he needed to know about. He hadn't gotten the salted pork, though, but he could make do without it. Not having the compass would be troublesome. He technically knew how it worked, but he didn't really know how *magnets* worked, so he wouldn't be able to get one until he arrived at the next small settlement. For now, he would be able to guide himself by the map and the terrain, but it would be harder to. Still, he now would be way better off than without a map, so it was of no use pondering about what could have been.

His enemies had no way of knowing where he was headed to now, so it should be an easy journey. He got up, and guiding himself by the map, started walking towards the city of Mithforden.

Merdilen had kept walking for the next day without any complication bigger than detours. He didn't have a compass, and even though all the landscape in Gartaena was easily recognized because of its chaotic nature, he kept accidentally steering to the east. Once, he had been confused by giant boulders that looked extremely similar, and so he had ended up in a town several hours east of where he needed to be. But still, he had been making overall good progress, and only two days were remaining for him to reach Mithforden. He was now lying on the ground in the middle of a small forest with his arms stretched from side to side, resting.

He had been there for a while already, and so he sat up to check his map. The moment he did, he felt something fly right past him, and he heard a loud piercing sound as it buried itself deep in the dirt where his head had been a moment ago.

An arrow?! he thought, shocked. He turned to his left and saw another arrow flying at him. He Transmuted part of the sand in his Transmutation gloves into a small shield, in which the arrow buried itself in with a loud *'tuck!'*. Far away to his left, deep in the trees, he saw its source. It was a man wearing a brown shirt and pants with a long bandanna covering his head's lower half. He was wielding a longbow and had a quiver with dozens of arrows slung over his shoulder. He was not a kingdom guard, but as he seemed to be alone, he wasn't part of the killers' party either.

A bounty hunter, he thought, surprised. *I wasn't careful enough in the village of Verline. He must have followed me.* Merdilen Transmuted part of the ground into his black sword, but as the bounty hunter was so far away, there wasn't much he could do with it. All that was left was his Transmutation. Most of the times he had used Transmutation in combat was for direct offense or defense against melee attacks. None of that would work this time. He would have to get creative.

Merdilen started to sprint towards the bounty hunter, closing the distance between them, and the bounty hunter shot two quick arrows at him. Merdilen quickstepped to the side behind a tree and prepared to spring to the other side. The moment he did, two other arrows flew past him. The bounty hunter was good. But he didn't know Merdilen. When he sprang from behind the tree, he Transmuted part of its bark with his feet into a small step, boosting himself with it and jumping *above* the two arrows.

Merdilen jumped all the distance to the next tree, and when he got to it, he Transmuted it into another step with his feet. He kept jumping upwards, until he got to the treetops. He Transmuted the leaves into a solid surface, standing upon them. It would be way harder for the archer to shoot at him effectively

here. He kept running through the treetops in the bounty hunter's direction, and most arrows he shot buried into the trees instead of hitting him. The bounty hunter then shot at a tree behind him, but Merdilen just thought he misfired and kept running towards him.

When Merdilen got right on top of him, he jumped down, but not before turning several leaves into sharp daggers that he hurled at the bounty hunter. The bounty hunter tried to shoot another arrow at the falling Merdilen, but was forced to jump to the side instead to avoid the daggers. Merdilen raised his sword high over his head as he fell, ready to strike.

Now I've got him! he thought. But, instead of falling on top of him, he hit an invisible string in the air. He then noticed. The bounty hunter hadn't misfired, he had shot two arrows connected by a string to opposite trees, laying a trap for Merdilen right in front of his eyes. The string made him spin in the air and lose his balance, and he fell to the ground on his back several feet from the bounty hunter. The bounty hunter aimed at him with his bow, but before he could shoot, Merdilen Transmuted the ground around him. Dirt was an excellent conductor. He turned all the ground dozens of feet around him into quicksand except for the spot he was laying on, and it was the bounty hunter's turn now to lose his balance, shooting his arrow far from his target.

Merdilen started running towards the bounty hunter, turning the quicksand at his feet into solid ground as he ran. The bounty hunter once again shot at him, but missed and the arrow buried itself deep into a tree behind him. He jumped to Merdilen's left, and then shot another arrow to Merdilen's right. He realized his mistake too late, and he saw the string fly past him. The string connecting the two arrows hit him as the arrow flew by, and as the bounty hunter had shot the second arrow after making a turn around Merdilen, the string wrapped around Merdilen's body, making him fall to the ground. The bounty hunter then took a dagger from his belt and thrust it at Merdilen's neck, but he hadn't accounted for the Transmutator's reflexes.

Merdilen turned the dagger into sand as soon as it touched his neck, and then turned his right Transmutation glove into a steel blade, hurling it at the bounty hunter's neck. He looked at Merdilen, shocked and surprised, but the Transmutator didn't strike. He turned the string wrapped around him into sand, and then muttered to the bounty hunter.

"I hope you remember this if you ever try to cross paths with me again." He knocked the bounty hunter unconscious with his black sword's pommel, and then broke his longbow in half with his sword, also turning the bounty hunter's dagger into sand. He then got up and left the place quickly, constantly turning around to make sure he wasn't being followed again.

The Deadliest War

March 28th

Year 2120

City of Mithforden

Kingdom of Fergahn, Gartaena

Merdilen poked his head from behind the barrel he was hiding behind and looked at the House of Records. Since the bounty hunter's attack, two days ago, he had traveled with haste, only stopping when absolutely necessary and for the minimum amount of time. Because of that, he had arrived at the city of Mithforden with no more problems, and had managed to sneak in. It was very big, full of universities, museums, laboratories, and the like. He was now hiding behind a barrel in an alley, a few blocks away from his destination. From here, he could see the acclaimed Tower of Records perfectly.

It was a perfectly straight tower made of some kind of white stone, and Merdilen counted twenty-six floors. If he was correct, it was because the records were organized in alphabetical order, and so there was one floor for each letter of the alphabet. Following that thought, all information concerning the Transmutation War should be stored on the twentieth floor, where the records starting with 'T' should be located.

Merdilen had knocked out a city guard a little while ago, and now struggled to put on his armor. The House of Records

would logically be full of guards, so getting by as one of them would be the only way in. He had to avoid combat at all costs, as they would be way too many for him to fight. And he hadn't wanted to Transmutate his clothes into guard armor either, as he didn't know if they had anything special other guards might recognize. The guard he had chosen to knock out was pretty much his same height and weight, and so if he didn't attract any unwanted attention to himself, he should be okay.

After a while of wrestling with the uncomfortable stock iron armor, he finally put it on and headed out from the side alley he was in. The streets were full of people, and as it was still daytime, no one paid attention to someone wearing standard city guard armor in the middle of the city. He paved his way towards the House of Records, until he arrived at the bottom. A guard chief was standing at the bottom, next to a fat and bald clerk who sat in front of a desk, writing down everyone who entered the building.

"Name?" asked him the clerk, without bothering to look at him.

"Brent," Merdilen replied, remembering how another guard had addressed the one whose armor he was now wearing. "I'm arriving late because I was sick, and I'm still feeling a bit odd, that's why my voice sounds strange too."

"Spare us the details, kid," the guard chief said. "We don't care."

"...Right."

"Brent Jackson, right?" the clerk asked.

"...Yeah," Merdilen replied.

After a few tense seconds of the clerk examining him, he finally said, "All right. Go in."

"And hurry up," the guard chief added. "The boys are tired of covering for you."

So, Merdilen finally breathed out, and entered quickly into the building. It looked like a massive library, with rows upon rows of books lined up on extremely tall shelves and a few seats here

and there. Two big sets of stairs were positioned in the middle of the giant room, leading up to the next floor. A big red 'A' was painted on the farther wall, indicating which records were stored on this floor.

Several guards were standing on strategic spots, to make sure no files went mysteriously missing. There were also some civilians reading and roaming the hallways, but just nobles. Most of the city population was confined to going to universities and other libraries, to keep the place relatively free of people and for the guards to be able to keep an eye on everyone.

As they had registered everyone who had entered the building, he should stick with his 'Brent' identity, at least for now, if he wanted to get to his objective without trouble. Now, all that he had to do was to get to the twentieth floor without arousing suspicion, steal the files related to the other Transmutator from under all the guards' noses, go all the way back down again, and leave the city before anyone noticed he was ever there.

He headed towards the stairs at the end of the hall, trying to walk as casually as possible while hiding his nervousness. After what seemed like hours of him walking through the middle of the library, and what seemed like millions of stares in his back, he arrived to the stairs, and started to climb. As he never used any kind of armor, the stock iron armor he was now wearing to look like a guard felt extremely heavy, and going up the stairs was way harder than it should be. Not to mention he had to go up and down twenty floors. He tried not to think about it and started climbing.

He went up through sections 'B,' 'C,' 'D,' 'E,' and 'F' with no problem, but when he was about to arrive at the stairs of section 'G,' on the seventh floor, he heard an alarm bell ringing far below him, and then immediately heard equal alarm bells ringing out loud ever nearer, until he saw a man running to an alarm bell at the floor he was in and ringing it too.

Damn it! Merdilen exclaimed in his mind, looking around desperately as inconspicuously as possible. *Did they figure out I'm here already?!* His whole body tensed, and it took all his strength not to look terrified. All the guards and noblemen around him looked confused, until the man at the bell mimicked something men in the floors below had shouted.

“All House of Records guards, head to mid point immediately! All House of Records guards, head to mid point immediately!”

Mid point? Merdilen wondered, puzzled. As he was posing as a guard, he'd have to head to 'mid point' too, except he had no idea what or where that was. But, to Merdilen's relief, all the other guards in the place headed towards the stairs leading up to the upper floors, and so he simply followed the rest. They climbed up to the thirteenth floor, which was the 'M' section, and then he realized what 'mid point' was. It was the thirteenth floor, because as the House of Records was twenty-six floors high, the thirteenth floor was the exact middle point. That way, neither guards on the top nor bottom floors would have to travel too much when summoned.

As he couldn't afford to look suspicious, and he would have to go through the thirteenth floor anyways, he arrived at 'mid point' with the rest of the guards. It looked pretty much the same as all the other floors, except for the fact that there were easily a hundred guards here. *Oh, no*, Merdilen thought. There was no way he'd be able to face off against a *hundred* guards. He just had to hope they wouldn't find out who he was. There was a guard with better armor and a black cape standing atop a chair in the middle of the room, and he now started to speak.

“Do you people know the guard Brent Jackson?” he said with a deep and strong voice. “Well, he today arrived late to work, excusing himself with saying he had been sick. No one really cared, until *another* Brent Jackson appeared. He was missing his armor, sword, and shield, and had a huge lump on his head. He said a

man who appeared to fit the physical description of the Transmutator had jumped him, knocking him unconscious and stealing his gear. Therefore... There is an impostor among us.”

Everyone started muttering between themselves, showing a mixture of emotions between puzzleness, nervousness, and fear. Merdilen stared at the man in terror, and forgot to breathe. If they found out who he was, right here, right now, he would be doomed. He wouldn't last as much as a minute against a hundred guards.

“Therefore, everyone stand in an orderly line and give me your ID numbers,” the guard continued. “Anyone who doesn't will be executed.”

Merdilen stayed completely still, having difficulty to breathe. Needless to say, he had no way of knowing which was the guard Brent's ID number. He wouldn't be able to keep posing as a guard for long, and once he got near the middle of the mob of guards, it would be too late to escape. He had no choice. He headed to the back of the line, and when he thought nobody was looking, walked as casually as he managed to towards the closer wall, then through it using his Transmutation.

But of course, someone saw him do it, and exclaimed, “One of the guards just walked through a wall!”

Then, all hell broke loose. Of course, he didn't see it, but from the adjacent room he had gotten to, he heard it. Everyone started to speak with loud voices, all at the same time, shouting to get heard over the rest, and he heard several swords being unsheathed and metallic footsteps running over the wooden floor towards where he was. He was now in a small room with a few shelves, a desk, and several chairs, and so he sprang towards one of the walls.

It would be no use escaping down, as he needed to get the information from the twentieth floor, and so he Transmuted part of the wall with his feet into steps he used to go up. He had to go up as sneakily as possible, as everyone would be searching the whole place for him now. They probably knew in which room he

was now, and so to move with more speed and swiftness, he Transmuted the heavy iron armor into his usual black clothes. He felt the difference immediately, and so he kept running up his newly-Transmuted stairs to the fourteenth floor.

As he had caught the guards by surprise and they ran slower than he did because of their heavy armor, he got to the fourteenth floor before them. That floor was fortunately empty now, clearly because of the emergency state the House of Records had to be in now. He ran across the room and, without missing a beat, sprang to the stairs that led up to the fifteenth floor. He knew he would have to stop to rest long before he arrived at the twentieth floor, but he had to put as much distance between him and the rest of the guards before that happened. He kept running, and when he reached the sixteenth floor, he realized something.

He couldn't hear the *whole* group of guards following him, only about half of them, and he thought he knew why. He had Transmuted the stairs he had used to reach the fourteenth floor back into the wall right before sprinting to the next set of stairs in an attempt to cover his path, and so they didn't have any way of knowing if he had gone up or down when they had lost him. That's why they had split the group. He needed to use that information to his advantage.

Merdilen ran towards one of the floor's windows and Transmuted as many books as he could into a big rock boulder. He didn't like to damage information like that, but this was an emergency. He dragged the boulder to the edge of the window and pushed it down. The massive rock boulder fell down the side of the House of Records for what Merdilen estimated to be six floors, until it crashed with strength against a cornice, loudly breaking in half. It wouldn't take long for the guards to realize it had just been a bait, but it should give him at least several precious minutes.

Merdilen stopped to breathe for just the bare minimum, and then started running again. He never stopped hearing shouts and footsteps dangerously close below him, but then finally

arrived at the twentieth floor, panting and gasping for air. He let his hands fall to his knees, and after catching his breath, looked up. He was finally in the ‘T’ section. On top of each shelf was a big sign reading in alphabetical order the records it contained, and after scanning several times the whole room with his eyes, Merdilen finally found what he was looking for.

‘Transmutation War.’ He rushed to it and started quickly scanning the names. He had to hurry up. He didn’t know the name of the enemy Transmutator, but he spotted a book that probably told all about it, including his lair. ‘Transmutators: Masters of Matter.’ He quickly grabbed it and stuffed it in a newly-Transmuted backpack that was hanging from his back, but as he was about to leave, another tome caught his eye. ‘Transmutation War: Cataclysm.’ Below the title, a subtitle read, ‘The unknown end to the deadliest war the world had ever faced.’

Merdilen had never known how the Transmutation War had really ended, and it sounded like something interesting, so he stuffed the book in his backpack too, because why not. He was already feeling the weight of the two tomes in his backpack though, so he couldn’t afford to take any more. He could already hear the shouts of the guards almost at the floor he was on, so he rushed towards the wall. He Transmuted part of it into an opening and peered out.

If he had a gold coin for each time he had escaped death by jumping from a tower, he would have two gold coins. Which wasn’t a lot, but it was weird that it had happened twice. Still, it made sense. Jumping was a perfect way of making distance between him and his opponents, and the higher the place he jumped from, the longer it’d take for his pursuers to catch up to him. But crashing against the ground at high speed was quite dizzying, and it left him extremely weakened, so he had to of course try to avoid that.

Merdilen hesitated for a few seconds, looking at the city below from the extremely high altitude he was in, and finally

jumped. But this time, instead of just letting himself plummet down, he Transmuted the wall's stone bricks into a massive round cloth canopy, with belts that clinged to his arms and backpack. A parachute.

Of course, it was nothing professional, but it still slowed down his fall enormously, making him peacefully drift away from the House of Records. The guards that arrived where he had been moments earlier looked at him open-mouthed, and as they were indoor guards, they were wielding swords, not bows. All they could do was look at Merdilen as he floated away. Although his head hurt because of the continuous use of his Transmutation, he grinned and waved at them as the sun set.

Kayline rushed to the side room of the inn, followed by the rest of the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team. A messenger had finally arrived, seemingly with reports of the Transmutator. The messenger, a relatively young girl, was standing in the middle of a private room in the inn in which the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team was, and she started to speak as soon as they entered the room.

"I come from the city of Mithforden. The Transmutator attacked the House of Records two days ago, allegedly to steal some kind of unknown information, and then escaped," she said, straight to the point. "I left on horse little after the Transmutator left, and so I don't know if they were able to discover what he had stolen. The guard chiefs sent me to look for the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team, and they are asking you to head to Mithforden immediately. Although it is unlikely, the Transmutator may still be somewhere around the area, and even if he's not, when they find out what he had been looking for, that might give you a hint on where to start looking for him."

"...Understood," Sir Grendar said after a while with a serious expression. "We'll depart immediately."

"Were there any casualties?" Kayline asked, worried.

“Not at all,” the messenger answered. “The Transmutator escaped by unexpectedly jumping out of the House of Records and creating a parachute, so he was able to avoid all the guards clustered there. He did fight a trio of guards when he touched down, though, but he just knocked them all out. Aside from lumps on their heads, none of them had anything more severe than long but completely superficial sword cuts.”

“That’s great,” commented Kayline. “But... isn’t it a little odd? Why didn’t he just kill them? It would’ve probably been easier for him not to hold back.”

“He may have wanted someone to witness his glory or something to become famous,” Salvatore proposed.

“Yeah, but he didn’t have to leave all three of them unharmed. One would have been enough. Besides, everyone at the House of Records had already ‘witnessed his glory.’”

“Well, we have no way of knowing why he did this or that. You’ll have to ask him next time we fight,” said Salvatore sarcastically.

“I just find it strange. He’s supposed to be a bad guy.”

“It’s better not to overthink it,” suggested Sir Grendar. “The facts are, he’s the descendant of one of the biggest mass murderers in the world, and if we don’t stop him soon, he’ll have the power to follow in his ancestor’s footsteps. We don’t want that. Everything else is just speculation.”

Kayline then chose to remain silent, and after quickly packing the few things they had in that inn, they hopped on their horses, and started the trip towards the city of Mithforden. From what they had always heard, the Transmutator traveled on foot, so as the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team travelled on horses, they covered terrain about twice as fast as he did. If they found out which specific records the Transmutator had stolen, they might be able to discover what he was after, and then it would just be a matter of time until they got to him. Only a matter of time until this was finally over.

Alvoren Vandmorn arrived at the village of Verline, the small settlement north of the city of Arthol. His home. It was just as he remembered it—most villagers were out working the fields, merchants sold their wares, and children were playing happily in the streets while their mothers supervised. As he walked towards the central plaza, several people looked at them and either scoffed or winced.

They're so glad to see me! he thought sarcastically, then chuckled to himself. Of course, his reputation was well earned. He had officially been labeled a 'disturber of the peace.' But, he didn't care. He would become a hero, no matter what people told him. And, if being an adventurer earned him ugly looks from among some villagers, then so be it.

Alvoren headed directly for the inn. He entered, making the bell ring, and sat down on a table. It didn't have much people at the moment—most of them would be out working in the fields—so the barmaid immediately noticed him. While she prepared to attend him, Alvoren unbuckled his sword from his waist, resting it against his chair, then pulled down his hood, revealing a handsome face with dark hair swept back.

"Alvoren," the barmaid said, badly hiding her disdain. "You're back."

"Glad to see me, huh?" he said, smiling. "And, please call me Axerhos. Although 'great hero' Axerhos will do too."

The barmaid rolled her eyes, scoffing. "Just tell me what ya want, *Alvoren*."

"A glass of water will do fine," Alvoren said, partially disappointed she didn't call him by his self-imposed codename Axerhos. "As I'm here mainly for information. I heard rumors that the Transmutator was here some days ago?"

"Yeah," she replied, fetching the water and offering it to him in a wooden jug. "He was here several days ago, caused a stir in old Gilda's shop, then left. Weird fellow, that one, I tell ya."

“Hmmm,” Alvoren said, drinking his water. “Did you guys see the direction in which he left?”

“North,” she said. “You still tryin’ ta be a hero, huh? I doubt you’re being any good at it.”

“I’m not just *trying*. I *am* a hero,” he answered, grinning, ignoring the insult.

“Whatever,” she said, rolling her eyes once more, then leaving.

Alvoren had heard strange things about the Transmutator. He seemed to be extremely destructive, but not actually committing any crimes.

Hmmm. It seemed like a contradiction. *I guess I’ll just have to go and see for myself, test him*, he thought. Because he didn’t want to become a bounty hunter. He wanted to become a hero, no matter how hard it was. And he’d become one. He’d show them. They’d see.

It had been about a day and a half since Merdilen had left the House of Records and Mithforden, and the late afternoon sun provided the perfect light for reading. Merdilen had been reading for hours, and although the books were way too long for him to fully read in the time he could afford to spend, he had had a quick look at them and had caught the gist of the information. The book ‘Transmutators: Masters of Matter’ was a study made by some old historian on the lives and careers of the two main Transmutators, while the book ‘Transmutation War: Cataclysm’ showed the story of the last leg of the war, including details about its end.

He had begun with the first one. He had always thought there had been several Transmutators during the period of the Transmutation War, but it seemed like there had been just two of them. They had been childhood friends, two brilliant minds destined to do great things. A chemist and a biologist.

Their names had been Kateko Arthenmon and Morkilen Forenthar.

They had grown up in the 1800', during a period which he had never heard about before: something talked about here as the 'Industrial Revolution.' During the Industrial Revolution, several industries had boomed, creating better inventions every day that completely revolutionized the world, therefore its name. Two young boys, Kateko Arthenmon and Morkilen Forenthar, had been caught up in all the hype the Industrial Revolution had caused, and had therefore decided to become scientists.

They had become quite successful, publishing papers and articles in something referred to here as 'prominent science magazines,' but Kateko didn't feel satisfied. He felt like just another generic scientist out there, and even though they were doing great, he felt like they had never really discovered anything special or unique, that all they had ever done was improve the discoveries of others. And so he started a search for something that made him stand out, and stumbled upon an ancient art that should have never been found, that had never been made to be dominated by humans. The power to Transmutate matter.

Transmutation.

Kateko had initially tried to keep it secret, as he had understood how powerful the Transmutation could really be, but then Morkilen, his science partner, had found out about it. He reasoned they had discovered this power for a reason, and that they had the right to use it however they deemed better. On the contrary, Kateko didn't want to use it, arguing it was something too powerful, and that if it fell into the wrong hands, it had the potential to destroy the world.

Their discussions started becoming more and more heated, until in a sudden burst of anger, Morkilen had stolen the chemical used to access the Transmutation, and had injected it on himself. Kateko tried to stop him, first by words and then by using the serum for actually wielding the Transmutation himself against his opponent, but none of the two had been able to overpower his friend-turned-enemy. That had been the catalyst that had started

the biggest conflict mankind would ever face. The Transmutation War.

But the book didn't just have history lessons. It also had what Merdilen had been looking for in the first place. Detailed maps showing the location of the two Transmutator's fortresses during the war. Based on the position of his own ancestor's base, Merdilen realized his ancestor had been Kateko Arthenmon. To hide their origin from the rest of the world, Merdilen's family line had thrown away the family name generations ago, so it was interesting to find out what their original family name had actually been. Deep down, he was for some reason relieved to know his ancestor hadn't been Morkilen.

So my name is Merdilen Arthenmon, huh, he thought with curiosity. He then kept pondering about the information.

As he already knew, Kateko's fortress was far west of the kingdom of Fergahn, and he now also found out that Morkilen's fortress was far south of the same kingdom. It seemed those two fortresses had been in actual kingdoms during the Transmutation War, but those warzones had been way too destroyed and couldn't be fixed. That explained why shadow monsters only came from the south of the world. And that was the place where he would have to go now if he wanted to survive. Although Merdilen's map only depicted the kingdom of Fergahn, the book, fortunately, contained an appendix in which he saw a small map of the entire regions south and west of Fergahn, so he spent a while copying it into his own map. The journey towards it would probably take several weeks on foot.

While the first book, 'Transmutators: Masters of Matter,' talked about the beginning of the Transmutation War, the second book, 'Transmutation War: Cataclysm,' talked about its end.

At some point during the war, the two Transmutators had amassed massive armies, and the whole world had already taken sides. But the war had been raging for too long, and Kateko felt like they would have to take action soon if they wanted humanity

to be somewhat saved. So, channeling all his Transmutation power into one giant object, he created a rock giant, a massive humanoid controlled by himself that should be able to channel his Transmutation and empower it. Parallel to him, Morkilen created his *own* rock giant, and on the last battle of the Transmutation War, the two rock giants fought.

Merdilen wasn't sure if Kateko was losing or if he was just not winning, but at some point during the battle, he had realized he would never be victorious if they kept fighting the way they had fought during the whole war, so Kateko triggered a secret weapon he had hidden inside his rock giant for if things went horribly wrong. The most macabre attack in human history. Kateko had already understood Morkilen was nigh-invincible, as he was so extremely powerful in the Transmutation nothing could physically hurt him anymore. So, with his scientific genius, he discovered the only way to actually kill him.

Throughout his experiments and experience, Kateko had understood that Transmutators had an extreme attunement to the natural world, which was why they were able to Transmute things. But when you talk to the world, the world talks back. As they were both extremely powerful already, their attunement to the world was so immense that they could sense where people were without looking at them, they could catch a fly in midair, and they could feel people's deaths. People's deaths felt like a slight pain in their minds. And Kateko was going to use that to his advantage. Morkilen's ultimate power would be his eventual doom.

Kateko knew what he had to do. His 'secret weapon' he had hidden inside his rock giant was a bomb. When he triggered it, it caused the biggest explosion to be ever seen in human history, killing both armies instantly. The bomb expanded throughout the whole world, not by emitting destruction, but by emitting a flammable shockwave that would make every single fire in the world blow up, destroying the world of Gartaena completely. Of

course, Morkilen had been able to shield himself completely from the blast, not getting as much as a scratch, but it had all been according to Kateko's plan.

If Morkilen used the Transmutation to shield himself, he would keep his attunement to the world, and the pain of millions of people dying at the same time would absolutely destroy his mind. But if he somehow cut himself off from the Transmutation, the physical explosion would destroy his body. It was the ultimate attack. But the ultimate sacrifice. Kateko chose to sacrifice the whole world to stop his enemy, as he knew that if he didn't, millions of generations into the future would suffer and die, as Morkilen would be able to live forever because of the Transmutation.

Kateko Arthenmon had defeated Morkilen Forenthar, the enemy he himself had created, but at a terrible cost. The explosion destroyed every single settlement in the world, and ninety-percent of the world's population died. And as all that remained were tiny villages with almost no fire in them, most of them had no technology, so civilization regressed... almost seven centuries. It seemed that the world had had technology far superior before the Transmutation War, but none of it had survived the massive explosion that had destroyed the world.

The world of Gartaena had been completely destroyed, but at least the Transmutators had been destroyed too. Gartaena was finally at peace... until Merdilen arrived. For the first time in his life, Merdilen fully grasped the consequences of the Transmutation War. Not only had it destroyed Gartaena's landscape, but it had also regressed civilization by a full seven hundred years, and it had killed approximately the exorbitant amount of nine million people. No wonder everyone was trying to kill him.

But, that gave him responsibility. Responsibility to use his powers for good and to atone for the sins of his forefathers. Of course, it'd be impossible for him to bring back the people who

had died, but there was something he could do. He would fix the world. If he reached the fortress of Morkilen Forenthar, chances were he would gain enough power to reverse part of the damage the Transmutation War had caused. He would gradually heal and fix the earth, returning the landscape to its original form, to how it should be. But to do that, he would have to reach the fortress.

Merdilen was pondering that, so deeply immersed in his thoughts that he didn't hear the man approaching him. A shout from behind startled him.

“Behold, villainous foe! Your reign of terror has ended! You will finally fall, slain by none other than the great hero Axerhos!”

Merdilen turned around sharply, surprised, only to find a man standing a few feet away from him, pointing at him with a sword. The man, who had seemingly identified himself as ‘Axerhos,’ was taller than he was, had black hair swept back, and was wielding a longsword in his right arm and a shield in his left. He didn't seem to be wearing any kind of armor. Merdilen would have thought he was a bounty hunter if he hadn't introduced himself as a ‘great hero.’ Now he was just confused.

Merdilen was puzzled by his sudden introduction, like he was some kind of fairy tale hero, as most enemies he fought didn't bother about talking and preferred instead to have the advantage of surprise. “What?” was all he could reply.

“Don't try to fool me, you monster!” Axerhos exclaimed. “Now I, the great hero Axerhos, will claim your head, and restore peace and justice to the world of Gartaena!”

“...” It seemed this man was more theatrics than actual skill, but it'd be better not to underestimate him anyways. Merdilen quickly made a small rock cover for his backpack and books, and then Transmuted a part of the ground into his trusty black sword as Axerhos charged.

The man slashed down with his longsword at Merdilen, and the moment he lifted his own longsword to block, Axerhos used Merdilen's blade as support to turn his own attack from a

slash to a thrust. Merdilen was able to sidestep at the last moment, but not without a superficial cut on his left shoulder. The man then slashed twice at Merdilen, both of which he dodged by stepping backward. Axerhos was clearly strong and fast, although not as strong as the big man from the killers' team and not as quick as the red-haired girl from the same team.

Still, he was a formidable swordsman in his own right, and would have overwhelmed any normal opponent. But Merdilen was no normal opponent. As he was a Transmutator, Axerhos had no way of knowing what he would do, and so Merdilen was at a massive advantage. That's why the killers had created that thing to stop him from using the Transmutation, as there was no way of predicting what a Transmutator would actually do in a fight.

Merdilen then concentrated his Transmutation on his feet and prepared to turn the ground below his attacker into quicksand to trip him, but the moment he looked downwards, Axerhos attacked, not with his right arm wielding his longsword, but with his left. Merdilen then realized. He had forgotten about his shield. His enemy attacked him with his shield, and even though a shield would deal almost no damage, it was so big it was almost impossible to block. The shield hit Merdilen square in the face, stunning him and forcing him to back down several steps. Merdilen tried to turn the sand into quicksand anyway, but because of his temporal dizziness, he missed the spot he aimed for by several feet.

Axerhos then jumped to the side, towards a tree, and boosting himself by kicking it, sprang towards Merdilen.

“Ultimate Technique: Whirlwind Slash!” he shouted, and rotated his arms to the right. His whole body rotated to the right, and he gave two full spins in the air, gaining momentum before falling on Merdilen. Although at plain sight it seemed more theatrics than anything, it was actually an elaborate well-executed technique. As he held his shield and sword on opposite sides of his body while he spinned, he had no weak spots, so even if he wasn't

able to do anything while he was in the air, he didn't have the risk of being attacked during the process either.

Because of the momentum, he was charging Merdilen too fast for him to dodge, and it'd be too strong an attack for him to block with his sword. So he concentrated, and channeling his power to his arms, he turned both sleeves of his jacket into thick steel, partially turning his jacket into armor. Axerhos slashed at him with all the accumulated momentum, and his blade screeched as it entered into contact with Merdilen's sleeve armor. His eyes widened as he saw his attack being blocked by what seemed to be bare arms, and Merdilen used that temporary confusion to his advantage. He immediately turned the sleeve armor back into his light leather sleeves, and then Transmuted a small stone wall behind his attacker.

Axerhos didn't notice it at all, and then Merdilen sprang at him, intending to tackle him. Axerhos instinctively backed away, and he would have been able to evade the tackle, but he then tripped on the stone wall Merdilen had Transmuted earlier. Merdilen shoved him to the ground, and pressed his longsword to Axerhos' neck, but without actually cutting.

"Even if you kill me, foul villain, you will never win!" exclaimed dramatically the fallen attacker, throwing his head back and closing his eyes.

Merdilen didn't do anything for a few seconds, puzzled as he was, and then Axerhos cautiously open an eye. "Why are you not killing me?" he asked, and then his eyes widened in dramatic understanding. "I get it! You're even worse than I thought! You plan on torturing me, the great hero Axerhos, in order to exert a long-awaited vengeance!"

"I'm not killing you nor torturing you. I have nothing against you. In fact, I'd never heard about you in my life," Merdilen replied genuinely, raising an eyebrow.

Axerhos now looked more confused than ever before, and Merdilen got up, releasing him. He didn't seem like he'd attack Merdilen again, at least not for now.

"Get up, drama queen," he told the man, and as they both stood up, he saw something from the rear of his eye.

Another man was standing behind a tree a distance away, looking at them. He was wielding a greatsword, and the moment he noticed Merdilen had spotted him, he raised his greatsword and charged at them with a roar.

Another bounty hunter?! Merdilen thought, but before he could react, Axerhos ran at the attacker from besides Merdilen, and both their swords clashed in midair, screeching and throwing sparks.

"So that's how it is, huh?" Axerhos exclaimed. "My evil enemies crafted an intricate and villainous complot to turn the Transmutator and myself against each other, weaken us, and then kill us both, is that right?!"

"I don't know what the heck you're mumbling about, but out of my way! I'm looking for *him!*" the new attacker shouted, gesturing at Merdilen. "Outta my way or I'm killing you!"

"Don't act like you don't know! I'm not going to play your games. And you'll find out the great hero Axerhos is not someone easy to kill!"

Persecution

March 30th

Year 2120

South of the City of Mithforden

Kingdom of Fergahn, Gartaena

Axerhos pulled his sword backwards, breaking the lock, and then slashed twice at the man. The man raised his greatsword, blocking both attacks, and then Axerhos feinted to the bottom right. His enemy took the bait, lowering his greatsword to parry the third attack, but Axerhos, instead of finishing the slash, abruptly hit his enemy with his shield in his left arm, the same way he had hit Merdilen. The big man stumbled backward, and Axerhos sprang at him, his longsword ready at his side.

“Ultimate Technique: Infernal Thrust!” he shouted, and boosting himself forward, thrust his longsword towards the man’s chest, fully extending his right arm. His enemy took a step to the side in an attempt to dodge the attack, but he wasn’t nearly fast enough. Axerhos’ longsword fully pierced through the man’s side, making him scream and fall backward. Axerhos then raised his sword over his head, ready to deal the final blow.

“Stop!” Merdilen exclaimed, rushing to him. “We don’t need to kill him. Breaking his sword so he can’t fight us anymore is enough. Remember, he’s human, same as us.”

“...Okay,” Axerhos finally said, giving an elaborate spin to his sword before sheathing it. “But only because you spared my life before.” Still, he did kick his fallen enemy in the head, making him lose consciousness, and Merdilen tossed him a roll of bandages for when he woke up.

“So, are you evil or not?” Axerhos suddenly asked him.

“...I’m not,” Merdilen replied, momentarily puzzled by the direct question. “I have done nothing wrong,” he added, finding unnecessary to mention his theft of the two valuable books from the House of Records.

“Hmmm.... So that man’s attack just now confirms my suspicions,” Axerhos said in a conspiratorial tone. “My evil enemies know you are powerful and that if we worked together we’d be too powerful to be stopped by them, so they turned us against each other in order to weaken us and then send someone to kill us.”

“I think he was just a common bounty hunter who followed you,” Merdilen commented.

“I don’t think so. But anyway, you just had the honor of sparing the life of the great hero Axerhos. Congratulations.”

“...Sure. Coming to think about it, I don’t think I’ve properly introduced myself. My name is Merdilen. Merdilen... Arthenmon, and I’m the last Transmutator.”

“Merdilen Arthenmon, huh. My real name is Alvoren Vandmorn, but the world knows me as...” and with that, he crossed his arms in front of his face in an X gesture and took a step to the side, making his long cape billow, “the great hero Axerhos!”

“Oh, okay. May I call you Alvoren?” Merdilen asked. “It’s less awkward that way.”

“...It’s not ideal, but if you don’t want to use my epic hero codename, go ahead,” he said, sounding slightly disappointed.

“But, back to the important things. So, are you going somewhere?”

“I’m searching for power to stop my enemies, survive, and hopefully fix this ugly world someday,” Merdilen answered, trying to give as little specific information as possible.

“Ah, a noble errand,” Alvoren agreed. “So, I’ve come to a conclusion. Considering both our objectives are to become heroes, that we have mutual enemies, and that you have proved your worth by sparing my life, I have decided I shall travel with you. You’ll have the honor of forming an alliance with the great hero Axerhos.”

“...Sure, you can come along if you want. But it won’t be easy,” Merdilen warned.

“The great hero Axerhos and his noble Transmutator partner will have no problem defeating whatever perils they may face!” Alvoren declared.

“Yeah, yeah. Let’s go. We’ve got a long road ahead of us.”

Kayline and the rest of the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team arrived finally at the city Mithforden, two days after leaving the city of Arthol. Kayline thought it took way too long considering there was a Transmutator in the run, but considering they traveled twice as fast as him, they should still be okay. She had been to Mithforden before, but it had been long ago, so it was nice to be there again. She just wished it was under different circumstances, though.

They arrived at a massive tower in the center of the city, a tower which rose so high over the rest of the city there was no place in Mithforden from which it couldn’t be seen. The House of Records. They left their horses on a small stable close to it, and the moment they dismounted, a guard came running to them. He looked panicked, and started to speak frantically.

“You’re the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team, right?!”

“Yes, we are,” Sir Grendar answered.

“Thank god you’ve arrived! The place is pure chaos now,” the guard told them between gasps. “As you know, the

Transmutator attacked, four days ago. We don't know what he stole yet, but we're in the process of investigating. We have already registered everything up to the thirteenth floor, section 'M.' Please, follow me."

So they followed the guard into the House of Records, and a fat and bald clerk greeted them at the entrance.

"So it is certain the Transmutator stole something from section 'N' upwards, right?" double-checked Kayline with the clerk.

"Indeed," answered the fat clerk, nodding.

"From what floor did the Transmutator jump?" asked Jarleren.

"The twentieth floor," he replied. "Section 'T.'"

"Then we know for a fact the Transmutator stole something from section 'T,'" Jarleren said.

"How do you know?" asked Salvatore, raising an eyebrow.

"Think about it," Kayline explained, understanding Jarleren. "Once the Transmutator got what he needed, he'd of course want to leave the building immediately, and wouldn't want to risk staying there any longer. So we can deduce the Transmutator stole something from section 'T' and left as soon as he could."

"...Right."

"I'll send men to check it immediately," said the clerk.

So, he sent several men to check the twentieth floor, who returned about ten minutes later.

"You were right," one of the men declared towards the group in a solemn tone. "The Transmutator stole the books 'Transmutation War: Cataclysm' and 'Transmutators: Masters of Matter.'"

"Why would he do all this just for history lessons?" asked Salvatore.

"There must be something there of practical use for him," Sir Grendar said.

“Do those books teach about the Transmutation?” Kayline asked.

“Hey, Fred, come over here!” called the clerk. “He’s the expert on the subject.”

So, after repeating the question to him, the scholar called Fred answered, “No, the only place to find actual information concerning the Transmutation is thought to be the fortresses of the two Transmutators. There is none on those books... but the fortresses’ location can be found there.”

“That’s it,” Jarleren declared. “He’s searching for power.”

“Those fortresses must be swarming with knowledge,” Sir Grendar said. “We need to get there before him. If not, it’s game over for us. He’ll be too powerful for us to fight. Is there any other way to know those fortresses’ locations?”

“I’ll search related books for any hints,” said Fred.

“Do it.”

So he left, and after a while, returned with a map showing its location.

“How do we know which fortress he’s headed to?” Kayline asked.

“It’s simple,” Jarleren replied. “We know he arrived from the west, so we can deduce that he came from Arthenmon’s fortress. Therefore, it’s obvious he’s now headed to Farenthar’s fortress, as he’d have no need of returning to his home with a map.”

“Okay, so we should head south,” Salvatore said. “Let’s go.”

“There’s something I want to do first,” Jarleren said.

So they headed out and, after doing what Jarleren had headed off to do, arrived at the outer part of the city. It’d make no sense for Merdilen to need a map to get to his own ancestor’s fortress, as he probably came from there, so they could assume he was headed for the other fortress. The fortress of the Transmutator Morkilen Farenthar. They started riding south, all while looking for any traces of the Transmutator. Now, they knew where the

Transmutator would go, and it was only a matter of time before they found him. Only a matter of time before they killed him.

Merdilen and Alvoren kept walking south for the next day with no problems, and Merdilen used the time to explain about the killers, the ancient Transmutators, and the fortress he was heading towards to Alvoren. It felt good talking to someone without the risk of being killed. Alvoren meanwhile spoke about his great battles and quests with great dramatism, from which Merdilen supposed half were either fake or exaggerated.

Although Alvoren was several years older than Merdilen, he was noticeably more immature, but Merdilen found talking with him fun. A nice breath of fresh air in all the chaos he was surrounded by these days. Alvoren had also asked Merdilen to make shoes with backward soles for them both, in order to throw off track any potential followers. Fortunately, Alvoren had a compass, so they made overall good progress.

“So, where do you come from?” Merdilen asked him.

“I come from the village of Verline, a village of great kings and heroes,” Alvoren replied proudly.

“I was there. It didn’t look that great to me,” Merdilen said before he could stop himself.

“Then you stayed for too little.”

“...Yeah, that might be it,” agreed Merdilen unconvincingly.

“And why did you leave?” then asked Merdilen.

“I left in order to shine in this world, to find honor and glory like I was always meant to!”

Being an adventurer was an overall freelance job, so if Alvoren didn’t have any pending jobs, he was free to do whatever he wanted to. Merdilen supposed Alvoren was following him mainly for the lure of adventure, although he didn’t know if there was any deeper meaning behind it. Still, Alvoren didn’t add anything else, so Merdilen reasoned that if he didn’t volunteer to

say it he probably didn't feel comfortable talking about it, and he let the subject go.

They kept walking south for several hours, then stopped at the feet of a giant rock boulder to have dinner, as it was already getting late. They made some improvised dinner with some Transmuted food along with a part of Alvoren's rations, and ate in relative silence. They had been making good time and had met no more bandits, bounty hunters, or killers since the fight in which they had met.

Alvoren suddenly looked to the side, towards behind the boulder, and started walking towards it half-crouched, as a hunter would stalk its prey. Merdilen looked at him puzzled and raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. Merdilen then heard sudden movement behind the boulder, and Alvoren broke into a run towards it. Merdilen also headed there to find out what was happening, and saw two teenagers running away from Alvoren.

"What's going on?!" Merdilen asked, but before anyone answered, Alvoren tackled one of the boys, throwing him to the ground. They were dressed for traveling, but didn't seem to be carrying any weapons nor anything dangerous.

"You are spies, aren't you?" he exclaimed. "Aren't you?!"

"W-we're not, sir!" the teen exclaimed. "We were just playing here!"

"No, you weren't! We aren't even near any settlements, there's no way you just stumbled onto us!" What Alvoren had said was true. They were at least an hour away from the nearest city.

"H-heh, stop!" Merdilen called out to Alvoren, confused. "They're just boys!"

"Well, then why are they carrying—," Alvoren said, reaching into the fallen boy's pocket and pulling out a long steel dagger, "—these!"

With that, the two teens paled in unison, and the other one muttered, "H-how did you—?"

“I saw the momentaneous shine of the sunlight reflecting on the blade!” Alvoren declared. “Now speak. What are your intentions?! You’re too young to be bounty hunters or bandits, so what are you?! Are you crafty allies of our evil enemies, ready to give our location away to your bosses?! Well, we won’t let you get away this easily!”

“W-we’re just plain robbers, sir!” the standing boy said, trembling. “We didn’t know you were so powerful!”

“You seem to be honest, I’ll give you that,” Merdilen said. “Alvoren, give me their weapons.”

“Right away, Merdilen!” Alvoren replied, quickly grabbing the other boy and tossing both daggers towards Merdilen. He caught them in midair and, without as much as a thought, turned them both to sand. The boys lost all remaining color and tumbled backward, looking as if they were about to faint.

“You aren’t spies, are you? Don’t you dare lie to me,” Merdilen said, trying to look as menacing as possible. And he succeeded.

“O-of course not, sir!” both boys said in unison.

“...Okay. Leave before I regret my decision.”

“W-what?!” Alvoren exclaimed. “Even if they were someone’s spies, they wouldn’t just tell us! We should tie them up to a tree and leave them here, just in case.”

Even though the killers might have perfectly resorted to new tactics now, he just didn’t feel it would be right. He had already realized Alvoren was extremely paranoid and an absolute *chunibyō*, and he didn’t want to risk two innocent kids just because they *might* be evil. That would go against his whole reasoning he had used against the killers, and he wanted to be no hypocrite. He was seriously tempted about doing what Alvoren had suggested, as it might pay off in the future, but he stopped himself. Sometimes it was easier to just act tough, but he was trying to be a hero, after all.

“...We’re letting them go,” Merdilen declared. “They look innocent enough. Now leave before I regret my decision.”

“...Sure, whatever you say. Just don’t come running to me when they ambush us with an army of enemies,” said Alvoren as a kid would speak to his mother who had just refused to buy him candy.

And with that, the kids ran away, leaving Merdilen and Alvoren alone but unsettled.

He seems like a good guy, Alvoren thought, walking next to Merdilen. Alvoren had lost on purpose, he tried to convince himself, all to find out the Transmutator’s intentions. And he seemed to be a good person, after all. Since they had met, Merdilen had spared the lives of four people—a bounty hunter, the two boys, and Alvoren himself. That was quite a lot. He truly seemed like the hero he was trying to be. And he was certainly a better person than most ‘heroes’ he had previously met.

Maybe, just maybe, Alvoren thought, he himself would be able to become a hero if he went with Merdilen. Maybe, just maybe, he’d be able to fulfill his dream.

Alvoren had made his decision. He would travel with Merdilen, the last Transmutator, and become a hero, or die trying.

Kayline and the rest of the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team had been riding for about half a day when they saw something strange on the road. It was a man with a greatsword hanging from his side, dragging his feet and clutching his side. From afar, he seemed to be drunk because of how he walked, but they soon realized he was instead severely hurt. He had a deep hole-like wound in his side, seemingly caused by a sword, and was bleeding badly.

“Come here, my good man!” Sir Grendar exclaimed worriedly, rushing to him.

“Th-thank you for finding me...” the man muttered while Sir Grendar laid him down. “I’ve been stumbling hurt through the forest for two days already. I thought I’d never been found.”

“Don’t worry. You’re okay now. But, what happened to you?”

“Please, you have to give this information to someone, anyone, immediately,” he said. “I’m a bounty hunter. I headed out to search for the Transmutator, as I had heard they were paying big money for his head, and I-I actually found him. I thought I’d be able to kill him for sure, as another bounty hunter, one who fought with a sword and shield, was already weakening him, but the most unexpected happened. That bounty hunter actually betrayed all of mankind, and... allied with the Transmutator! I tried to fight them both, but they were too much for me, so I was left like this. It’s a miracle I managed to escape alive. That was two days ago.”

“Oh, no...” Kayline muttered.

“Thank you for telling us,” Sir Grendar said. “We’re the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team, the official team designated to end the Transmutator’s menace. We’ll take care of this.”

“As if we didn’t have our hands full already,” Salvatore scoffed. “That’ll deserve extra payment.”

“Stop worrying so much about the money!” Kayline snapped.

Salvatore looked at her with an irritated look, and Sir Grendar asked the bounty hunter, “Did you see where the Transmutator and his new partner headed off to?”

“They knocked me unconscious before leaving, so I don’t really know, but the Transmutator was heading south when I first found him,” the bounty hunter answered. “Remember it was two days ago, though, so they may have perfectly changed course by now.”

“Your report matches what we already suspected. Okay, thank you very much for your help. Mankind will be eternally grateful.”

“Cut the bureaucracy and let’s get going,” said Jarleren coldly.

“Right.”

So, now they pretty much knew for a fact the Transmutator was headed towards one of the Transmutators’ fortresses. So, after indicating a nearby farm where he might receive medical help to the bounty hunter, they hopped on their horses once more and kept riding.

Soon after leaving the bounty hunter behind, Salvatore, who had turned out to be an excellent tracker, had found what they thought to be the Transmutator’s footprints, as they followed the path the bounty hunter had mentioned, so they had been following them since then. As the footprints were a few days old, they were fuzzy and difficult to see in some places, but Salvatore always found them sooner or later. A day after starting to follow them, they had seen the place in which the Transmutator, his partner, and the bounty hunter had seemingly fought, and so were now following two sets of footprints.

“...This is strange,” Salvatore said shortly after while examining the terrain once more on the lookout for footprints. “The footprints seem to be going backward here. But... they won’t fool *me!*”

Kayline crouched to look at them, and she effectively saw two sets of footprints suddenly going backward and heading somewhere else. She followed the new set of footprints with her eyes, confused.

“They’re trying to throw us off track, and they would have tricked any normal tracker, but they won’t trick *me!*” declared Salvatore. “You see, these are clearly just shoes with backward soles! Here’s my evidence. First of all, there’s no reason for them

to suddenly turn around. Second, they are different from the earlier footprints, so they must be different, modified soles. These don't have the characteristic marks of any normal shoe or boot, they're just flat. Only rain boots have flat soles, as they're usually plastic, but no one would use rain boots on early autumn. So they're clearly fake. Let's get going," he finally said, leaving Kayline examining the footprints, puzzled, but without finding any difference from the earlier ones.

Salvatore was really a good tracker. Well, he had been chosen for this job for a reason, Kayline thought, riding after him.

They kept riding for another day, following the Transmutator and his partner's footprints, but even though traveling on horse was way faster than traveling on foot, they hadn't caught up to him yet, as Salvatore had actually been traveling on foot to follow the footsteps accurately. Therefore, the rest of them were obviously riding at Salvatore's pace too. Still, they were getting ever closer to their prey, as the tracks they were following were getting fresher and fresher. Salvatore estimated they would catch up to him in about two days tops.

"We'll have to stop on a settlement soon. We're running out of provisions," mentioned Sir Grendar while they rode.

It was true. They had left the city of Arthol five days ago already, and as they were in a hurry, they hadn't stopped to buy provisions in the city of Mithforden. They still had a few days of rations left in their backpacks, but it was better for them to stock up whenever they could. Besides, they needed to carry rations for both them *and* their horses, so if they wanted to travel with haste they weren't able to take as many days of rations as they would have liked to.

"The city of Rarbeng is nearby," Kayline suggested. "It'd just be a detour of about half an hour. Besides, as we know where the tracks were, Salvatore will be able to keep following them when we get back."

“Of course I can,” Salvatore answered. “Okay, let’s go.”

So, they headed towards the city of Rarbeng, and arrived about half an hour later. The city of Rarbeng was an extremely poor city surrounded by walls, a city in which no one who had any other option would live. Everything was extremely cramped inside the wall, and trying to find someone who wasn’t poor there would be like trying to find a needle in a haystack.

The main problem with the city of Rarbeng was, in fact, its wall. Although Kayline suspected it had been made to prevent raids from robbers or bandits, surrounding the whole city by a wall seemed a bit excessive. Besides, making a wall that surrounded the whole city wasn’t cheap. All the money that had been spent in making that wall was one of the main reasons for the city’s poverty. And that caused an extremely low quality of life, as the city population was in constant growth, but as moving the wall would be way too expensive, they weren’t able to expand the city as they should, and a massive percentage of the population was forced to live on the streets.

That also led to an immensely high criminality rate, as most people didn’t have the security measures needed to remain safe from inside robbers and thieves. No one who had any other option would live in the city of Rarbeng. She didn’t even fully understand the purpose behind its wall, but they should have a very good reason to ruin themselves like that.

After entering the city, they headed towards a relatively empty general goods store in a side street, and while Sir Grendar bought provisions for everyone, Kayline, Jarleren, and Salvatore waited outside. Jarleren had been extremely quiet since they had arrived at Rarbeng, even quieter than he usually was.

“Leave,” he suddenly said in a loud voice.

“What?” Kayline asked, confused.

Jarleren didn’t answer, but she soon heard several sets of footsteps slowly approaching them from all directions.

“You got some nerve coming back here, *Occisor*,” a man said, seemingly addressing Jarleren. He, like the rest of the men now surrounding them, was dressed in black and wielding a thick dagger in his right hand. He had a long scar running from his right eyebrow to his jaw and looked several years older than Jarleren. He grinned menacingly. “Especially after dramatically running away as you did. I still got that scar, y’know. Never thought you’d come back here. Especially to this specific spot. Finally came to refund the surgery, huh?”

Jarleren didn’t answer anything, and Kayline slowly brought her hands to her longswords, but made no move.

“A contract’s a contract,” the man with the scar continued menacingly. “And the Ruby doesn’t like people who break them.”

Ruby. Abbreviation for Crimson Ruby, Kayline recalled. The biggest thieves’ guild in the world of Gartaena, said to manipulate every criminal activity from the underworld. It was infamous for its ‘contracts,’ lifelong deals which gave criminals continuous income in exchange for lifelong loyalty to the Crimson Ruby. She recalled its members were called ‘Rubies’ and, although she wasn’t an expert on the subject, it seemed the city of Rarbeng was one of its main centers of operation. She hadn’t thought they would have any problems for just passing by, though.

“Leave this to me,” Jarleren whispered towards Kayline and Salvatore. “I’m giving you one chance to leave,” he then growled towards the Rubies in a menacing tone. “Three...”

“...He’s counting?” one of the men mockingly asked.

“...Two...”

“There’s five of us and only three of you, *Occisor*,” the man with the scar said. “If you want to dance, let’s dance.”

But, if they were that good, Kayline reasoned, then why hadn’t they killed Jarleren yet?

“...One,” Jarleren finally muttered, and sprang backward towards the bunch of criminals.

They all stabbed towards him, but he then boosted himself on a wall, dodging the blows, and jumped towards one of them. He flew through the group like a tornado, too fast for them to react properly. The one he jumped towards slashed with his dagger towards Jarleren, but Jarleren lifted his own dagger precisely, completely blocking the attack. He then gave a sharp flick of his wrist, slashing part of the man's hand and making him drop the dagger in pain. He then sprang towards the man with the scar, who hid behind another two of his men.

Both of them also prepared their daggers to attack Jarleren, but he ran low, throwing one off balance by kicking his leg and dodging the other's dagger. He then finally got to the man with the scar and jumped onto him, throwing him to the ground and pressing his dagger on the place where the man already had the scar, but without actually cutting. The remaining men froze, not wanting to do anything that would get their boss killed. Jarleren didn't need to defeat all of them—he just had to defeat their boss.

“Do you want another scar?” Jarleren growled menacingly. “We're just passing by. I'm not looking for trouble, and neither should you. So leave us alone like a good dog and I will spare that ugly face of yours another reminder of who I am.”

All the other Rubies looked at Jarleren scared, but the man with the scar scoffed, more irritated than anything. His grin faded completely.

“...Damn you,” he finally said. “You never change, Occissor, you damn brat. Leave now before we come back with even more men.” And so, he gestured to the other men, and they gruntingly left the group alone.

“You come from here?” Salvatore asked, not trying to hide his disgust, once they made sure they were alone.

“I grew up here,” Jarleren nodded. “I remember that alley over there was a perfect place to steal passersby. And there,” he then pointed to an ugly and partially-collapsed rooftop, “is where I

vowed to never go hungry or cold again. That's what prompted me to accept this Transmutator job."

"...Wow," was all Kayline was able to say. She had never known anything about Jarleren's background. In fact, she then guiltily realized she had never even thought about it. That sudden revelation came as something of a surprise to her. Even though she hadn't had a perfect childhood herself, she had always had a family who cared for her and a home to live in. Even though he never spoke about it, Jarleren had clearly gone through much, much more.

"...Oof," Salvatore grunted. "You knew that guy right now?"

"He was a rival of mine during my time in the Crimson Ruby. Not that I wanted to join that guild, mind you. I had to survive, and they were the only ones who took me in," he replied. "I was a bucket man—an assassin. The best in the guild. That's what earned me my nickname—'Occisor,' meaning *Killer*, and that's why the government reached out to me for this job. He was jealous of my abilities, and so was always trying to find some defect in me. It was a really low life, so I left by force. He was sent to fight me in order for me not to survive rebelling against them, but I absolutely destroyed him, leaving him with the scar you saw right now."

"...I got the rations," Sir Grendar said. Kayline hadn't heard him arrive, but she supposed he had recognized this was a serious moment and had decided not to interrupt. "Now let's go before we get into any more trouble."

Sinner

April 3rd

Year 2120

City of Rarbeng

Kingdom of Fergahn, Gartaena

Kayline and the rest of the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team rode out of the city of Rarbeng, having bought all the provisions and supplies they needed. As it was almost nighttime already, they considered staying in the city of Rarbeng for the night, but both because of the Crimson Ruby and the need to keep tracking the Transmutator, they decided to leave and sleep later somewhere along the road. They started riding in the twilight back towards where Salvatore had last seen the Transmutator's footprints, but after a few minutes of riding, they saw a strange figure in the distance.

It looked like some kind of hyena, except it was way bigger and completely black. It was half-walking on all fours and half-stumbling through the landscape. The distorting light of the twilight gave it an eerie, ominous, and horrifying look. From afar it almost looked as if it was grinning, its sharp white fangs forming a stark contrast with the rest of its pitch-black body.

Suddenly, Kayline realized what Rarbeng's walls were for. It was made to keep these things out. The city of Rarbeng was one of the cities that was farthest south in the kingdom of Fergahn,

and south of the kingdom of Fergahn lay the Southern Wastes. That was where this thing came from. It was...

"...A shadow monster," Kayline said aloud, feeling a chill run down her spine. Of course. The closer they got to the creator of these things' fortress, the more they would encounter. This would just get worse and worse.

"...I thought they were just fairy tales..." Salvatore whispered.

Kayline thought the same. Of course, she had heard countless stories about the shadow monsters, but she had never thought them to be actually real. This shadow monster, along with the now-forming mist around it, had a surreal aura to it, something abnormal. Unnatural.

"Now this is an interesting detail you forgot to mention about your hometown, Jarleren," said Sir Grendar in an accusatory tone.

"We should go. Now!" said Salvatore, alarmed.

"Stop!" exclaimed Jarleren in a whisper. "They're like dogs. If you stay still and pretend to be calm, they probably won't notice you."

But it was too late. Salvatore had already spurred his horse, and it started riding desperately in the opposite direction.

"You can't outrun a shadow monster," muttered Jarleren. "Even if you manage to run or ride faster than it, you'll eventually tire. They're not natural. They're not organic. They're killing machines, created for destruction by the Transmutators during the Transmutation War. They do not tire. You can't outrun a shadow monster. All that's left to do... is fight."

So, Kayline, Sir Grendar, and Jarleren dismounted from their horses, fearfully preparing their weapons. Salvatore returned with his horse hesitantly and dismounted to join them.

"Don't let it get the horses," Sir Grendar warned. "They have no means of defending themselves, and catching the Transmutator without horses will be nigh impossible."

“It seems like it hasn’t seen us, though...” muttered Salvatore.

As if on queue, the shadow monster suddenly turned its head towards them. Kayline’s heart skipped a beat. It stared at them for a few tense seconds, without moving, as a hunter would stalk its prey right before springing into action. The world was in absolute silence, and it seemed like the animals and insects themselves also feared the presence of the shadow monster. After what seemed like an eternity, the shadow monster sprang towards them, running and quickly covering the distance between the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team and itself.

They prepared their weapons and braced for the attack. As Kayline crossed her swords in front of her, ready to block, Sir Grendar rushed forward. Sir Grendar’s steel armor was told to be one of the best—if not *the* best— suits of armor in the kingdom of Fergahn, making him almost completely impossible to damage, but still, it required an enormous amount of courage to just run off into a shadow monster’s jaw.

Sir Grendar swung his Bladesmasher with a roar, attacking the shadow monster vertically on the jaw. The shadow monster also attacked forward to bite Sir Grendar, and the two objects collided with a fearful shriek, but neither seemed to give way. For a shadow monster’s bare jaw to stand firm against the legendary Bladesmasher was just frightening. The jaw was cut by several inches in the place in which the Bladesmasher was pressing, but no more. The shadow monster then savagely struck with its left clawed paw at Sir Grendar, but as Sir Grendar still had his greatsword locked with the shadow monster’s jaw, he wasn’t able to swing it in order to block the second attack. Salvatore fired two arrows at the shadow monster in an attempt to stop the attack, but they did nothing. Of course. If a full-on greatsword attack did no damage, a few arrows would have no chance.

He instead raised his shoulder for his shoulder plate to receive the hit instead of his neck, and the sharp claws slashed at

the armor with an ear-splitting screech, leaving deep cuts in the steel but fortunately not damaging Sir Grendar's body. During the whole time, the shadow monster kept pushing his jaw against the Blademasher ferociously and roaring, not leaving Sir Grendar any time to rest or get out of the way. The shadow monster then raised his right clawed paw to strike once again, and Kayline sprung into action. She stood between Sir Grendar and the shadow monster's right paw, crossed her swords, and blocked the attack.

The shadow monster felt strange to her swords. It didn't have neither hair nor feathers, and it didn't even feel like skin. It felt like some kind of extremely hard plastic, hard to the touch but without any texture. Still, it was enormously strong, and Kayline pushed her longswords to her left, deflecting the attack.

"Do you think you can hold on there a little longer?"

Kayline called over to the trapped Sir Grendar.

"I don't have much of a choice," he muttered back.

"Not really," she agreed, disengaging from the shadow monster and circling it from the side.

Once Kayline was relatively free from its forward weapons, she slashed twice at its body, testing its durability. Each slash bit several inches into the shadow monster's body, but considering how immense the beast was, it looked like it'd take a year to actually kill it at that pace. And, needless to say, they didn't have that much time. She kept slashing, biting ever further into the shadow monster's body, but it didn't seem as if it was actually doing any damage. And Sir Grendar was holding on, but he was clearly tired now, and as Jarleren had said, the shadow monster did *not* tire. They had to do something, and quick.

At that moment, Kayline saw Jarleren sprinting towards the back of the shadow monster, holding his dagger.

What is he doing? she wondered. *That dagger of his will deal no damage against a monster like this.* But then, Jarleren jumped onto a rock, and then on *top* of the shadow monster. He held on to the savage shadow monster as a rider would hold on to

a wild horse, and started to quickly crawl forward. When he got near the shadow monster's ever-moving head, he raised his dagger high over his head and stabbed down. Of course, the small blade slipped from the shadow monster's thick skin, doing no damage, but then Jarleren kept stabbing again and again and again, achieving always the same result. But then, Jarleren stabbed on a certain spot, and the blade bit deep, making the shadow monster roar in agony. Then, Kayline understood.

His eyes! Jarleren had been looking for the beast's eyes. Even though the shadow monster's skin was almost impenetrable by normal weapons, there were some spots, like its eyes, that weren't. Still, as its eyes were also pitch-black, along with the mist of the sunset, they were indistinguishable from the rest of the body, so Jarleren had had to try several times before achieving his goal. Then, Jarleren stabbed again, several inches left of the monster's right eye, and the monster roared in agony once more. It let go of Sir Grendar and raised its head sharply, trying to throw Jarleren off its back, and Salvatore took advantage of the opportunity. He fired three simultaneous arrows at the shadow monster's mouth, all three of which entered the mouth and bit deep into its inside skin.

The shadow monster gurgled in pain, trying to cough out the arrows, and Sir Grendar prepared his Blademasher. He thrust it inside the shadow monster's mouth with a roar, and it fully pierced the beast from the inside, its tip emerging from its back a foot next to where Jarleren was still crouched. The shadow monster roared once more, then fell to the ground and stayed still. Interestingly enough, the shadow monster didn't shed any kind of blood, but Kayline ignored that and just sat down, catching her breath.

"They'll get more common as we travel south," Jarleren said, sheathing his dagger.

"You okay?" Kayline asked Sir Grendar.

“Yes, I am. My armor is cut in several places though, but it’s still usable. I’m not hurt, though. Luckily, the horses are unscathed too,” he replied. “This is another proof of the threat the Transmutator poses,” he finally added in a grave voice, frowning.

The Transmutator we’re hunting had nothing to do with the shadow monsters, Kayline thought, but she wasn’t in the mood for arguing, so she remained quiet.

After that, they kept riding for about half an hour, then set camp. Even though they knew where the Transmutator was headed, it was better to follow him directly just in case, to kill him before he got to the fortress. Therefore, they could only travel during the day, when they could actually see his tracks. They didn’t light any fires, though, in order to not attract the attention of any more unwanted dangers, and after deciding the guard shifts, went to sleep.

The next day, they headed back towards where they had last seen the Transmutator’s tracks with no problem, and after about a few minutes of searching, Salvatore found them again. Because of the delay the shadow monster and the night had caused them, the tracks seemed more faded now, but still, he managed to find them easily. The rest of the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team could barely see some marks on the ground on irregular intervals, but Salvatore recognized them all as tracks and guided them with expertise through the tracks.

“You are an incredible tracker,” Sir Grendar pointed out. “Your family must be proud.”

“I wish that were the case,” answered Salvatore, without looking at them.

“What do you mean?”

“I started honing my skills way too late. For the first twenty-or-so years of my life, I did nothing productive at all, just enjoying the wealth that my family, House Arneret, had. But their patience, of course, ended. They started treating me terribly, being

ashamed of me being their son. They dishonored me, calling me a lazy good-for-nothing profiteer. That's why I decided to become an adventurer, to bring honor to my name and gain a place among my household once more. And, what more glorious job is there than putting an end to the last Transmutator?"

So, every member of the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team had a tragic story, to some extent, Kayline reasoned. Well, it made sense. Happy people in happy families didn't feel the need to go out and hunt world-ending ancient menaces. Still, they all had hopes, dreams, and objectives. They were determined to stop the Transmutator, whatever it took.

Merdilen suddenly woke up. It was still early morning, but he woke up anyway, feeling some kind of heavy presence. He recognized it almost immediately. A shadow monster. He sat upwards, looking around nervously. They were in some kind of plains, with Alvoren Vandmorn still sleeping in his bedroll several feet from him, but there were no shadow monsters to be seen anywhere. Still, the feeling was unmistakable. Somewhere to the east, relatively near them, was a shadow monster. He stood up, and without bothering to eat breakfast or anything else, started to walk east.

Merdilen wanted to check out this shadow monster to make sure it wasn't killing people, but it wasn't worth waking up Alvoren. He would just check it out, he wouldn't actually *fight* the shadow monster, so he should be okay on his own. He'd have breakfast once he returned and Alvoren woke up. He didn't exactly know how far the shadow monster was; it could be a minute away, five minutes, ten minutes, or half an hour, but as it was just about eight in the morning, he probably still had plenty of time before Alvoren woke up. Who knew, maybe he'd go back to sleep for an hour when he returned.

He kept walking for about half an hour, when he finally saw it. It was a massive hyena, pitch black and with sharp claws

and fangs. It was pretty much the same as the other shadow monster he'd encountered, but he felt terrified all the same. Still, it was fortunately just laying in the middle of a small forest, nowhere near any settlements, so he could just leave it there. He stealthily scouted the nearby area, and after a few more minutes, prepared to go back.

"Try anything funny and you're dead!" shouted a voice in Alvoren Vandmorn's ear.

He woke up, startled, and looked around. About ten men were surrounding their small camp carrying swords, one of which was holding his sword against Alvoren's neck. Merdilen was nowhere to be seen.

"W-what?!" he muttered, puzzled, trying to grasp the situation.

Are these the killers Merdilen mentioned?! he thought, scared. No, it can't be. Merdilen said they were just four people. These are about ten. Then what are they?!

"The reports said he'd be here. Answer me: where is the Transmutator?" the man holding his sword to Alvoren's neck asked. "Where is he?!"

What?! he wondered. How do they know about him? How did they know where we were?! But then, he got to a conclusion. The kids! They were spies! I, the great hero Axerhos, was right! There's no other answer!

"Where is he?!" the man shouted.

"I-I have no idea!" Alvoren genuinely answered. "I just woke up!"

Has he deserted me?! No, no, my loyal companion would never do that. Then, where is he?!

The man pressed his sword against Alvoren's neck even harder, shedding a drop of blood. "Don't you dare lie to me!"

"I genuinely *don't know!*" he answered, scared.

“Well, then,” the man said. “We’ll wait for ten minutes for him. If not, we’re taking you with us. You’re his friend, aren’t you? He’s bound to appear sooner or later.”

So, they started waiting in silence, waiting for Merdilen, the Transmutator, to appear. Alvoren was getting increasingly nervous, and now he was afraid. He considered trying to fight, but this was too big a challenge for even the great hero Axerhos to overcome.

Where is he?!

They waited for ten more minutes, but he didn’t appear.

“Well, if he wants you back, he’ll have to come and get you,” the man said menacingly, pulling him up and dragging him out of their small camp.

After an hour, Merdilen finally got back to their small camp. It had taken way longer than he had hoped for, but now he knew the shadow monster wasn’t hurting anyone, so it’d probably pay off. But when he looked at the camp, Alvoren just wasn’t there. He’d probably already woken up and was probably taking a bath in a nearby river or something.

“Hey, Alvoren!” he called out, just in case, but no one answered.

Merdilen probably wouldn’t have thought much about it under normal circumstances, but then he noticed something. Alvoren’s sword and shield were gone. And, even though he was no tracker, he could clearly see about ten sets of footsteps around their camp. That definitely *wasn’t* normal.

“Alvoren! Alvoreeeeeeeeeeeen!” he called out, but once again, no answer. “Damn it!”

Was he captured in the hour I was away?! he wondered, feeling increasingly more nervous. Examining the camp, he clearly saw the tracks leading away from it, away... into the mountains. A high mountain range rose in the distance to the west, and the tracks were leading in that direction. He waited a few minutes for

Alvoren to appear, but of course, he didn't. But the thing was, he didn't know for sure if those mountains were anything special. He took out his map, and in it, he saw a small annotation in the mountains he was looking at.

Bandits. So, it was bandits who had taken Alvoren. But, why? Why'd they take Alvoren?

A bait. He immediately came to the logical conclusion. It was a trap to catch Merdilen, kill him, and collect the bounty. But still, he *needed* to save Alvoren. He had been captured because of him; it was *his* responsibility to save him. He ate breakfast in half a minute, packed his essential things, and started following the bandits' tracks, determined to save Alvoren.

"Please! Have mercy! I will do whatever you want, please, just have mercy!" the man said, terrified, crawling away from her.

Kayline Sherdaine answered nothing, but instead raised her right longsword.

"Please!" the man begged once more, in a desperate effort to save his life.

"There is no mercy," Kayline answered coldly, slashing downwards and killing the man, his blood spraying over her.

There was blood everywhere. There was blood everywhere.

Kayline woke up with a gasp, sitting upwards in her bedroll. Even though the autumn night was relatively cold, she was sweating. A single sensation lingered from her dream—from her nightmare. There was blood everywhere. Slowly, her dream started coming back to her mind. A hunt.

About a year ago, long before the Transmutator job, Kayline had been a bounty hunter. They desperately needed money, and even though it wasn't a honorable job, Kayline had found bounty hunting a way of earning big money fast. She hadn't

told her mother, though, but she had become a bounty hunter. Although bringing the targets dead sometimes was easier and provided a better bounty, she had decided not to kill people. She wouldn't go as far as giving up her morals for money.

But, on a certain job, it had taken too long for her to capture her target, and she desperately needed the money. So, she had coldly and unmercifully killed him. She had regretted it immediately after, but the man was already dead, so she had been just left with her guilt.

Kayline was a sinner.

At that moment, she had decided not to kill anyone ever again... until the Transmutator job. For the first time in months, she had remembered clearly that scene.

Although deep down she believed it was wrong, she had buried those thoughts, convincing herself that killing the Transmutator would be for the sake of all mankind. And at the beginning, when all they knew about the Transmutator was that his ancestors had been mass murderers, thinking that had been easy. But nothing was as black or white anymore.

For all she knew, nothing was proving this specific Transmutator was evil. Nothing. More than two weeks had passed since the Transmutator's first sighting, and he hadn't committed a single real crime during that time. Jarleren might have committed more crimes than the Transmutator had, but as he had agreed to kill the Transmutator, he had been forgiven. They didn't have any real reasons to kill the Transmutator. In fact, the Transmutator had even spared her life in that first battle.

But the truth was, she was afraid. She was afraid of any changes. She was afraid of going against the world.

It was her guard shift already, so she got up, pondering on her problem but without getting to any solutions.

Three hours later, the rest of the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team got up, and after having breakfast, continued their

hunt once more. Kayline felt uneasy, but she did her best to hide it. They kept riding for several hours, until they arrived at what looked like some kind of camp. Kayline didn't give it a second thought, but Salvatore started examining it profoundly.

"The Transmutator was here," Salvatore confirmed, "but something happened. It seems they were kind of attacked, but it's strange."

Salvatore kept examining the scene for several minutes, until he at last raised his fist victoriously. "Ha-ha! I've got it. What happened first is that one of them left the camp. See, these footprints that trail away seem to be about half an hour older than the rest, and they, later on, come back, much fresher. So my theory is that whatever happened, happened while one of them was gone. So, I'd guess several people arrived at the camp, and they found the remaining person sleeping. They must have pressed him against the ground, as we can see because this bedroll over here has clearly had a lot of pressure on it.

"They later pulled the person up for unknown reasons, and dragged him out of the camp against his will, as we can see over here, because his footsteps are too long, so he was being dragged. The other person arrived much later, and started following them, as we can see because of these much fresher tracks. They were probably bandits or something. And I believe they captured the Transmutator's partner, not the Transmutator himself, as there's no way a mere ten bandits would have been able to defeat a Transmutator."

"...Wow," Kayline muttered.

"And the tracks lead... west, towards that mountain range over there," he finally added. "The Transmutator also went west, which seems odd to me, as the fortress he should be headed to is south."

So he's going after his captured friend, Kayline realized. It didn't seem evil at all. But still, she couldn't let herself be fooled by

appearances. She looked forward with determination and rode towards the others.

It's my fault Alvoren was captured, Merdilen thought grimly. It's my fault. If I hadn't teamed up with him, he would still be okay and free. Therefore, it's my duty to free him. Thinking back, I have actually done almost no good for the entirety of my adventure. Maybe it would have been better if I had never left my house at all. Who knows, if things don't get better, and quick, I may even go back to my house, and try again in a few decades or something. But for now, my job is to save Alvoren. I gotta focus on that.

Merdilen kept following the tracks for several hours, until he finally got to the feet of the first mountain from the mountain range. He was probably only about half an hour behind the bandits who had Alvoren, but as he was no professional tracker, he had no way of knowing for sure. Merdilen couldn't see them yet, but the mountain had several unnatural boulders, steep cliffs, and the like along the road, so that didn't really mean anything. Still, they had to be a few hours ahead of him at most. They'd have to stop eventually when they got to their lair, so he'd catch up sooner or later.

Slightly Transmutating his boots into more resistant trekking boots and Transmutating some rocks into a trekking pole, he started walking up the slope of the rocky mountain in parallel to a small road in order to not be seen by anyone traveling through it, which started becoming steeper and steeper. The footsteps were almost impossible to see now in the rock, but there was only one road—the one he was walking parallel to—so he should still be going on the right track. The higher he trekked, the colder it got, but he just Transmutated his black leather clothes into warmer materials and kept going.

“There he is!” Sir Grendar exclaimed in a whisper.

After sharply turning to the west, several hours earlier, they had kept following the Transmutator, knowing the time for their next fight would arrive soon, all of them tensed up in anticipation. They had been trekking through a cold mountain rapidly for the last half an hour, with Salvatore guiding them expertly along near-invisible tracks. Higher up in the mountain, trekking too, they could indeed finally see him. A man with black clothes and golden hair. The Transmutator.

After twelve days of the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team following him nonstop, they had finally caught up to the Transmutator. If they killed him now, their journey would finally come to an end. And, along with what Jarleren had ordered men to make in the city of Mithforden, they would definitely kill him this time. What Jarleren had ordered. New weapons for Salvatore, engineered based on Kayline's Sonic Blades. Sonic Arrows.

As they were in a hurry, they hadn't had any time to test them, but if they did work, the Transmutator would have no chance.

"This is it. The time has come," Sir Grendar told them in a solemn tone. "Almost three weeks have passed since the Transmutator was first spotted, and after spending most of it in earnest combat and persecution, we, the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team, have finally found him once more. All of this will finally be over. His menace will finally end. The world of Gartaena will finally be at peace once more. My ancestor will finally be avenged, his will fulfilled."

"My family will finally love me and accept me once more," Salvatore said.

"I will have enough money as to not suffer as I did when I was a child ever again," Jarleren said.

"And... my family won't be poor anymore, and my mother will finally get better from her illness," Kayline finally said.

“Anti-Transmutation Strike Team, let’s go,” Sir Grendar finally said with determination, and they all dismounted from their horses, preparing their weapons and charging into battle.

Merdilen kept walking with haste, until he suddenly heard something in the road below him. He looked behind him and saw what he had most dreaded to see in the last weeks. Four blood-thirsty fighters running at him with their weapons prepared, ready to battle. The killers.

Not now! Merdilen thought nervously, and started running more quickly up the slope. He couldn’t afford to fight them now. He couldn’t afford to die or be severely hurt now, not when the life of an innocent man was on his hands. They kept running at him with determination, the distance between them growing shorter and shorter.

“This ends now, Transmutator!” one of them, the big guy, roared.

He loosened some boulders from the mountain using his Transmutation, and they started rolling down towards the killers at alarmingly high speed, but they nimbly dodged them, still running towards him.

Oh, no! Merdilen then started creating small rock pillars with his feet and boosting himself on them, in an attempt to get as high and far away from the killers as possible, but then one of them shot a precise arrow towards him. But it wasn’t a normal arrow. For some unknown reason, it released an incredibly high-pitched screech while it flew towards him, a screech that resounded on the depth of his mind, stunning him. He screamed, grabbing his head with his hands, and then the arrow itself buried deep in his back.

It hurt terribly, and he lost his balance, falling from the rock pillar he was standing upon and hitting the rocky ground hard. Although he didn’t think he had broken any bones, the crash hurt terribly, but he stood up and kept running away anyway. He

was still stunned though, so as much as he tried to use his Transmutation to his advantage, it just didn't work.

The killers were gaining ground on him with an alarming speed, but he saw confused there were just three of them running after him now. The small guy was nowhere to be seen. He looked to his right, scanning for him, but it was too late. He saw the small man standing upon him, raising a dagger, and the man stabbed down. He tried to dodge, but he was too slow, and the dagger buried deep in his right shoulder. He screamed once more and tried to keep running. But he was too weakened, and tripped on a small rock.

He fell to the ground, and rolled several feet downwards, coming to a stop on the top of a sheer and completely vertical cliff. He tried to stand up, and was able to, but he was too weakened to try anything else. Because of the stunning arrow, he couldn't Transmutate anything at all, and as he had been so intent on running away and so confident in his Transmutation powers, he hadn't even made his sword.

The group of four killers approached him menacingly, blocking his exit, pointing their swords, bows, and daggers at him.

Is it... over? he wondered, terrified. *No, I can't die yet. I can't die here. I still need to save Alvoren.* But there was nothing he could do. He took several steps backward, trying to get away from the killers, but his feet quickly reached the border of the cliff. Small stones and dust fell down into the abyss below from where he had stepped on.

"Goodbye, Transmutator," the big man said, full of hate, taking several steps towards him and raising his greatsword.

He slashed down, aiming for his head.

Merdilen raised his left arm and tried to Transmutate his Transmutation glove into a steel shield, in a desperate attempt to block the blow.

But, as he was still stunned, he wasn't fast enough.

The massive greatsword sliced cleanly through his defenseless left arm with tremendous force, cutting through clothing, skin, meat, and bone. It severed Merdilen's left arm completely from the elbow, and the arm fell away, dropping into the abyss below.

Merdilen grabbed his bleeding stump, screaming. Pain like he had never felt before rushed through his body.

There was blood everywhere. As Kayline watched the defenseless Transmutator screaming, his arm severed at the elbow, all she could think about was that horrendous scene. The scene she had vowed never to repeat.

The shocked Transmutator tried to say something, but no words came out of his mouth. But it wasn't necessary. Kayline knew what he had tried to say. The same thing the target she had killed had said right before she sinned.

Please! Have mercy!

She had vowed never to repeat that scene. But she had also vowed to save the world. Deep down, she felt that the decision she made now would change her life forever.

Sir Grendar raised his Blademasher once more, ready to deal the killing blow. The Transmutator fell to his knees, grabbing his stump, unable to do anything but die. To Kayline, time might as well have stopped whatsoever.

She had to do something, but what? *What?!*

Merdilen fell to his knees, grabbing his stump, unable to do anything but die. *This is it... My adventure... my quest... my dream... it's all over.* The big man prepared his greatsword, ready to kill, like an angel of death. He slashed down. Red filled Merdilen's vision. But it wasn't blood.

It was red hair. A girl's red hair.

She recognized that girl. She was one of the killers. Killing him was her job. Then, what was she doing now? The girl was

raising her two longswords, blocking the greatsword, her arms trembling under the pressure but full of determination. Merdilen stared at her, his mouth wide open in disbelief.

After a few seconds, her swords started to crack under the pressure.

“What are you doing, Kayline?!” the big man roared at her furiously.

“I’m doing what’s right,” Merdilen heard the girl mutter back, and she took a step to the side, disengaging from the lock.

The big man prepared his sword once again, although he didn’t seem sure if to attack her or not, but Merdilen saw from the side of his vision the small man preparing his dagger, looking at her. They were going to kill her for saving his life. And he couldn’t allow that.

Mustering what little strength he had left, Merdilen ignored the overwhelming pain, and stood up. He grabbed her arm with his remaining right arm, and without giving it a second thought, jumped backward, into the long abyssal fall behind them.

Merdilen prepared to Transmutate the ground at the bottom in order for them to land safely, but the overwhelming pain along with the pressure of the free fall was too much for his weakened body. While still falling, he started drifting in and out of consciousness, until he passed out completely.

THE END OF PART ONE