

PART TWO:

SURVIVORS IN A
RAVAGED WORLD

Rescue

April 5th

Year 2120

Southern Mountain Range

Kingdom of Fergahn, Gartaena

Kayline's body moved on her own, without her controlling it, and she blocked Sir Grendar's strike with her own swords, saving the Transmutator's life. Her swords instantly began to crack, and Sir Grendar roared.

"What are you doing, Kayline?!"

"I'm doing what's right," she replied, and after a few seconds of intense sword lock took a step to the side, unsure what to do next.

What would they do to her now? Arrest her? Kill her too? But then, when she looked at Sir Grendar's eyes, she didn't see what she had expected to see. She didn't see anger. She didn't see hate. She saw sadness.

"How could you...?" he whispered, too low for anyone else to hear.

Kayline looked at him for a few seconds that felt like ages, then felt someone grab her from behind. She looked to see the Transmutator falling backward, pulling her with him. They both fell into the abyss below, and Kayline yelped. They spiraled down, the pressure suddenly kicking the air out of her lungs.

What the...? Did the Transmutator have any sort of plan for this? But when Kayline looked at him, he didn't even seem to be conscious. If he had ever had a plan, he wasn't going to execute him anytime soon. And they were falling fast.

There were several holes and crevices on the cliff wall, but none big enough to fall into or anything. Still, she would have to make do with what she did see. She probably wouldn't be able to stop the fall completely, but even slowing down a little would be better than plummeting to their deaths. Letting go of her cracked swords, she grabbed the Transmutator's remaining arm with her left hand and reached out with her right arm towards the nearest crevice.

Fortunately, she was able to hold on to it, but the sudden stop pulled her arm hard. It didn't seem like it had dislocated or anything, but it still hurt terribly. She hadn't been able to grab the crevice properly, though, and her hand soon started to slip. But as her other hand was busy holding onto the unconscious Transmutator, she couldn't relocate her grip on the stone. Besides, the Transmutator was a full-grown man. He was very heavy, but letting go of the Transmutator wasn't an option either. She couldn't let what she had just done go to waste. There was nothing she could do. At least she had slowed down their fall and stopped their momentum.

Kayline tried to keep holding on, but after a few seconds of her fingers slipping through the stone, she completely lost her grip and they kept plummeting down. They almost immediately hit the curving side of the mountain with incredible force and started rolling down it, getting their bodies increasingly bruised and cut with each passing moment, until they finally came to a stop at the bottom of the cliff.

She just lay there, breathing heavily and clenching her teeth, trying to ignore the pain flowing over here. She was almost certain she had broken at least a few bones, and the overall pain

was bigger than anything she had ever felt before. But the Transmutator was even worse.

Aside from all the fall damage, he had a deep stab wound in his right shoulder, an arrow sticking out from his back, and his left arm was completely gone from the elbow down. He hadn't regained consciousness. He'd bleed to death if she didn't do something, and quick. It was her fault he had gotten his arm chopped off. It was her responsibility to heal him now. She got to her knees with effort to get a better look at his injuries. At that moment, Kayline saw what the Transmutator actually looked like for the first time in their three-week-long chase.

The Transmutator was a bit taller than her, with a slim but strong body. He had wild golden hair that went down a little farther than the height of his chin, and was wearing black clothes with a long black jacket folded over the front that had a long rear tail flowing down and a high neck. She couldn't see his eyes, though, as he had them closed at the moment. He seemed to be the same age as she was.

She removed his jacket and ripped it into several pieces, which she used to first of all cover the Transmutator's remainder of his left arm. It took about half the jacket and several layers of cloth to stop the bleeding, but after a while, she finally managed to. Of course, that was just a temporary solution, and the adventuring jacket was far from hygienic, but that was the best she could do with what she presently had. She then also tended to his remaining injuries and her own wounds, and then laid down once more, waiting for the Transmutator to wake up and trying to think of the best course of action.

What would she do now? Would she accompany the Transmutator in his journey? Kayline felt guilty for the Transmutator trying to rescue his partner without having his left arm, and besides, it wasn't as if she could just go back to the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team and act as if nothing happened. They wouldn't forgive her that easily this time. They probably

wouldn't forgive her at all. There was no going back now. But, what would happen to her family now...?

Kayline was pretty sure her last pay would last for at least a few more weeks, especially considering they now had to feed two mouths instead of three. But she had no idea what they would do *after* the money ran out. Even if Kayline somehow managed to solve the Transmutator problem and she returned to her family, no one would give her any legal jobs anymore. She was now a traitor to mankind, after all. She would have almost no way of getting food for her family anymore.

But, as Kayline pondered about her endless stream of problems, she suddenly came up with an idea.

This guy's a Transmutator, she thought, looking down at the injured man lying several feet away from her. *If he lives up to the legends, he should be able to Transmute anything into anything. Following that logic, he'd be able to create infinite food or plowing fields given the necessary resources! If he's a good person, he'd have the potential to diminish world hunger enormously. And if he's not a good person, in the state he's in, I'd probably be able to defeat him easily.*

Kayline kept waiting and thinking for the next half an hour, until she heard a groan to her left, and the Transmutator slowly opened his black eyes.

Merdilen woke up.

Where... am I? He was lying down somewhere hard, as if on a rock, and his left arm itched a lot for some reason. He remembered everything hazily, but then his memory gradually started to come back to him.

He hazily remembered he had been fighting the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team, and losing, and then he had fallen off a cliff. He had been looking for something... He had been looking for someone...

“Alvoren!” he then remembered, suddenly sitting up. Pain surged through his body because of the sudden moment, making him groan in pain.

“Hey, hey, be careful!” someone called out to him to his right. A girl’s voice.

Merdilen looked to the stranger confused, his mind not fully awake yet. It was a girl slightly shorter than him, with long red hair flowing down to her back and black eyes. Her adventuring clothes were covered in blood, although it didn’t seem to be hers.

“You are severely wounded,” she told the still confused Merdilen. “Don’t do any sudden movements, or else the improvised bandages will fall out and you’ll bleed to death.”

“Oh.” Merdilen tried to raise his left arm to brush his hair to the side, but he for some reason wasn’t able to touch his hair at all. In fact, his arm was completely missing from the elbow down.

At that moment, the details of his defeat hit him like a punch. He had been about to die. His left arm had been severed from the elbow down. A girl from the killer’s had saved him, and he had tried to escape but had passed out in midair. Then, that meant this girl right now was...

“...You’re one of the killers?” he asked her, although he already knew the answer. “Why... aren’t you killing me...?”

“The killers’? Well, I guess you could say that...” the girl muttered. “But the team’s officially called the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team. I’m not killing you because it’s not right. You’re not evil, right?”

Merdilen felt the question was dumb, as no one would actually admit being evil, but he answered anyway. “...Of course not.”

“I thought so. Coming to think of it, I think we’ve never been formally introduced. I’m Kayline Sherdaine,” said the girl, trying to sound optimistic and stretching out her hand.

“...I’m Merdilen Arthenmon,” he answered, stretching his hand and awkwardly shaking the girl’s.

But as he did, his shoulder wound hurt even more, and he slowly lowered his arm, wincing.

“Be careful,” Kayline Sherdaine told him. “I bandaged your wounds, but they’re still far from healing.”

“Thank you, I can take care of that,” Merdilen said, and started to slowly heal himself using the Transmutator. He started with his severed left arm, and although he wouldn’t be able to get his arm back, he was able to heal the wound.

He wouldn’t be able to get his arm back. The realization hit him like a kick in the gut. He looked at it. Would he have to live the rest of his life with just one arm...? How would he fight now?

Merdilen kept healing himself, until all his wounds were closed, several minutes later.

“Y-you can heal people?!” Kayline exclaimed surprised.

“Well, I can heal myself, not anyone else,” Merdilen said, uncomfortable with the sudden exclamation. “At least for now.”

“Could you, say, heal a chronic illness?” she then asked, her heart skipping a beat.

“On myself, maybe, but I don’t think so. But I am headed somewhere. And in that place, I should gain enough power as to heal any illnesses on anyone,” Merdilen declared.

“You mean Morkilen Farenthar’s fortress?”

“You know about that?!” asked Merdilen, surprised, but thinking about it, it wasn’t that strange. He already knew the killers—whom the girl Kayline had called the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team—had access to a lot of information, and they had probably needed that information to track him accurately. “Well, yes. If I get there, I’d be able to heal and help more people than anyone else in this world. I tried to tell you during our second fight, but you were too busy trying to kill me—no offense.”

“None taken,” Kayline answered, her mind racing. So this Merdilen would be able to heal her mother?! If Merdilen healed her mother and gave them a proper place to live, all their big problems would vanish permanently. Their life would be

completely fixed. And, to save her family's life, all she needed to do was get this Transmutator to Morkilen Farenthar's fortress. True, Merdilen could still become a threat, but she was willing to take that risk.

"I have made a decision," Kayline told Merdilen with determination. "I will make sure you arrive at Morkilen Farenthar's fortress alive and will help you on your journey. But with one condition. You will help my family with your powers."

Merdilen considered it for a few moments, surprised, then finally said, "I guess it wouldn't hurt to have another fighter with us. And I'll gladly help everyone I can. So, welcome to the party."

"Thanks."

"But there's something I need to do first. You see, I have a partner, Alvoren Vandmorn, who was recently captured by bandits as what I think is a bait to lure me to them and collect my bounty. I need to save him."

"Okay, I'm going with you," Kayline said. "I doubt you'll be any good in battle with just one arm. But, are we just going to spring the trap? They're bandits. There are probably at least ten guarding your friend and another hundred roaming around the mountain."

"Yes. And we're going now, when it's nighttime. That way, it'll be easier for us to evade the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team while we climb and we'll have better odds of reaching Alvoren."

"Okay. It'd be better to eat something first to regain our strength, but I lost my backpack when I left the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team, and it is too late to go hunting now..." Kayline muttered.

"That won't be a problem," Merdilen answered, pressing his right hand against the ground. "Remember, I'm a Transmutator."

With that, he started Transmutating the ground into cheese, nuts, bread, and the like. He couldn't Transmutate to or from liquids or gases though, at least not yet, so he had no way of

making water. Luckily, his waterskin had survived the fall, as it was made of flexible leather, so he Transmuted the ground into another similar waterskin and split the water into equal parts. He handed half of everything to Kayline.

“Sorry, I can’t Transmute anything that is or once was alive, so meats, vegetables, and fruits are out of the menu,” said Merdilen. “Still, this should be enough to keep us on our feet for now.”

“No, no, it’s amazing!” Kayline commented. “You’re an infinite food source!”

“I guess so. But when I get to the fortress, then *that’ll* be amazing. But let’s focus on the present. It’s getting late. Let’s get going.”

“Yeah,” agreed Kayline, swallowing the last of her improvised dinner and getting up.

But when she got up, pain erupted in her back, and she barely managed to hold back a scream, gritting her teeth.

“Are you okay?” Merdilen asked.

“Y-yeah, I think so... no, not really,” she corrected herself.

“I-I think I broke a bone or two during the fall.”

“Oh. I... think I may be able to do something about that,” Merdilen answered.

“Hadn’t you said you weren’t able to Transmute other living beings?” Kayline asked, frowning.

“Well... I can’t Transmute anything big. I need to get to the fortress to heal anything big on someone else, but I guess I’d be able to mend a few bones,” he explained. “To be honest, I have never really tried. Sit back down.”

So, with that, Kayline hesitantly sat back down, and Merdilen pressed his hands against her back. She tensed at the touch of his hands, and Merdilen closed his eyes.

With enough determination, no matter how experienced he is, a Transmutator can do anything. Merdilen remembered once more his father’s words. He’d still need the head start found

in Morkilen's fortress to do greater things, but he thought he'd be able to do this. He *needed* to do this. There was too much at stake. If he didn't succeed, they wouldn't be able to save Alvoren. If he didn't succeed, the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team would hunt them down and kill them all for good. If he didn't succeed, the world would never recover from its wretched state. There was too much at stake.

He focused, feeling the power flow like a golden stream from his veins into Kayline's body. He felt the cracked bones, and slowly, they began to heal. After about a minute, she was as good as new.

"Done."

Kayline looked at him surprised, moving around and testing her healed body. "...Thank you," she muttered. She was now more determined than ever to get this Transmutator to Morkilen Farenthar's fortress and save the world.

"I'd say there are fifteen bandits in that platform," Kayline said, crouching behind a rock next to Merdilen.

They were looking at the bandits' lair in the mountains, after about an hour of trekking. They had arrived with no problems, and they hadn't encountered the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team either, as they had probably gotten down from the mountain long ago, in their infructuous search for the pair. The bandits' lair was a big complex high in the mountains made of massive wood platforms sticking from the side of the mountains interconnected with rope bridges, like some kind of treehouse, but tens of times bigger.

They were pretty sure Alvoren was at the platform they were looking at, for although they couldn't see what was inside because of wooden roofs and walls obstructing their view, they could see the edges of makeshift cells inside it through holes in the walls, so it was safe to assume most prisoners, including Alvoren, would be there.

Kayline led her hands to her longswords, ready to unsheath them. Although Merdilen didn't know if it was because of guilt, a sense of justice, or something else, Kayline seemed very determined to save Alvoren, especially considering they had never met each other before.

"Let's try not to kill anyone," commented Merdilen, breathing in and tensing his muscles.

"Of course. I was going to tell you the same thing," Kayline answered, looking at him curiously.

"Nice. Okay, let's go."

So, with that, Merdilen jumped down stealthily towards the nearest rope bridge, ready to fight and act according to their plan.

He started running along the rope bridge towards the platform Alvoren was on, Transmutating the rope bridge behind him into sand as he ran to separate their platform from the rest of the bandits and platforms. Merdilen quickly got to the platform and Transmuted part of his Transmutation glove's sand into his sword. Fortunately, he had had his left arm cut off, so he would still be able to swordfight, as his sword arm was the right one. As for Transmutating, he could Transmute with his whole body now. He could just Transmute with what remained of his left arm. He'd just have to get used to shorter range.

Merdilen took a deep breath and kicked open the door to the platform. Just as Kayline had said, there were fifteen bandits inside it, all of whom stood up surprised at the stranger's arrival.

Lined up on a wall, there were several cells with people in them, in one of which Merdilen saw Alvoren. He was bruised in several places, and his lip was bleeding, but aside from that, he didn't seem severely hurt.

"Merdilen!" Alvoren called, surprised.

"Hold on a little," Merdilen answered. "I'm getting you out of here."

With that, Merdilen slashed at one of the bandits with his sword, throwing him to the ground, and then at another one,

making him stagger several feet backwards before collapsing to the ground, breathing raggedly.

“The Transmutator!” one of them exclaimed, before twisting his mouth into an evil grin. “He fell for the bait. Get him!”

At that moment, all the bandits rushed him, having prepared their weapons, and Merdilen prepared to counterattack. He stretched his left foot towards one of them, and pressing it against the ground, Transmuted. The wooden floor turned into sand below the bandit, and he fell, yelping and coming to a stop a short distance down the mountain, but without having any way of going back up. Another bandit slashed at him, but Merdilen grabbed the bandit’s sword with his hand, turning it into sand. He then Transmuted his Transmutation glove from leather to steel, punching the bandit with tremendous force, throwing him down the hole in the floor and on top of his partner.

Merdilen felt a sudden urge to kill the bandits, as that would make the whole fight easier, without the need to hold back, but he stopped himself. Even though it would be more efficient, it would go against everything he believed to be right. He couldn’t allow that.

The remaining eleven bandits rushed him, raising their swords and preparing to attack. Merdilen would probably be able to survive a while longer against all of them, but he wouldn’t be able to properly fight them alone. Luckily, he wasn’t alone.

The bandits were now distracted, and Kayline used the distraction, according to the plan. She came up behind the group, from the entrance at the other side of the room, her longswords both raised high over her head, and slashed down. She cleaved onto two of the bandits, and after kicking the wounded men to the side, thrust one of her blades onto one bandit, and slashed towards another one, taking both of them out of combat. All in a matter of seconds.

The bandits turned around, shocked at seeing their men falling from behind, and Merdilen attacked them once more.

Kayline also attacked from the other side of the group, gaining an advantage by flanking their opponents.

Seven bandits left. Six. Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Zero. After a quick battle, Merdilen and Kayline defeated all of the bandits. None of them were dead, but neither were they in any position to fight anymore. And they weren't able to get reinforcements either, as Merdilen and Kayline had cut off all rope bridges leading to the platform they were on.

They stood there for a few seconds, gasping and catching their breath, and Merdilen headed for Alvoren's cell. It was locked, but Merdilen just Transmuted the lock into sand, opening the cell. Alvoren stumbled out, hurt, but raised a hand to greet him anyways.

"I knew my loyal companion would come for me," he said, grinning. He was just as cheerful as he always had been.

"Are you okay?" Merdilen asked him.

"Yeah, they're all just superficial wounds," answered Alvoren. "They weren't able to make the great hero Axerhos feel any pain!"

"Nice. Oh, I forgot to tell you. We have a new party member."

"Hello," Kayline said, sheathing her swords behind her back and approaching them. "My name is Kayline Sherdaine."

"If Merdilen trusted in you, then I trust in you too. You will be one of the few chosen ones to know my real identity. My real name is Alvoren Vandmorn, but the rest of the world knows me as... the great hero Axerhos!" With that, he crossed his arms in front of his face, trying to strike an epic pose, and Merdilen cringed internally.

"...Can I just call you Alvoren?" Kayline asked, and it was Alvoren's turn to cringe.

"...Sure."

Meanwhile, Merdilen examined the other cells. Most of them were empty, but the occupied ones all had tough-looking

prisoners, with scars on their bodies and scowls on their faces. They didn't look innocent. Merdilen pondered whether to release them or not, but then Kayline called out to him, making the choice easier.

"Hey, Merdilen! We have to get going, now. This place will be swarming with bandits in a few minutes at most."

"...Right. Let's go."

So, Merdilen, Kayline, and Alvoren ran towards the exit of the platform, and even though there were no bridges leading out anymore, Merdilen just walked straight out through the air. Right before jumping into the void, he grabbed a long wooden plank. He jumped and let it fall below him, one end still touching the platform. He then Transmuted it with his feet, turning it into a full-fledged stone bridge. Alvoren tossed him another two wooden planks, and he repeated the process twice. They ran out through the makeshift bridge as bandits shouted at them from the other platforms. But that was all they could do, and the trio dodged the few arrows that were shot at them.

They got back to the mountain and started running away. But then, most bandits jumped to the same mountain from their respective platforms, and started running after them. There were easily fifty bandits, all closing in on them. Even though Alvoren had already retrieved his weapons from the platform, there was just no way they'd be able to fight all of them.

"You guys keep running," Merdilen suddenly told them. "I'm trying something."

"What-?" Alvoren started, puzzled.

"We're not leaving you!" Kayline called out to him, unsheathing her longswords. "Whatever you're doing, it better work. And quick."

"...Thank you."

At that moment, Merdilen crouched, and pressing his right hand and both feet against the ground, prepared to Transmute. Even though he had completely healed his wounds, his missing left

arm still provided a disadvantage in battle, but luckily, that didn't affect the Transmutation. It all depended on the power of one's mind. And earth and rock were great conductors for the Transmutation. Still, this would be the biggest Transmutation he had ever done. But he could do it. He *had* to do it.

Focusing, he Transmuted part of the mountain, rising it and making a massive wall all around the group of bandits chasing them. The stone wall rose, high and high, until the bandits wouldn't even be able to fire arrows precisely over it. The Transmuted wall rose around the whole group of bandits, trapping them completely inside the ring of rock. The bandits yelped and screamed at the sudden construct, but their cries were quickly muffled by the layers of rock. Besides, the rock was completely obstructing the way to the bandit camp, so the rest of the bandits wouldn't be able to get to them either. He had done it.

Merdilen stood up, but as he did, his head hurt terribly, the landscape spinning and merging and duplicating in his vision. He stumbled towards the others, and Alvoren grabbed him, throwing Merdilen's right arm over his shoulders.

"Great work, man!" he congratulated Merdilen. Kayline just kept looking in silent awe at the massive Transmuted rock wall.

"Okay, let's go," Merdilen whispered.

With that, they started the trek down the slope, carefully but with no rush anymore. After about forty-five minutes, when they had left the bandit camp far behind them, they arrived at what seemed to be a good place to camp. As they were still in the mountainous zone, it was still just rock, but this one had a decently-sized tree hanging over it, which would provide cover from any onlookers from above and shadow when the daylight arrived.

Merdilen Transmuted that section of the ground into soft and fresh grass, and they all laid down.

“Thanks for the save, guys. I was in quite the tight spot back there,” Alvoren told them, his arms stretched out in the grass. “But, where did *you* come from?” he then asked Kayline.

“Oh, I, umm...” she hesitated, not sure what to say.

“She was from the killers’ team I told you about,” Merdilen bluntly explained. “But she’s good now.”

“Wh-what?!” Alvoren exclaimed, suddenly getting to his feet and striking an exaggerated defensive praying mantis stance. “Why should we trust her?!”

“I just saved your life,” Kayline pointed out calmly, not intimidated at all by Alvoren’s stance.

Alvoren relaxed his praying mantis stance but didn’t lay back down. “W-well, I guess you’ve got a point, but still...”

“Kayline saved me too,” Merdilen said. “I was about to be killed by the killers—or, the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team, I guess—when she stopped the man’s blade, saving my life. She also tended to my wounds after we escaped so I didn’t bleed out.”

“...Okay, I’ll trust her,” Alvoren finally accepted. “But don’t try anything funny, or you’ll pay for it.”

“Of course, of course,” Kayline said. “I made a deal with Merdilen here that he’d heal my mother once we got to Morkilen’s fortress, so I need him too.”

“Is the fortress still far?” Alvoren asked.

“I believe it is a few weeks south of where we actually are,” answered Merdilen. “It is hard to calculate the distance with this old map, but we should get there eventually.”

“That’s enough for me.”

So, after that, Merdilen Transmuted some dinner, and they ate in silence, pondering about their quest. Merdilen reached out with his left arm for food several times, only to remember he no longer had a left arm, after which he reached out with his right one instead in frustration. The same thing had happened to him during their most recent battle. He had tried to attack and Transmute with his left hand several times, as he still felt as he

had it. ‘Phantom limb syndrome,’ he believed it was called. Although he had already healed it completely, it was really strange, as he still felt it itch terribly, but it just wasn’t there. It would get some time getting used to it.

With those thoughts in mind, he looked at his allies, and then at the stars up above. He reached out to them with his missing left arm, imagining it was still there. Everything would be harder from now on, as he would have to fight with one arm less, and they would probably encounter shadow monsters every day now as they kept going south. But he couldn’t give up. Not now. Not when two people’s lives depended on him. He couldn’t give up anymore. He would get to Morkilen Farenthar’s fortress along with Alvoren and Kayline, and they would win.

Into The Unknown

April 6th

Year 2120

Southern Regional Limit

Kingdom of Fergahn, Gartaena

Merdilen, Alvoren, and Kayline had been trekking south for several hours after a long night's sleep, until Merdilen looked once more at the map, and stopped them. The terrain looked the same as in the rest of Fergahn's southern region—dull land devoid of grass, sprinkled all around with massive craters, toppled mountains, and shadow monsters. But here, there were big red flags buried in the dirt here and there, forming the outline of a long line.

“This is the Southern Regional Limit. This is where the kingdom of Fergahn ends and the Southern Wastes begin. Once we cross this line, there's no coming back until we finish our quest,” Merdilen warned. “We'll be too far away to return easily, and we'll probably be encountering shadow monsters every day now, as there will be no kingdom guards to stop them from wandering around. Are both of you ready for this? If any of you wants to go home, feel free to do it. I won't judge you.”

“Of course not,” Kayline said, thinking about how happy her family would be when they weren't poor anymore. “We're

already risking it all coming with you. We'll keep fighting to the very end."

"The great Axerhos isn't one to step down from a challenge, and never has been!" Alvoren declared, raising a fist.

"Thank you," Merdilen said, grinning. "I mean it. I wouldn't last a day out here alone."

So, with that, they kept walking, into the unknown.

Kayline walked a short distance behind the other two, watching them. She wasn't quite sure how she felt about them.

Alvoren, the self-styled 'great hero Axerhos,' had extremely high self-esteem, and he seemed to be confident he'd succeed no matter what he tried to do, something that also tended to spread to the rest of the party. Merdilen wasn't that eccentric, but he was also quite confident in himself, and one tended to feel at ease around him.

Kayline had just properly met these two people, but still, the atmosphere wasn't as awkward as she'd expected it to be. And Merdilen didn't seem to hold any kind of grudge against her for their past conflicts, something that felt extremely relieving to her. The chill and relaxed aura of the two even made her temporarily forget the dire stakes they had, the horrible landscape they were traveling in, and the terrifying monsters they'd have to face.

Being an adventurer, Kayline had never had many friends, as most girls her age were either afraid of her or thought her to be too different as to hang out with her. While most girls her age were raising children and trying to become the perfect housewives, Kayline was hunting down and capturing kingdom-wide criminals and stopping—or trying to, at least—threats to civilization itself.

Therefore, these were the first people she could consider friends she had had in a long time. It felt good having someone to fight and travel along with.

"Hey, Merdilen," Kayline asked him. "What's it like being a Transmutator?"

Merdilen looked pensive for a few moments, and then replied, "Concerning powers, it's cool. It feels good to be powerful, to be able to defend myself. Concerning reputation... not so much. Needless to say, all the hate I constantly receive is really exhausting."

"If you had the choice to give up your power or not, would you do it?" she then asked

"...I don't think so," he answered after a while. "I mean, it would be cool to not be hated and all, but... there's so much good I can do with these powers. I think... a small sacrifice like being hated is worth it if it means changing the world."

That left Kayline thinking. *He really is a hero*, she concluded.

A few minutes of walking later, Merdilen tensed, looking to the side, only to find Alvoren and Kayline looking weirdly at him. He breathed out, trying to relax. Since they had left the Kingdom of Fergahn and entered the Southern Wastes, he had been constantly feeling the presence of shadow monsters all around him, everywhere. He could just know they were somewhere in the radius of several hours' travel around him, not the distance, and that was freaking him out.

He had felt an especially strong presence just now, but as many times before, it seemed to just be a false alarm. But, the moment he let his guard down, a massive black beast emerged from behind a big rock to face them, bearing long claws and sharp fangs. A shadow monster.

All three of them jumped in surprise, taking several steps backward and preparing their weapons. Merdilen once more Transmuted his sword, Alvoren unsheathed his longsword and raised his shield, and Kayline unsheathed her two longswords, raising them in front of her.

"I'll go for the eyes," Kayline told them in a whisper. "You guys keep it entertained and then attack the inside of its mouth."

She didn't know if the others fully knew what she was planning, but they curtly nodded anyway.

The shadow monster charged them with a roar, and Alvoren ran forward to meet it with his shield. The shadow monster crashed against Alvoren's shield, breaking it and throwing Alvoren backward. The shadow monster roared and prepared to attack Alvoren again, but Merdilen stood in the way, turning his sword into a massive steel shield. The steel shield also threatened to break with the shadow monster's impact, but Merdilen counterTransmuted, mending the cracks in the shield immediately after being formed. The shadow monster attacked with its claw towards Merdilen, but now it was Alvoren's turn to get in the way, blocking with his longsword while Merdilen Transmuted his shield back to full durability.

Meanwhile, Kayline ran over to behind the shadow monster and prepared to jump on top of it.

Let's make my time spent with the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team worth something, she thought, and breathing in, jumped on top of the giant beast. She wasn't able to get on top of it on one jump, though, and struggled to climb on top of it with her hands. The shadow monster moved furiously, trying to throw her away, but as it was still busy with Merdilen and Alvoren up front, it wasn't able to attack her yet.

Kayline crawled on all fours towards the front of the shadow monster, and when she was directly on top of its eyes, she slashed horizontally with both of her longswords at once. As longswords had way bigger range than a small dagger and she already had some kind of clue about where the eyes should be, she cut them in her first try, making the shadow monster bellow in rage and pain.

It attacked blindly forward, and as Alvoren blocked the attack with his newly-mended shield, Merdilen prepared to deal the final blow. Using the remaining sand of his Transmutation glove, he extended his blade to the point that it looked more like a

spear than a sword in order to reach inside the monster's mouth, and ignited it, Transmutating it so that intense blue fire fully covered the edges of the sword-spear. He then thrust his weapon towards the blind shadow monster, piercing through its flesh and emerging from the top of the beast. The shadow monster gave one final roar before falling to the ground and dying.

"...Wow," muttered Kayline, jumping off from the giant corpse. "I thought it'd be harder."

"Yeah," agreed Merdilen. "The last time I fought a shadow monster, I almost died, got lynched and arrested, and lost everything I had."

"Oh. I had fought a shadow monster once before, with a very powerful ally, and it was *way* harder than it was now," Alvoren added. "I guess teamwork makes the dream work."

"It may also affect a little that we literally have a living legend by our side," mentioned Kayline.

"Don't mention it," Merdilen said, shrugging off the compliment. "You did most of the job."

"Yeah," confirmed Alvoren.

"Thanks," she said, slightly grinning in pride.

Merdilen looked around, making sure there were no more shadow monsters around, and then said, "Most shadow monster presences I feel are from over here. There, to the west, I feel almost no shadow monsters. Maybe we should head that way."

"Sure," agreed Alvoren. "Let's go."

So they kept walking. They were in a valley now, surrounded mainly by two big mountains. One of them, the eastern one, was full of shadow monster presences, while the other one, the western one, had almost no shadow monsters at all. Therefore, they were headed for the latter now, trying to make as fast and easy progress as possible.

"To think shadow monsters were mere soldiers during the Transmutation War," Kayline mentioned with a shudder. "I can't even begin to imagine how much damage a whole army of them

would do. No wonder the world of Gartaena was left like it is today.”

“Yeah,” agreed Alvoren. “Poor victims.”

“I have come to another decision,” Merdilen declared.

“When I get Morkilen Farenthar’s power, I will annihilate every shadow monster in Gartaena, so the world can live at peace.”

“Are you insane?” asked Kayline, raising her eyebrows.

“There must be thousands, if not tens of thousands, of shadow monsters in the whole world!”

“Well, I’m still young. And traveling around the world hunting shadow monsters sounds way more fun than farming,” Merdilen said with a grin.

“The great hero Axerhos will accompany you!” Alvoren declared. “That is a task worthy of his powerful name!”

“...You guys really are insane,” commented Kayline, dumbfounded. “But let’s focus on the task at hand for now. First things first, let’s get to that mountain.”

So, they kept walking, and after an hour, before actually getting to the mountain itself, they saw a group of about thirty men approaching them.

“Huh? A caravan?” Merdilen asked. But at that moment, all twenty men took out swords, axes, and a few even bows.

“No—bandits!”

“I think they’ve seen us,” muttered Kayline.

“Stop right there!” one of them exclaimed, pointing a bow towards them. “Hands over your head! This is Crimson Ruby territory!”

“Damn it,” Alvoren said, gritting his teeth. “I think they are too many for even the great hero Axerhos and his loyal companions to fight. We don’t even have the element of surprise, and they have bows and arrows.”

Not finding anything else to do, and not wanting to try and escape from those deadly bows, they did as ordered, raising their hands over their heads and waiting for the group to arrive.

“State your business,” the man ordered when the group of bandits got closer.

“Uhh,” Merdilen stuttered, unsure of what to say.

“We’re just passing by,” Kayline tried to bluff.

“Sure, sure, because there are *so many* touristic places down south,” the man sarcastically said. “You’re spies, aren’t you?”

“Of course not!” Alvoren said, seemingly offended. “You wouldn’t have been able to catch the great hero Axerhos if we had known this was the Ruby’s territory.”

“Whatever. You’re coming with us,” the man said coldly.

They were outnumbered and outmatched. Even if they somehow managed to beat all thirty men, they had no way of knowing if more bandits would come after them. Therefore, they hesitantly let the group guide them. They stripped them of their weapons, but fortunately, the bandits didn’t tie them up, another witness of their confidence in numbers. The bandits took them up the western mountain, and after about ten minutes of silent walking, got to the entrance of a big cave with a flaming torch on each side. It seemed to be some kind of tunnel, and the bandits pushed all three of them inside. This bandit lair seemed to be comprised of cave tunnels instead of mountain platforms.

The bandits guided them along the tunnels for several minutes, the way twisting, turning, and dividing as they went on. Merdilen doubted they’d be able to find the way out by themselves if they tried to escape. They finally came to a stop at a big steel door, and one of the bandits knocked on it twice with his gloved knuckles.

“Come in,” a deep and grave voice called out.

The bandit who had knocked on the door then opened it, revealing a big office, its walls lined up with shelves and weapons and a big desk in the middle, behind which a big and bulky man sat with his feet upon it. He had his right arm sleeveless and bare, and a big ruby tattoo was visible on his right shoulder, marking him as a member of the Crimson Ruby criminal guild.

“Come to bring more candidates, do you?” the man asked. *Candidates?* Merdilen wondered. He didn’t like the sound of that.

“Yes, boss,” the bandit from before answered. “They were armed, and considering they arrived out here safely, just the three of them, they must be good. This guy’s missing an arm, though, but we lose nothing by trying.”

“We lose nothing by trying. Yes, that’s right,” the bandit boss said, giving a big chuckle. “Hey, you three,” he then said, addressing Merdilen, Alvoren, and Kayline. “I have a deal for you. You see, there is a guy on the mountains parallel to this one who can tame shadow monsters, and he’s causing a hell of a lot of trouble for us.”

A man who can tame shadow monsters...? Merdilen wondered, nervous. *How can that be?*

“He wants to take over this subsection of the Ruby, and of course, I’m not letting him,” the bandit boss continued. “Capture him and bring him over to us and we grant you safe passage over these mountains. Easy peasy.”

“Why should we trust that you’ll fulfill your part of the deal?” Kayline protested.

“You don’t really have a choice, do you?” the bandit boss answered, letting out a booming laugh.

“Why don’t you send your own men to do it?” Merdilen then asked.

“He’s quite strong, you know,” he explained. “Many have tried and failed. I can’t risk any more of my own men. But, again, you guys don’t really have a choice.”

“...I guess we’re doing it, then,” Merdilen said. “In exchange for safe passage through those mountains.”

“Of course, of course!”

“If I were you I would be preparing the man’s cell right now!” Alvoren told the bandit boss with confidence.

“Just know one thing,” the bandit boss finally told them in a menacing tone. “If you don’t do it and instead try to escape, I will hunt you down until I have all three of your heads hanging from the entrance of the cave. That is a promise. You have one day.”

“...What a nice guy,” Alvoren muttered under his breath.

With that, another bandit led them out of the cave system and then pointed to a faraway ruin on the eastern mountain.

“The leader you need to exterminate lives on that ruined ex-military base,” the bandit told them. “Good luck. You’ll need it.”

Then, they started the trek down the mountain, and then towards the parallel one, ready to fight.

“He should be on that tower over there,” Alvoren said while they crouched behind a rock, looking at the ruined ex-military base.

“How do you know?” asked Kayline.

“That’s where I would be in his position.”

“Fair enough,” said Merdilen. “It’d make sense to be in the highest and most secure point of the fortress. He has the high ground. Besides, if we don’t find him there, we can just carefully and silently make our way down the fortress. We’re bound to find him eventually.”

“How are we meant to get to the tower, then?” Kayline asked. “The fortress must be swarming with shadow monsters.”

“Walking,” Merdilen said simply. Kayline looked towards him incredulously, raising her eyebrows, and then he added, “We have an enormous advantage over any other teams sent to capture this guy. I’m a Transmutator. I can just make a bridge from the nearest mountain so we walk over there. And I can block all entrances to the room so he doesn’t get reinforcements. Defeating one guy should be easy.”

“True,” Kayline agreed. “Unlike other teams, we don’t need to fight an entire fortress of shadow monsters to get to our target. We’ve got quite the shortcut.”

“We would be doing a service to humanity too,” Merdilen commented. “Defeating a man who can tame shadow monsters would prove to be extremely helpful.”

“The great hero Axerhos approves of the mission!” Alvoren declared.

“Okay,” Merdilen said, breathing in. “Let’s go.”

With that, they left their hiding place, and started walking in a crouch towards a certain peak, which was relatively close to the tower the shadow monster tamer should be on. When they got there, they took a closer and better look at the tower. It looked ancient, probably dating from the Transmutation War, but it was still in a relatively good state.

It was very tall, about half the height of the peak next to it, and it was of a gray stone color, its edges swollen by moss and time. The whole structure had once had windows, but now only the shattered frames remained, revealing big rooms and halls, all swarming with shadow monsters. Unfortunately, only the farther wall could be seen from the top of the tower, though.

Merdilen concentrated, pressing his right hand and legs against the mountain, and Transmuted a massive chunk of it into a giant block of compacted sand surrounding his arm. That was a good way of carrying big components for Transmutating, he had realized shortly before. He carried the block of compacted sand towards the edge of the mountain, and lowering it, started to slowly Transmute the sand into a steady rock bridge. He started walking through it confidently, Transmutating the sand and creating the bridge as he crossed it.

Kayline and Alvoren seemed hesitant at first, but followed shortly after. After a small while, Merdilen finally got with his bridge to the tower’s tallest window frame, and after making sure his friends were behind him and ready to fight, jumped in.

It was a big hall, with one corner of it filled by a giant wooden desk filled with maps. A single man was sitting on a chair behind it, studying one of the maps, his hands hidden and his back

towards Merdilen. Merdilen gestured toward him for his companions to see, then rushed him, Transmutating his sword as he ran. As soon as he got near the desk, he jumped upwards, raising his blade, ready to attack the seemingly unsuspecting man.

But the moment he slashed downwards, the man took out a long rapier from under the desk, raising it fast as lightning and fully parrying Merdilen's strike.

"More assassins? The Ruby really is stubborn, huh," the man said, getting up from his desk and grinning. "Although these assassins aren't subtle at all. My shadow monsters alerted me when you were a mile away. Still, they should provide some fun."

Merdilen studied him, squinting. The man was very thin, wore glasses, and had short hair. He was wearing a plain white shirt, and didn't look like a fighter at all. Still, he had to be quite strong, considering how efficiently he had parried Merdilen's supposedly 'surprise' attack.

"Deal with them, Brokoren," the man then said, his evil grin widening even further.

From the shadows behind them, a massive shadow monster appeared, wearing full steel armor and roaring. Its armor had several spikes and tusks rising from it, making it a walking armory. Kayline didn't want to know what would happen if that thing were to trample an innocent villager. It was bigger than any other shadow monster any of them had ever seen before, and it rose several times an average man's height. It was truly a terrifying sight. It roared once more, raising its head and opening its jaw a terrifying amount.

"Alvoren, think you can deal with the man?" Merdilen called out.

"Of course I, the great hero Axerhos, can deal with him!" answered solemnly Alvoren, preparing his sword and shield. Kayline and Merdilen prepared to in turn fight the massive shadow monster apparently called Brokoren.

Kayline was extremely nervous, but forcing herself to remain calm, prepared herself for Brokoren's charge. The enormous beast rushed them with incredible speed, and as it hit Merdilen, who had Transmuted a giant shield, Kayline ran to circle it. She got to its rear, but this one was too big for her to just jump upon. As it hit Merdilen, who kept on blocking with his massive shield, Kayline dropped one of her longswords, and using her remaining hand, grabbed onto one of the massive spikes eroding from Brokoren's armor. As she did, Merdilen quickly ran over to each of the entrances, blocking them as to prevent reinforcements from arriving before facing Brokoren once more.

The shadow monster kept moving, twisting, and shaking, so it was hard to get a good grip on it, but Kayline pulled herself up anyway. She then raised a foot, placing it on another grip, and started to climb. She climbed, up and up through the moving mountain, extending her body as to keep herself as far away as possible from the monster's spikes. After a small while, she got to the top, and started to quickly run forward between the spikes. When she got to where its eyes were, she raised her right sword, and prepared to slash down.

Maybe this Brokoren isn't as tough as he seems, Kayline thought, filled with hope. She slashed down, and cut its eyes. But, it didn't seem to want to retreat yet. In fact, it didn't seem weaker at all.

Merdilen had Transmuted his shield into a sword-spear, prepared to kill Brokoren. Merdilen had expected for Brokoren to fall back so he could attack it, as it had happened with the last shadow monster they had fought.

But this one was different. It didn't retreat. Instead, it attacked.

It opened its massive jaw, preparing to thrust it at Merdilen, and Merdilen didn't have time to turn his sword-spear back into a shield. Brokoren took a bite at him, and he wasn't able to do anything except being swallowed whole.

“Merdilen!” Kayline and Alvoren yelled simultaneously as Brokoren swallowed Merdilen, but there was nothing they could do.

Alvoren headed towards the man as Merdilen and Kayline prepared to fight Brokoren, the massive shadow monster. Alvoren was nervous for his friends, as Brokoren was truly terrifying, but he forced himself to look away from them and at his opponent. He had his own battle to fight.

The man was looking at him with a grin, looking at him with confidence as the two opponents circled each other. Although this man didn’t seem to be as strong as Alvoren, he was wielding a rapier, which meant he was clearly much faster. He would have to be *very* careful. The man thrust at Alvoren with his rapier, trying him. Alvoren swung his sword around, deflecting the blow, and raised his shield just as the man retracted his rapier and attacked once more. The shield parried the rapier perfectly, and the man retreated, still grinning.

“You’re good,” he said. “But, are you good enough?”

Is this some kind of game to him? Alvoren thought, frowning. He was quite nervous, but his enemy seemed to be as calm as the reader reading this story. It was unnerving.

The man thrust his blade at Alvoren once more, and Alvoren once more swung his sword in order to deflect the rapier, but this time, the man twisted his rapier around the sword and pushed to the left, trying to hit it away from Alvoren’s hand. Alvoren in turn hit the rapier with his shield, depriving it of its strength, and the man retreated once more.

“Nice,” he said. “You’ve clearly had good training. Okay, I’ve warmed up.”

“You’re getting better, Alvoren! You’re quite worthy of being Axerhos,” the boy said, grinning. Alvoren subconsciously remembered his old friend, the boy he had liked to play make-believe with so long ago, pretending to be the great hero

Axerhos and his loyal companion, long before his life was filled with Transmutators, bandits, shadow monsters, and pain. The memory caused him a pang of nostalgia, but he forced himself to push the memory away, focusing instead on his present battle.

The man rushed him once more, starting a combo of several quick thrusts. Alvoren deflected all of them with his shield and sword, but one of them brushed his left shoulder, superficially cutting him. Alvoren slashed at the man towards his knees, but the man blocked the slash, and then Alvoren attacked once more, towards the head, but the man blocked once more. Their swords locked for a few seconds, letting out a high-pitched long screech. The man looked at him, grinning, and thrust at him once more, breaking the lock.

They kept both attacking and defending, feinting and blocking, neither being able to get past the other's defenses enough as to deal a winning blow. Alvoren clearly had good defenses, as he was used to fighting with a shield, but even so, the man had still managed to superficially cut him several times. But Alvoren hadn't even been able to touch the man once with his sword, even though the man was just defending with a rapier. His mastery of the weapon was unlike anything he had ever seen before. He would never be able to get past his rapier enough as to deal a real hit. But then Alvoren came up with an idea. He didn't *need* to get past the rapier.

But in that very moment, he heard Merdilen yelp, and both combatants automatically looked toward him, just in time to see him get swallowed whole by the brutal Brokoren.

"Merdilen!" Alvoren called out, and his enemy started to chuckle, then laugh out loud.

"Damn you!" Alvoren exclaimed, attacking him once more.

The man blocked once more with his rapier, but this time, it was Alvoren's turn to grin. The man had forced Alvoren to hit the rapier. But Alvoren had been *aiming* for the rapier. Alvoren put all his strength into the hit, simultaneously hitting the rapier's

handle with his shield's edge. The man's grip on the hilt weakened just momentarily, and Alvoren used that opportunity to finish his slash. He pushed the rapier with exploding force, and it flew away from his opponent's hand, burying itself in the ground at the other side of the room and granting the victory to the great hero Axerhos.

Merdilen was too late in Transmutating his shield back, and the massive shadow monster thrust his jaw at him, grabbing him and swallowing him whole. Fortunately, he was swallowed whole, so the monster's horrific teeth didn't hurt him, but then the monster raised his head. Merdilen started to slide down its throat at an alarming speed, and quickly got to its stomach, completely wet and nauseated. It looked like a massive pool, full of weapons, armor, and steel things. Merdilen subconsciously supposed those were the only things that could survive the stomach's acids.

As if on cue, he fully fell into the green acids, and it started to burn his body, tearing at his flesh. He screamed, starting to sink in the dark and foul-smelling acid. He had to do something, and quick. He stabbed at the shadow monster from inside, but his one sword wasn't enough to deal any damage. His one blade wasn't enough. Suddenly, as he looked at the rest of the swords and weapons floating inside the morbius stomach, an idea occurred to him. If this didn't work, his body would completely corrode, and he would die long before his friends outside were able to kill Brokoren.

He extended his body as to touch every solid thing he could find, and ignoring the pain, concentrated, and Transmuted. He fused all of those things into one massive greatsword, which thrust naturally when appearing against the stomach's side. The combined greatsword's strength of all those Transmuted weapons and armor was too much for the shadow monster's side and armor, and it ripped through its flesh and skin, a ray of light entering the stomach. Everything started to pour out of the beast,

including Merdilen, and Brokoren started to tumble around, right before dropping dead because of the massive wound on its side.

“No, my glorious Brokoren!” its owner exclaimed as Kayline helped Merdilen up.

“You were never any match for the great hero Axerhos and his loyal companions!” Alvoren declared, raising his sword in an epic stance.

Southern Wastes

April 6th

Year 2120

Southern Mountain Range

Southern Wastes, Gartaena

“D-don’t kill me!” the man exclaimed desperately. “My shadow monsters will kill you if you do!”

“We’re not killing you, we’re taking you with us,” Kayline said.

“Besides, your shadow monsters can’t hurt us much if they can’t get to us,” added Merdilen while healing himself with his Transmutation. “Now tell us: how did you learn how to tame shadow monsters?”

“W-well, I guess it wouldn’t hurt to tell you,” the man muttered nervously. “It all started three months ago. I was part of the Crimson Ruby at that time, and I worked with the group of bandits from the mountains west of here. A group of men attacked us, seemingly belonging to some kind of cult, a cult that treats shadow monsters as superior beings. They had learned to tame them and to use them in battle, and after a gruesome fight, we managed to defeat them, capturing one of them. The rest of the bandits were pure brutes, so I left with the captured cultist, taking hold of this abandoned fortress.”

“So you betrayed them,” Alvoren commented.

“...I guess you could call it that way,” the man said with a sigh. “But it was just because I was the only one who’d be able to fully take advantage of his potential. Anyway, I took him here, and he taught me their ancient art. Ironically enough, one of the very first shadow monsters I tamed ended up accidentally killing him. I’ve been in constant warfare for territory with my old allies since then, and they had never succeeded in actually killing me or capturing me, because of my defensive legion of shadow monsters. Until now.”

“We’re meant to bring you in alive, but they said nothing about a little torture,” Merdilen bluffed. “So tell us everything you know about the Southern Wastes.”

“Well, I don’t know much, as I have never been farther down from here, but I’ll tell you what I know,” the man started. “The Southern Wastes are the southern region of the world of Gartaena, left that way as it was the main warzone of the Transmutation War. Although it is shrouded in mystery, I do know there are strange cultures, weird landscapes, and ancient powers and knowledge over there. There are extremely few maps of that region, as no sane explorer would voluntarily venture into it.”

At least that last part of it was true, Merdilen thought. He had never seen a map of the Southern Wastes before he got his books from the House of Records, and even the map he did have just outlined the main mountains, lakes, rivers, and of course, Morkilen Farenthar’s fortress. They would have to be really careful when traveling over there.

“Anything else?” Alvoren asked.

“I don’t know anything else, nor any details,” the man answered.

“Okay, time to leave, come with us,” Merdilen told him, grabbing him by the arm and pulling him up. They left the tower, crossing once again the bridge Merdilen had formed.

After binding the man's mouth to make sure he wouldn't call any shadow monsters to him, they started the trip back to the other mountain.

They started walking, but when they were about halfway to the bandits' lair, they realized there was a problem with their plan.

"What if they suddenly decide to not let us go?" Kayline said. "Sure, they might not come after us when we leave, but while we're actually there, they can feel tempted to keep us there as slaves or whatnot. How can we make sure that doesn't happen?"

"The ideal would be for us not to go back to them, but I doubt our Mr. Captive here will walk back to them alone and unguarded," commented Merdilen.

"Can we, you know, throw him to them in some way...?" Alvoren wondered, and then his eyes flashed with the spark of a sudden idea. "I've got it! What if we... catapult him there?"

"That's stupid," Kayline said immediately. "We don't know how to build one."

"I do!" Alvoren exclaimed. "We saw that when I was at school several years ago, and I still remember the basics."

"W-well, it's still stupid," she protested. "We don't want our captive to get there smashed against the ground. It'd go against everything we believe in."

"I might be able to do something against fall damage," Merdilen said, remembering his daring escape from the House of Records. "So there's this thing called a parachute... He'll probably throw up during the ride, but we were told to get him there alive, not clean."

"I can't believe you're considering this!" Kayline told him dumbfounded, raising her eyebrows. "In that case... How are we meant to make them know it was us?"

"A note," Merdilen said simply. "We've got time."

"You guys are so stupid," Kayline finally said, sighing, giving up.

So, while Kayline guarded their captive, Merdilen and Alvoren worked on making a makeshift catapult. It took way longer than it should have taken, as Merdilen had a missing arm, but after several hours and a lot of failed attempts, they finally did it. They had to make it extremely big as for it to throw a man all the way to the mountain, but as Merdilen was a Transmutator, they were able to.

“There was never any doubt that I, the great hero Axerhos, and my loyal companion would be able to make this!” Alvoren exclaimed victoriously.

“Okay, time to leave,” Merdilen told the captive man.

Merdilen then made a makeshift parachute, and after untying the man’s hands, strapped the parachute to his back.

“You don’t have to do anything,” he told the man. “It’ll open automatically with the wind. If it doesn’t... then you’ll plummet to the ground and die. If I was you I’d be praying right now.”

“Oh,” was all the man was able to say. He seemed to want to say something else, but no words came out of his mouth. He was terrified. But they didn’t really have a choice.

They loaded him onto the catapult, and after making sure he was as ready as he could be, Merdilen told him, “Off you go,” and cut the catapult’s rope with his sword.

The moment he did that, the catapult sprung into action with enormous force and speed, throwing the man onto the sky. The catapult broke in half because of the massive pressure and force, but they didn’t need it anymore. Needless to say, the man would never reach the mountain with that poor makeshift catapult, but that was where the parachute came in. When the man reached the peak of his flight, the parachute opened because of the wind, and the man stopped falling, instead gliding calmly over to the mountain. After a short trip, the man came to a stop, hitting the mountain and falling into one of its many small roads.

“Woo-hoo!” Alvoren exclaimed happily. “Our brains are *massive!*”

“They are indeed,” Merdilen agreed, grinning, and Kayline sighed once more.

“Sir! You must see this, sir!” the lesser bandit told the bandit boss, who scoffed. “The leader of the shadow monsters is here!”

“That group of adventurers actually succeeded?!” the bandit boss asked incredulously, getting up from his chair so fast it toppled over.

“Seems like it, sir. You must see this.”

With that, the bandit boss followed the lesser bandit, into one of the many roads lining the outside of the lair. Lying in it was, effectively, the leader of the shadow monsters, somehow wearing a parachute.

“What the-? How did you get here, you?” the bandit boss asked the fallen and bruised man.

“They catapulted me here,” the man said weakly. “One of them was... a Transmutator.”

“A-a Transmutator?!” the bandit boss exclaimed, his surprised mouth slowly twisting into a grin. “Sherdaine will want to hear about this.”

“Hey, Merdilen, I’ve been wanting to ask you something for a while,” Kayline told Merdilen as they settled down on a place to camp. The place wasn’t that special, as there was almost no grass in the Southern Wastes, but it was already getting late, so they’d have to make do. “Why is there no useful information about the Transmutation in your ancestor’s fortress? That would’ve spared us a *lot* of trouble.”

“I have no idea,” Merdilen genuinely answered, sitting down on a comfortable chair he’d just Transmuted from a rock. “If I had to guess, I’d say it was so Morkilen Farenthar, his

archenemy, wouldn't find it, but still, it's strange. If he, Kateko, lived in the fortress, he could've protected the secrets to the Transmutation himself, without needing to destroy it for Morkilen not to have it. But, if he didn't live in his fortress, then what's the point in having a personal fortress in the first place? It's strange. I have personally never understood that. Maybe we'll find some clue to it in Morkilen's fortress, although I don't think so."

"Hmmm," Kayline wondered, looking at the sky. "Maybe he didn't want the Transmutation either?"

"But that makes no sense," Merdilen argued. "Why create something that you don't want?"

"Maybe he *did* want it in the beginning," Alvoren proposed. "Maybe something happened along his journey that made him change his mind."

"Could be. But, what?" Merdilen asked. "What could have made him make such a decision? True, my own life would have been more peaceful without the Transmutation, but I can still use it for good, so I like having it. I don't understand why someone wouldn't want to be a Transmutator *and* wouldn't want anyone else to be one either."

"I guess some truths are better left unknown," Alvoren commented, to which Merdilen looked at him curiously.

"Maybe that's true," he finally answered. "There's no way to know anyway, so there isn't much of a point to wonder about it."

They sat there in silence, looking at the sky, the landscape, and each other, until Kayline broke the silence a little later.

"Hey, Merdilen... do you think you could make me a notebook and a pencil?" she asked.

"Huh? That's a strange request," Merdilen commented, "but sure. May I ask what you want it for?"

"I like to draw a lot," Kayline replied. "I used to have a notebook with drawings of every place I visited in my travels, but needless to say, I lost it when I joined you. My little brother would be slightly disappointed if I came back empty-handed, so I want to

make it up for him. The Southern Wastes provide landscapes quite... unique, you know?”

“Nice,” commented Alvoren. “You must be a good big sister.”

“Yeah,” agreed Merdilen, and Kayline let out a sad smile.

Torlen and her mother... Kayline hadn’t seen them in almost three weeks, which was more than any other job she had taken. They’d be so worried... But she had to do this. Even if it took a month or two of worriedness, if it meant saving her mother’s life and her family economically, then it’d be worth it. Their life would be a thousand times better when she returned with Merdilen and Alvoren, and that was worth doing anything. With those thoughts in mind, she started to draw the landscape around them, the mountains, the valley, the rocks, everything, in order to have something to bring back to Torlen when she returned.

After a short while, they had dinner and went to sleep. That night, Kayline dreamed of her family.

The next day, they woke up early and started their trek once more towards Morkilen’s fortress. The day was colder than the others before, and Autumn was fully visible now. Although there were no trees anywhere near their camp, they were sure orange trees would already be dropping their leaves all around the southern half of the world of Gartaena. Fortunately, they had a Transmutator with them. Merdilen had Transmuted warmer—but still flexible—clothes for all of them, so they were all okay.

Of course, Kayline would have preferred to be wrapped up in blankets with her family in their home, drinking hot cocoa and reading a good book, but nothing was perfect. Still, Merdilen had warmed up their food using his Transmutation, so they had been all right.

They kept walking for a few hours through a long valley between two mountains with relatively no problem, and they only

sighted one shadow monster, which they could easily evade. They were getting ever closer to their objective.

They had kept walking for the entirety of that day with ease, and the next day started similarly. But, when they thought that they would finally have several peaceful days in a row, they saw once more the most stubborn squad of fighters in the world of Gartaena.

A big and burly fighter wielding a greatsword, a slimmer archer carrying a bow and arrows, and a small rogue with no visible weapons. The Anti-Transmutation Strike Team.

Thanks to the multitude of bandits along the way, Merdilen, Alvoren, and Kayline had managed to get several days' advantage between them, but their luck had finally run out.

"There you are, traitor!" Sir Grendar bellowed towards her. "This will be over soon!"

"The Anti-Transmutation Strike Team," Merdilen muttered to Alvoren.

"Ohh, so these are the guys, huh," Alvoren answered. "It's three against three, and we've got a Transmutator on our side. We should win."

"That's right," Kayline agreed. "It will be over, but for them. But remember: no killing. They're still human."

"Of course," Merdilen said. "Let's do this."

Then, Merdilen Transmuted a part of his Transmutation glove into his sword, and along with Kayline, rushed Sir Grendar. Meanwhile, Alvoren rushed Jarleren. Usually, Jarleren always managed to stab Merdilen at least once, as he always had the benefit of stealth, but now that Alvoren was on him, that wouldn't happen anymore. This time, they would win.

Merdilen attacked Sir Grendar with his blade, and Sir Grendar perfectly blocked it with his Bladesmasher. Kayline used the distraction to circle him and slashed twice at the man's back. She wasn't able to actually reach his body with her swords because

of the armor, but she bit deep into it, leaving two deep cuts on the shining plate.

Meanwhile, Alvoren thrust his sword at Jarleren, who dodged it with incredible nimbleness and speed. The smaller man in turn stabbed at him with his dagger, and Alvoren blocked with his shield, a moment before raising it to block an incoming arrow fired from Salvatore. Sir Grendar kept exchanging blows with Merdilen and Kayline, and although Sir Grendar wasn't damaged at all because of his armor, he was clearly overwhelmed.

But at that moment, Merdilen felt a presence.

It wasn't like the shadow monsters, yet it felt powerful. But it wasn't defiled and corrupted like the Transmutation that had created the shadow monsters; this was just plain, raw power. He looked around him, confused, but Sir Grendar took advantage of the distraction and cut at him with his Bladesmasher. Merdilen reacted just in place, turning his shoulder's sleeve into steel armor, but he was still superficially cut from it. Salvatore also tried to take advantage of the situation, and fired an arrow towards Merdilen's head.

But the arrow didn't land.

The arrow just stood floating in the air, a foot away from Merdilen's head, as if time itself had stopped for it. Everyone froze in shock, just as the arrow had.

"Wh-what?" Merdilen asked in a whisper while looking at the immobile arrow, his voice trembling. The powerful presence Merdilen had been feeling intensified enormously.

"I'll be taking him alive and unharmed, thank you very much," a man suddenly said from somewhere behind Merdilen.

He pivoted around, his heart beating hard in his chest, only to see a group of about thirty men looking at them, all of them armed. He recognized some of them. Bandits, from the subsection of the Crimson Ruby that inhabited one of the mountains from the Southern Mountain Range. But he didn't recognize the man who had spoken in the first place, although he did seem oddly familiar.

He had black hair and eyes, and was grinning. His arm was extended. Extended towards the arrow. He spun his hand around, then thrust it downwards. The arrow... mimicked his movement, spinning once in the air before falling downwards and burying itself in the ground.

“W-who are you?” asked Sir Grendar.

“You don’t need to know my name,” the mysterious man said, still grinning. “Now hand over the Transmutator before this gets ugly.”

“Never!” Kayline and Sir Grendar exclaimed simultaneously.

“As you wish. As a courtesy, we’ll leave you alive, just unconscious.”

With that, Merdilen, Alvoren, and Kayline stepped to the side, preparing once more for battle, their eyes darting between the two enemy factions. A few seconds later, all hell broke loose. The bandits attacked everyone, and they all started to fight each other, trying to distinguish friend from foe in the forty-people battle.

While Merdilen, Alvoren, and Kayline along with Jarleren and Salvatore defended themselves from the rest of the bandits, the mysterious man attacked Sir Grendar, probably thinking him to be the greatest threat of them all. Sir Grendar swung the massive Bladesmasher towards the man, but with a simple hand movement from the man, the greatsword was raised and slashed way over the man’s head, as if a wind current or something like that had pushed it upward. The man then pulled out a thick dagger, and stabbed towards Sir Grendar’s chest. He simultaneously did another hand movement and the dagger shot forward with immense speed and strength, as if the wind itself was propelling it, and even though it wasn’t enough to kill Sir Grendar, the simple dagger surprisingly buried itself deep within the armor, reemerging once more after a few moments, red with blood.

Seeing as how the man had so easily deflected the Blademasher earlier, Sir Grendar tried to punch him with an armored-covered fist, trying to catch him by surprise. But the man simply jumped upwards an unnaturally enormous amount, getting high over Sir Grendar's head and kicking him in the neck. The kick was pushed by some unknown power, flying with exploding force towards the neck, and Sir Grendar plummeted to the ground with a loud *thud!*, alive but unconscious.

Merdilen looked at the fallen combatant, his eyes widened with surprise. The man had defeated Sir Grendar, one of his biggest enemies, without breaking a sweat.

What is this man? he wondered. But, in the distraction, he was hit in the head twice by the pommel of a bandit's sword, and fell to the ground. He heard someone shout his name, but then the mysterious man approached him, kicking him too with one of his powerful kicks. Merdilen's vision went black, and even though he tried hard not to, lost consciousness completely.

Kayline woke up several hours later, confused. She just laid there in the ground for a few minutes, and her memories slowly started coming back to her. They had been fighting the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team, and a group of bandits, whose leader wielded some incredible unknown power, had joined the battle, defeating them all. She sat up with a gasp, opening her eyes, and the midday sun woke her up completely.

They seemed to still be in the location of the battle, and Alvoren was lying unconscious a short distance from her, his body in a strange position. Her swords were gone, but she fortunately still had a bit of food left in her backpack. The Anti-Transmutation Strike Team was nowhere to be seen. Had they left before Kayline woke up? That was probably it. Merdilen... was nowhere to be seen either. Either the bandits or the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team had captured him, and neither possibility was good.

But, thinking about it, the bandits had been winning the battle when she had passed out, so they probably had Merdilen instead of the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team. Merdilen probably was alive, and possibly unharmed, because of what the mysterious man had said right before their battle. Kayline sighed, relieved. But still, they'd have to save him. Not saving him wasn't an option. Not when they were in the position they were in. She walked towards Alvoren and grabbed his arm.

"Hey, Alvoren, wake up!" she told him, shaking him. "Alvoren!"

"Huh... w-what?" he mumbled, turning around to face her and rubbing his eyes.

Same as Kayline before, he looked confused at first, but then quickly regained his composure.

"We gotta save Merdilen," Kayline told him.

"Of course!" he immediately said. "I, the great hero Axerhos, would never leave a loyal companion behind! Especially one that saved my life."

"Yeah, he saved my life too. We owe it to him," Kayline agreed. "But we can't just walk in through the front door. We need a distraction. And new weapons, as our older ones were taken."

With that, they both started looking around, searching for ideas, until Alvoren spotted three lonely figures far in the distance, walking away from them.

"I think I've got our distraction," he said. It was the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team.

"That's perfect!" Kayline exclaimed. "They'll probably go attack the bandits' lair to kill Merdilen, and while they're fighting the bandits, we can sneak in and take Merdilen unopposed!"

"Right," Alvoren agreed. "We must follow them, but without being seen. We don't know what they'd do to us if they spotted us."

With that, they started following the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team, hiding behind rocks or dead trees whenever one of its

members looked behind them. They kept following for several hours, until they saw Jarleren gesture something to the rest, and all three of them hid behind a rock. Kayline and Alvoren hid too, confused, looking for the reason for the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team hiding. Soon enough, they saw it. A patrol of four armed bandits was walking through the valley, unaware of the danger stalking them.

Jarleren removed his black cloak, revealing brown clothes under it, clothes the same color of the landscape around them. He then took out two daggers from somewhere beneath his clothes the bandits seemingly hadn't found, holding one in each hand, and started to crouch out of the rock. Hiding in plain sight, he started to make a long circle around the bandits, crouching from rock to rock, until he was far behind them. He then stopped hiding and rushed the bandits, running hard but without making the slightest noise with his feet.

When he got to the unsuspecting bandits, he raised both daggers and sliced at two of the bandits' necks. Both fell, dead, but before they even touched the ground, Jarleren sliced the necks of the two remaining bandits, who also fell next to their partners. Sir Grendar and Salvatore came out of the hiding spot, and Jarleren tossed one sword to each, leaving the other two on the ground. They both grabbed them, and kept walking, with more confidence now.

After making sure they had left, Kayline and Alvoren came out of their own hiding spots, heading for the bandits' dropped swords. They each grabbed one, sheathing them in their empty scabbards. Kayline was used to fighting with two swords, but one was way better than none. Still, as they were heading straight into the bandits' lair, Kayline had the feeling she'd get a second sword before their quest was over.

Merdilen woke up, dazed. He slowly opened his eyes, confused, and tried to remember where he was. After several

minutes, he finally remembered. He had been captured by the bandits and been taken to their lair. Why had it taken that long to remember? He looked around, trying to get up. He was in some kind of dark cell, his legs, right arm, and the remainder of his left arm strapped to a wooden chair. He could see a metal door in front of him, but nothing else. He tried to Transmutate his bindings into sand, but nothing happened.

What... is happening? he wondered, getting increasingly nervous, and even afraid. His mind felt confused and shadowy, and thinking was hard. *I... must be drugged*, he realized. He was captured. Was there... any way out? Without his Transmutation, that didn't seem likely. *Where are Kayline and Alvoren? Are they safe? Are they alright?* He had too many questions, and no way to answer them.

"...Hello?" he called out.

A few moments later, his cell door slowly opened, and a man entered. The same man with black hair and eyes. The man with strange powers, he recalled.

"Welcome to our base, my little gold mine," the strange man told him, grinning. "You can call me Sherdaine. What about you?"

Merdilen didn't answer anything, puzzled. *My little gold mine?* What had he meant by that? Everything was so strange. And... Sherdaine? *Like in Kayline Sherdaine?*

"What is it, cat got your tongue?" the man, seemingly called Sherdaine, mockingly asked. "Well, do you want to live?"

"...Of course," Merdilen answered, still confused by the apparent drugging.

"Good boy. Then, make me thirty gold coins. If you don't, you won't eat today."

"W-what?" he asked, surprised. "But... it's not right. I-I shouldn't..."

"Okay, whatever you want," Sherdaine said. "But remember, this is for your own good. I know you're a

Transmutator. If you don't Transmute me thirty gold coins, you won't eat. If you do Transmute me thirty gold coins, you will eat. It's that simple. Think about it. But the choice is quite easy if you ask me. You know what to do. Goodbye."

Alvoren and Kayline kept following the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team with haste for the next two days, traveling back north, until they finally arrived at the bandits' lair once more. The Anti-Transmutation Strike Team first knocked out two bandits, one of which had a bow and arrows, which they gave to Salvatore, then headed for the entrance. Kayline grabbed the sword the other bandit had dropped with relief. The Anti-Transmutation Strike Team muttered between themselves, bracing themselves, and preparing to enter the lair.

Such determination, Kayline thought. *They're not afraid to die if it means completing their quest.* But Kayline understood them. She had felt the same way before she joined Merdilen. But still, that required a lot of determination.

The Anti-Transmutation Strike Team then prepared their weapons, and entered. Kayline and Alvoren immediately started hearing shouts and sounds of battle, and they ran away, searching for some other way in. Soon they found it; another cave entrance lay a distance to the side, in what seemed to be an emergency exit. Preparing their weapons themselves, just in case, they entered.

They found themselves once more in the dark and humid cave complex, lost as soon as they entered. But they couldn't back down now. They had no choice.

"I'd guess Merdilen would be in the safest place of the lair: the center, the farther away from all entrances," Kayline said.

"Damn," Alvoren cursed. "You're probably right."

With that, they started going forward, guiding themselves just by their sense of direction and fighting any bandits they found in their way. Still, they found extremely few bandits, as all others seemed to be in the ongoing battle with the Anti-Transmutation

Strike Team, which's sounds they could still hear. They kept wondering the maze-like corridors, being mistaken, returning, and exploring again several times. After what seemed like an eternity, they finally got to where they had been headed to.

An especially big room, most of it empty except for a desk and a chair at the end and a few big cells to one side. Merdilen was probably in one of those cells, Kayline thought. Saving him now would be easy. But, in the middle of the room... was the man with black hair and eyes. To Kayline, he looked extremely familiar, but she couldn't quite catch why.

"So the others were just a distraction, huh. Well, this should be fun," the man said, grinning. "Hello again, Kayline. I didn't know for sure before, but now, there's no doubt anymore." Kayline looked at him puzzled, trying to understand, and then he added, "What is it, Kayline? Don't you recognize me? Don't you recognize... your father?"

Family Business

April 10th

Year 2120

Southern Mountain Range

Southern Wastes, Gartaena

“So the others were just a distraction, huh. Well, this should be fun,” the man said, grinning. “Hello again, Kayline. I didn’t know for sure before, but now, there’s no doubt anymore.” Kayline looked at him puzzled, trying to understand, and then he added, “What is it, Kayline? Don’t you recognize me? Don’t you recognize... your father?”

“F-father?” Kayline muttered with a trembling voice, her heart beating so hard in her chest it felt like it was about to explode.

Kayline had never known what had happened to her father. To be honest, she had never really thought about it. When he had left, she had tried to move on, not thinking about him. But, to think he had become... a bandit. She just stood frozen in place, not knowing what to do. She had been ready to slash through anyone that stood in her way, but this... There was no doubt it was him. He looked exactly as he looked when she had left her. He was definitely Garnent Sherdaine.

She hadn’t been ready for this. She couldn’t have been. Out of anyone that could have stood between them and Merdilen, why

had it had to be her own father...? It felt as if fate itself was laughing at her.

“I have an offer for you, Kayline, my daughter,” her father, Garnent Sherdaine, told her, breaking her thoughts. “Join me. Kill this guy next to you and join me. We will be a happy family once again. Your Transmutator friend here will be alright. Maybe, if I’m pleased, I can even bless you with the same powers that I have. What say you, my little girl?”

Kayline wanted to cry. This was too much for her. The temptation was real. She had never really known her father, and she had always really wanted to. But... she couldn’t kill Alvoren. During their short journey together, she had grown quite fond of the great hero Axerhos. She couldn’t betray him. Forcing herself not to think anymore, she prepared her two swords.

“What say you?” her father said, grinning.

“I...” she started, her voice trembling, but soon regaining confidence, “...will never betray my friends!”

With that, she sprung into action, rushing Garnent with her swords. Alvoren prepared to fight, too, guarding the entrance. She slashed twice at him, forcing herself not to think, but Garnent just moved his hands to the side. A wind current pushed her arms to the side, and it took all her strength to not drop her swords. Then, her father made a pushing motion towards her, and she flew backward, pushed by some unknown wind force.

“Kayline, they’re coming!” Alvoren exclaimed from the other side of the room.

Kayline hit the farther wall, pushed by the wind, and fell to the ground. She forced herself to stand up, and although it hurt, she did it. She prepared her swords once more, and out of the corner of her eye, saw Alvoren fighting a horde of bandits, trying to protect the entrance to the room. She then noticed. She couldn’t hear the sounds of battle beyond anymore. The Anti-Transmutation Strike Team had lost.

Were they killed? Kayline wondered. *No, no, they're too strong for that. In that case, did they run away...? Damn it!* She tried to rush Garnent once more, but another wind current pushed her against the ground.

Her father started walking towards her, shaking his head from side to side in apparent disappointment.

“Okay, Kayline, I’m giving you two one more chance. Your friend must not return; you must think about my offer. See you.” With that, he kicked her hard in the head with a wind-powered foot, making her pass out once more.

Kayline woke up once more. Remembering what had just happened, she looked around, nervous. She was in the middle of a desert, her hands and feet tied up behind her with some kind of strong rope. Panicked, she realized she had never seen this place before. She was in some kind of large desert that seemed to expand infinitely, with nothing but a few cacti here and there.

Where... am I? The problem was, Merdilen had had their map. So they had no way of knowing where they were. She crawled towards Alvoren, and kicking him softly in the leg, woke him up. As soon as he looked towards her, he started to panic too.

“Where are we? Where’s Merdilen?” he asked, nervous.

“We... failed,” Kayline said, disappointed in herself. “We rushed in without a plan, the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team wasn’t enough of a distraction, and the man’s—my... father’s—powers were way stronger than I thought, so they knocked us unconscious and my father ordered for us to be dropped here, in this unknown desert.”

“So... that was actually your father?” Alvoren asked.

“...Yes,” she answered, sadly. “But I don’t get it. He left us when I was just a few years old, and it turns out he was being a *bandit* all along? It just doesn’t add up. I’d always thought people would become bandits out of need, but we were economically stable before he left us. I don’t get it...”

“...I’m sorry,” was all Alvoren was able to say.

“...You have a compass, right?” Kayline then asked him, changing the subject.

“Yeah. It should be somewhere in my backpack. But to take it out, I need to unbind myself first. Have any clue on how to do that?”

“Maybe,” Kayline answered, crawling to a nearby rock. She placed the rope binding her hands on top of it, then started to rub it strongly against the rock. The rope started to weaken, becoming thinner, until it finally snapped. “Yes!” she exclaimed.

She then repeated the procedure with her feet bindings, and later Alvoren did the same.

“Nice,” he commented. “Okay, my compass should be somewhere around here...”

Alvoren started to look around in his backpack, and after a short while, took out his compass victoriously. Its glass was partially broken, but it still seemed to be functional.

“But... what good will it do to us if we don’t know where we are?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Because we know civilization is up north,” Kayline said. “Pretty sure we’re still in the Southern Wastes, as bandits wouldn’t want to waste much time. Therefore, the kingdom of Fergahn is up north. If we keep going that way, we should eventually reach a village or town. We’ll need gear if we want to have another shot at saving Merdilen. It is our best—and only—choice.”

“True that,” Alvoren said. “You’re quite smart, you know that?”

“Seems like it,” she jokingly answered, grinning. “But we have no time to waste. Let’s go.”

With that, they started to walk north, on the lookout for any settlements.

Damn him! Merdilen thought once again. It had been a bit more than a day since Kayline and Alvoren had tried and failed to

rescue him, and the man—Kayline’s father—had never stopped mocking them since then. Worst of all, Kayline was his own *daughter*, but he didn’t even seem to care. The last few hours, Kayline’s father had been telling him all about how Kayline and Alvoren didn’t care about him and had run away on their own, but Merdilen knew that wasn’t true. Merdilen trusted in his friends.

But still, that was a despicable man. He had treated Kayline terribly, trying to manipulate her by bringing family into the conversation. Kayline had once told them about her father, in a conversation about family. He had no right to talk to Kayline like that. Not anymore. Still, he treated her like a daughter, just to manipulate him into joining him and killing Alvoren. He was truly a despicable man. With him, Merdilen felt an emotion he had never felt towards anyone else before.

He *hated* him.

Merdilen would *never* do what he wanted. He would resist. Because he trusted in his friends.

After several hours of walking, the desert ended, and Kayline and Alvoren finally arrived at a small village. They were lucky, as it seemed to be one of the few villages in the entirety of the Southern Wastes. It was composed of several small farms lining up in the countryside, alongside a few shops around a small central plaza. They looked at it in relief, approaching the main square as villagers looked at them all around, most in curiosity, but some even in disapproval. Not finding any cartographer shop, they headed towards the town hall.

It was a two-story simple house, similar to the rest of the village’s houses, except for the fact that it had a big sign hanging from its door, reading, ‘Town Hall, Village of Hedron.’ They got to it, and Alvoren knocked on its wooden door. After a short while, a tall and thin man opened the door. He had a sophisticated aura, one that funnily offered a sharp contrast to the rest of the countryside village.

“May I help you, kind strangers?” the townmaster asked them.

“This is gonna sound really strange, but where exactly are we?” Kayline asked.

“The youths of today,” the townmaster commented, sighing, but then spoke. “You are in the renown and sophisticated village of Hedron, as it says in this sign over here.”

“Well, yes, but like, in a map?” Alvoren explained.

The townmaster raised an eyebrow, but then gestured them to enter the small town hall. The town hall wasn’t any more impressive on the inside than it was on the outside, with just a few blue desks and chairs and a big map hanging on the farther wall. The map showed the kingdom of Fergahn, along with a portion of the Southern Wastes. The kingdom of Fergahn part was very detailed, showing every forest, river, and lake, but the Southern Wastes part showed just a few settlements. A silent reminder to the mysterious unknown.

“This red spot out here is Hedron,” he told them, pointing with a long and slender finger at a red spot in the old map. They also saw the Southern Mountain Range, to the east, and it was... far away. About a day’s travel to the southeast.

“Uh oh,” Alvoren muttered. “We got even farther away by walking to this town.”

“May I ask where you’re headed to?” the townmaster asked with curiosity.

“...Preferably not, I’m sorry,” Kayline said. The townmaster frowned but didn’t press on.

“And, another question...” Kayline then said. “What date is it?”

The townmaster raised his eyebrow once more, but answered, “It is almost nighttime of Sunday, April 11th.”

“April 11th, huh,” Alvoren muttered. “So it’s been a day and a half since *that* happened...”

“Merdilen must be so worried...” Kayline added, and then addressed the townmaster once more. “Thank you very much, sir. We’ll be going now.”

With that, they exited the town hall, looking for a smithy in which to get weapons. They immediately spotted one; a small brick shop next to the small plaza with an anvil in front. They headed towards it, but when they got to the door, Kayline remembered something.

“Hey, Alvoren, do you have any money?” she asked, nervous.

“N-no, I don’t,” he replied, paling slightly. “I thought *you* had the money.”

“Uh oh. No, I don’t. Then, how are we meant to get the weapons we need...?”

They weren’t able to get to any conclusions, but having no choice, entered the shop anyway. Its walls were lined up with weapons and armor, and a big and burly man was sitting at the counter, looking at a sword.

“Hello, strangers,” the man told them. “I’ve got swords, axes, maces, whatever you want. What are you looking for?”

“Uhh, we don’t have any money,” Kayline said, trying to ignore how stupid she sounded. “Is there some way to... get weapons for free or something?”

“Of course not,” the man answered, frowning. “That’s not how shops work. Come back when you get money.”

Alvoren tried to add something, but the man had already gone back to inspecting his sword, dismissing them. Kayline sighed, and they headed out once again. They sat down on the fountain, wondering what to do, when they heard a roar coming from somewhere they couldn’t pin. But both of them recognized the noise instantly. A shadow monster.

“Everyone inside!” the townmaster exclaimed, emerging from the town hall. “Shadow monster emergency! Everyone inside!”

“Hey, you two!” a woman called out to them. “We’ve been through this before. Get into a building. It always comes. If you’re lucky, the monster won’t find you.”

“It always comes?” Alvoren asked.

“That’s right!” she answered in a hurried tone. “Now come into a house!”

Alvoren looked to Kayline, who nodded.

“We may be able to do something better than that,” Kayline said, and both of them rushed into the smithy.

“We’ll be borrowing these,” Alvoren said as both of them took weapons without waiting for an answer.

Alvoren took a sword and a shield, and Kayline two swords. They couldn’t allow the village of Hedron to be attacked by shadow monsters anymore.

“Same strategy as always?” Alvoren asked.

“That’s right,” Kayline confirmed. “It’s our best option.”

With that, Alvoren rushed the shadow monster, distracting it and blocking its attacks with his shield. Meanwhile, Kayline circled it and started to climb. She soon got to its top, and crawling forward, quickly and efficiently slashed at its eyes. The shadow monster roared, and Alvoren thrust his sword into the monster’s mouth. The shadow monster roared once more, falling to the ground, dead.

“We’re getting good at this,” Alvoren called out to Kayline, grinning.

“Practice makes perfect,” Kayline answered, nimbly jumping down from the massive body.

“I, the great hero Axerhos, and my loyal companion have slain the monster!” Alvoren exclaimed towards the village.

Slowly, hesitantly, the villagers started to come out from their houses, looking at them in amazement. The townmaster approached them, dumbfounded, not believing his eyes.

“That monster had been terrorizing this village for three years!” he told them. “I-I can’t believe it. Thank you so much! Is there anything we can do for you?”

“Well, we need weapons and a map,” Kayline said, smiling nervously towards the smith.

“Of course you can have weapons and maps!” the townmaster exclaimed. “You are heroes. Take all that you need.”

“Thank you very much,” Kayline said, and they both sheathed the weapons they had borrowed onto their own scabbards, Alvoren hanging the shield over his shoulder. Kayline also took a dagger, tucking it into her belt.

“Would you grant us the honor of staying for dinner?” the townmaster asked.

“I’m sorry, but we’re kind of in a hurry,” Alvoren explained. “Maybe next time.”

“No problem! Thank you again very much,” the townmaster said.

With that, Kayline and Alvoren left the town with new weapons, a map similar to Merdilen’s, and knowledge of their location. Now all they had to do was get once again to the Southern Mountain Range and think of a plan to save Merdilen.

Alvoren and Kayline walked for several hours, late into the night, back to the Southern Mountain Range, and after a long and tiring trek, they finally spotted the mountain which housed the Crimson Ruby bandits’ lair. They crouched behind a big rock in the darkness, observing it. But, it wasn’t like it was before. In front of the mountain, in the valley beyond and the surrounding hills... was a camp. A big camp, fit for about three hundred people.

“W-what?!” exclaimed Alvoren at seeing it. “That wasn’t there before! Is... is there an army there?”

“L-looks like it,” Kayline answered as surprised as she was. “But, why are they just camping there...? Why don’t they attack?”

Alvoren wondered that for a small while, until he finally answered. “It’s a siege. That mysterious army knows it can’t defeat the bandits in their own lair so, knowing they have the numerical advantage, decided to just wait it out. The bandits are bound to get out eventually.”

“A siege, huh,” Kayline pondered. “It’d make sense. But, why? And why does it have to happen *right* when we need to save Merdilen...?”

“Hmmm... They are Fergahnian soldiers, are they not?” Alvoren commented, looking at the soldiers, seemingly kingdom soldiers from the kingdom of Fergahn.

Kayline looked at the soldiers, squinting. “Good observation,” she finally said. “Yeah, they seem to be Fergahnian soldiers.”

“And the whole kingdom of Fergahn is hunting down Merdilen, right?” he then added. “The Anti-Transmutation Strike Team is just its main force of attack.

“Yeah... oh, ohh!” Kayline exclaimed, realizing something. “So they’re here... for Merdilen. They’re trying to capture Merdilen so they can make sure he is killed. They must have had this army at the ready the whole time.”

“Seems like that’s the case,” Alvoren agreed. “Uh oh. The best strategy would be to wait for the two armies to fight each other so we can steal Merdilen in the distraction, but this is a siege. That won’t be happening for at least a few weeks.”

“We haven’t got that much time,” Kayline declared. “We have to save Merdilen as soon as possible. But, how are we meant to make these two armies fight? There doesn’t seem to be any other good plan, especially considering they’re completely blocking the lair.”

They kept pondering about their problems and discarding plans for the better part of fifteen minutes, until Kayline finally came up with something.

“I think I have an idea,” she said. “But it is extremely risky.”

“We’re already risking our lives by siding with Merdilen anyway,” Alvoren commented. “Say it; what is it?”

“So, I was thinking of ways to make these two armies fight, and the perfect way would be for both of them to think there are reinforcements coming for their opponents. That way, they’d hurry up. So if we fake letters for an army and give them to the enemy commander, both armies would think they have to hurry up, effectively fighting as soon as they can.”

Alvoren pondered it for a while, until he finally said, “It... might actually work. But, all military letters always have the commander’s signature. No one will believe us until we can get those signatures.”

“That’s right,” Kayline agreed. “But we can’t just sneak in and steal them stealthily. We’d get lost and caught before we got anywhere. So here’s what we can do: first, we’re gonna infiltrate the two armies, steal a random letter from each commander, and replace the text with a letter saying reinforcements are coming. Then, we’ll meet up, exchange our letters, and give them to the enemy commander. Later, during the battle, we’ll meet up again and save Merdilen.”

“Wow. It seems extremely risky though, but there’s no other choice...” Alvoren muttered. “Still, we gotta do this. For Merdilen!”

“Yeah. For Merdilen. So, I was thinking I could infiltrate the bandits, as my father had already offered me that in the first place, so it’d make sense for me to join him. You can infiltrate the Fergahnian soldiers, given that you seem to have more military knowledge than I do.”

“...Seems good. But, what will I do if I encounter the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team?” Alvoren asked. “They might recognize me from the battle in which Merdilen was captured.”

“Uh oh. That’s right. I... guess you just gotta make sure they don’t see you. Just keep your helmet on at all times.”

“...All right,” Alvoren agreed. “So, should we go now?”

“Sure,” Kayline replied nervously. “Good luck. We will both need it.”

“Yeah,” Alvoren agreed, also nervous. “Good luck to you too. See you at sunset in, say, two days. In this same spot.”

With that, they left the rock and separated, Kayline heading to the bandits’ lair and Alvoren heading to the soldiers’ camp, both ready to do whatever it took to save Merdilen.

Kayline headed towards the bandits’ lair, crouching, sneaking behind rocks, ledges, and more to not risk the Fergahnian soldiers from seeing them. Unfortunately, though, all entrances were guarded. She’d need a distraction. And fortunately, in the rock-filled mountain, there were plenty. She headed to the biggest boulder, one atop a ledge near the side of the mountain, and pushed. The massive boulder didn’t budge at first, but it then started slowly giving way, slowly moving forward. The boulder reached the end of the ledge it was in, and it fell, rolling noisily down the mountain. It crashed against one of the tents, causing chaos in the camp, and leading most soldiers—including the ones guarding the entrances—towards it.

Kayline took advantage of the distraction, dashing towards the entrance, and quickly got into it, her heart beating in her chest so hard she could practically hear it. A bandit stood up at her arrival, alarmed, and pointed at her with his sword menacingly.

“Hands over your head, girl!” he exclaimed.

Kayline complied and said, “Take me to your boss. Take me to Garnent Sherdaine.”

“And who are you to give me orders?” he asked in a dangerous tone.

“I’m his daughter. You don’t want to make him angry, do you?”

“Oh, you’re the girl from before!” the bandit said in recognition, to which Kayline nodded. “Follow me,” he finally said.

Kayline followed the bandit towards the interior of the mountain, nervousness tensing her body. After a short while of wandering through the labyrinthic tunnels, they arrived once again at her father’s office. He was sitting in his desk, not aware of their entrance. For Kayline, it hurt to see him again. Knowing that he was alive and that he wasn’t with the family... But she had to be strong. She had to endure this.

“Your daughter came back, sir,” the bandit said right before exiting the room, leaving them alone.

“So you considered my offer,” Garnent said with a wicked grin.

“Yes, I did. And I changed my mind. I decided to accept,” she said, playing along and trying to sound as natural as possible. “It was the smartest choice, especially if that means Merdilen will live. And, besides, I couldn’t say no to that power,” she finally added, grinning too, trying to sound reasonable.

“Good choice. Did you kill your partner?”

“I did,” she said, nodding. “He won’t be bothering us again.”

“Hmmm,” he pondered. “I’ll believe you for now. Consider it a courtesy. Anyway, it’d be dumb for you to try anything stupid, as you’re in *our* turf now.”

“Of course. I’d never.”

“You must know I’ll have you under strict vigilance. But, if you have half the brains that I do, you’ll recognize it will be worth it.”

“No problem,” she said, trying to play along. “It will be worth it.”

Alvoren left on his own, heading towards the Fergahnian soldiers’ camp. He was great at role-playing, so pretending to be what he was planning shouldn’t be hard. Still, he was extremely

nervous. Although he knew a bit of military knowledge, he had never infiltrated an actual military camp. A thousand things could go wrong. But still, he had no choice. This was for Merdilen. Alvoren owed it to Merdilen for saving his life when he himself had been captured by bandits, albeit different ones. He walked the final distance towards the camp, trying to look casual.

The military camp was a collection of about a hundred tents, all quickly but professionally assembled. Soldiers roamed the whole place, standing guard, preparing equipment, inspecting the outside of the enemy lair, and doing different activities. As he approached, two soldiers walked towards him, swords in hand.

"This place is off-limits," one of the soldiers told him. "State your business."

"Uhh... You see, I hate these bandits as much as you do, and I have some fighting training myself. I wanted to see if I'd be able to join you. I have my own equipment and food, so you'd lose nothing. You'd just have an extra soldier."

"Name and hometown?"

"A-Axerhos, and I come from the village of Hedron. It's quite close to here, so we're constantly getting raided by these bandits. That's why I want to wipe them out."

"Now that's a strange name," the other soldier commented, raising an eyebrow.

"My name's not local, sir. My mother was from the North, that's why my name may sound a bit strange to you," he bluffed.

"...Okay," the soldier agreed. "Sir Grendar Bartel will want to see you."

Uh oh, Alvoren thought. He had to completely evade any and all members of the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team.

"I-I don't think I'm *that* important," he muttered. "Maybe someone of lower rank will do."

One of the soldiers raised his eyebrow, but then the other one nodded.

“The man Axerhos is right. This is way below Sir Grendar. We shouldn’t bother him with an extra soldier. Let’s take him to Colonel Mandron.”

Yes!

“Thank you very much for your help,” he told the two.

With that, they guided him towards a big tent, drawing several curious glances from the rest of the soldiers. One of the soldiers knocked on a wooden pillar that supported the tent, and after a short while of waiting, a voice invited them in, to which they pulled open the tent’s door and entered.

Colonel Mandron’s tent was way bigger than most others, although it was completely devoid of any decorations. It had a big desk in the middle, and the sides of the tent were occupied by two big shelves, both full of books and scrolls. Colonel Mandron himself was quite thin, slightly muscular but not much, and clearly seemed to be more strategist than foot soldier. He wore a green jacket adorned with several plaques and medals.

Both soldiers saluted when entering, so Alvoren saluted too, thinking it to be the correct thing to do.

“This man wants to help us against the bandits,” one of the soldiers told Colonel Mandron. “He says to be called Axerhos and to come from the village of Hedron to defeat the bandits who raid his village.”

“Interesting,” Colonel Mandron muttered. “Yes, we could always use another soldier. What do you do, Axerhos?”

“I’m a swordsman, sir,” Alvoren said. “I may serve as a foot soldier.”

“Are you so? Okay, let’s test you. Hogrel, spar with him,” he said, gesturing to one of the two soldiers.

With that, all four of them headed out of the tent, and Alvoren and the other soldier, seemingly called Hogrel, took up wooden training swords.

They started sparring, slashing, parrying, and thrusting at each other with their swords. Hogrel was good, but he wasn’t

nearly as good as Alvoren. Still, Alvoren just endured through the mock fight, trying to appear of the same level as Hogrel. Being too good a swordsman would look suspicious in a common villager.

Alvoren couldn't help but remember the times long gone, sparring with his best friend, their old master inspecting them. He forced the memories of the past out of his mind, concentrating on the present. After a while of fighting, he let Hogrel win. But he had already shown his skills. The real winner had been him.

Colonel Mandron started clapping slowly.

"You're good, Axerhos," he said, grinning slightly. "You will make a good soldier. You're in."

Alvoren grinned too. He had done it. The infiltration had begun.

Infiltration

April 12th

Year 2120

Southern Mountain Range

Southern Wastes, Gartaena

What?! Merdilen thought, nervous. *What is Kayline talking about?* He remembered clearly what Kayline had answered when asked if she had killed Alvoren. *I did*, she had replied. *He won't be bothering us again.* That couldn't be true, could it? Merdilen started having trouble breathing. Had Kayline... betrayed them? Was Alvoren... dead? No, no, it couldn't be. That had to be a lie of some kind. It *had* to be. If not... their whole quest would be over, and Merdilen's best friend would be gone. But, then, where was Alvoren?

He tried to listen further, but Kayline and her father were speaking too low to be heard anymore through the heavy metal door that divided the cell and the rest of the room. Eventually, Kayline left the room, leaving him alone with his doubts and insecurities.

"Good to have you with us, Kayline," Garnent said. "We'll talk more tomorrow. Juhen, take Kayline to her room," he then said, gesturing to a specific big and burly bandit.

"Right away, sir," the bandit, apparently called Juhen, said.

Kayline followed Juhen as he guided her through the maze of dark corridors until they finally stopped in front of a doorless room. Inside the room were easily ten bandits and about fifteen bedrolls, with most bandits either gambling over dice or mock-fighting. Most bedrolls were undone and messy, with clothes and objects scattered all over the place.

So uncivilized, Kayline thought with disgust.

“That one over there’s yours,” Juhen told her, pointing at a bedroll on the farthest corner of the room. It didn’t seem to be occupied by anyone, but it was still as messy as all others.

As she crossed the room, a bandit tried to approach her, wearing a cocky and confident look in his eyes.

“Don’t,” she told him, shooting him a menacing glare and reaching for her longswords.

“You’re a dangerous one, aren’t you?” the bandit said, backing away and laughing nervously. Kayline answered nothing.

“That bedroll belonged to Bruthen, y’know?” one of the gambling bandits called out to her.

“Yeah? What happened to him?” she asked, not sure if she wanted to know the answer.

“He fell down the mountain,” the bandit said.

“Fell or was pushed?” another bandit asked, making the group laugh boominly.

“How terrible,” Kayline muttered, causing more laughter.

She frowned, and after inspecting her bedroll to make sure there was nothing in it, prepared to leave the room once again. Kayline didn’t leave any personal properties in her bedroll, though, not trusting in the bandits around her. Even though it was already late night, she headed out of the room, her backpack still hanging from her shoulders. She headed towards Juhen, the bandit who had guided her to her room, who was still roaming around.

“Could you show me around the lair?” she asked him.

“I’m no babysitter, girl.” He scowled at her, reluctant to do it.

“You don’t want my father to hear you’re mistreating his daughter, do you?” she then asked.

The bandit looked at her, angry, but then finally said, “Fine. Follow me.”

It was manipulation, she knew it, but she didn’t really have a choice. She needed to know about the whole lair if she wanted to have a shot at stealing a letter.

The bandit showed Kayline around their maze-like lair, taking her to the kitchen, dining hall, training area, and different offices for high-ranking bandits. Although Kayline asked for it, he didn’t give her a map, in an attempt to force her to be under constant supervision.

She felt interested in the offices, as she knew she’d need to get into one of those in order to steal the letters she needed to trick the armies and save Merdilen. Sure, she was in the same location as Merdilen now, but she couldn’t just go and save him now. Without a map, they would never be able to find their way out. Even if they managed to, the more than a hundred bandits would stop them long before they escaped. And even if they did escape the lair, the Fergahnian army camping outside would catch them and kill Merdilen before they were able to get away. Creating this distraction was their only choice. And she was determined to do whatever it took.

Alvoren followed Hogrel the soldier towards his tent, where Colonel Mandron had ordered he would stay for the time being. Colonel Mandron had seemed to accept him into the army, and had said that they would send him on a test mission the next day. Everything was so far working according to the plan.

“So we’re hunting a Transmutator, huh,” Hogrel mentioned, interrupting his thoughts. “Horrible beings, they are. They destroyed the whole world during the Transmutation War.

Did you know about ninety-percent of the world died during that war?"

"Yeah... it must have been horrible," Alvoren agreed.

"It still is," Hogrel added. "The Transmutators have risen again, even though it's only one this time. We have to kill it before it destroys the world again."

"Fully agree," Alvoren answered, trying to sound convincing.

"As you can see, I really hate Transmutators. As pretty much the whole rest of the world."

"...Yeah," muttered Alvoren.

After a short walk, they arrived at Hogrel's tent. It was smaller than Colonel Mandron's, as this one seemed to serve solely for sleeping quarters. Another two soldiers were staying with Hogrel in that tent, and they looked at Alvoren with curiosity as they arrived.

"We've got a new recruit," Hogrel announced. "This is Axerhos."

"Hey, Axerhos," one of the soldiers, a thin one, greeted him, "care to play some cards? Our game would be better with two more."

"...Sure," Alvoren agreed. "If you're okay with it."

"Of course!" the other soldier, a big man, exclaimed. "We're all comrades in arms now."

With that, Alvoren sat down next to Hogrel on the floor awkwardly, and the big man started to deal the cards.

"So, what brought you here? You're here to kill the Transmutator too?" the big man asked as he dealt.

"No, not really," Alvoren replied, trying to not sound suspicious in any sense. "I'm here for the bandits. They're constantly raiding my village, so now with this army here, I'll finally get the chance to give them what they deserve."

"But killing the Transmutator is an added bonus, right?" Hogrel asked, examining his cards. "Right?"

“Of course, of course!” Alvoren exclaimed quickly.

“What do *you* think about the Transmutator, Axerhos?” the thin man asked him, pulling a card from a stack and putting one back down.

“I... I don’t really know,” he replied, getting nervous. “I’m kind of indifferent to him.”

“But you *would* kill him if you got the chance to, right?” the big man asked him, squinting his eyes.

“Of course!”

“Good,” Hogrel said. “Because if not... it’d be treason talk.”

“I’d *never* do that,” Alvoren told them. “Don’t worry, if I get the chance, I assure you all I’ll do what I need to do.”

They finished the game in relative silence, and after having dinner, went to sleep. All was going according to the plan.

Kayline woke up. She hadn’t slept much, only drifting in and out of sleep, as she had been constantly worried about the bandits next to her. She doubted they’d dare do anything to their boss’ daughter, but still. She got up as soon as she was fully awake and, after having a quick breakfast, started to wander around the lair once more. Trying to look as casual as possible, she peeked into all boss offices, analyzing them. Most of them were near the center of the lair, in frequently-visited places. All of them seemed to be equally safe. She wouldn’t be able to steal from any of them if she tried to just sneak in.

Needless to say, she didn’t know anything about the bandits’ power structure, but there was one thing that was certain: her father, Garnent Sherdaine, was the most important one of the group. It’d be better to try to take the letter from him, as that way she would be sure the enemy army would believe it. But she wouldn’t be able to just sneak in and steal it. She’d need a distraction.

Kayline started to wander around the lair, examining it, looking for anything that would work as a distraction. There were

some explosives, but that wouldn't work. The fuses of all explosives were too short, and if anyone saw her near the place of the 'accident,' everyone would immediately blame the newcomer, Kayline, no matter who her father was.

She kept looking, until she realized something. There was a certain room of the cavern which's roof was lifted by a rock pillar. Theoretically, if she were to slash with her sword at it once, it would weaken and fall a short time later. During that time, she'd be able to start talking to someone. If the roof were to fall during that period of time, she'd have the perfect distraction, and would, later on, have a good alibi for her defense.

But then, she thought of something else. Just knocking her father out wouldn't be enough. He'd keep coming after them. Would she be able to kill him? No, no. There had to be some other way. Her father's main advantage was his powers. If she could somehow rid him of those, he wouldn't pose that much of a threat anymore, and they wouldn't need to kill him. But, how? She needed to gain as much information about his powers as possible. And if she wanted to do that, she'd have to get the letter mission out of the way as soon as possible. After all, she only had two days and a night remaining for the infiltration. She'd have to work quickly. Therefore, she'd have to end the letter business now.

Alvoren woke up from his bedroll and looked around. He was in the soldiers' tent, and Hogrel, the big guy, and the small guy were all getting ready for the day. He got up, and after greeting them, got ready himself, and headed out of the tent. The big guy and the small guy headed somewhere else, so he reasoned it'd be better if he stuck with Hogrel for the time being. Following him, they walked through the military camp. Hogrel knocked on the wooden pillar, on Colonel Mandron's tent, and after a short wait, they entered. Both saluted at Colonel Mandron, and he unexpectedly tossed a military uniform towards Alvoren, the same as the rest of the soldiers had.

“Wear this if you want to be a soldier,” he ordered Alvoren.

“Thank you, sir,” Alvoren said. “I’ll put it on as soon as I get back to my tent.”

Alvoren cheered internally. He was truly a part of the army now.

“We have already measured your fighting prowess, but we have yet to measure your discipline and competence in non-battle missions,” Colonel Mandron continued. “So we’ll send you two along with a big squad of soldiers to the bandits’ mountain. Your mission will be to check it all in a day to make sure there are no more entrances or exits that haven’t already been acknowledged. It’s a fairly easy task, but as it is long and tiring, it will require discipline. Don’t disappoint me. You’re leaving in ten minutes.”

“Sir, yes, sir!” both Alvoren and Hogrel said, snapping a salute.

Alvoren would have preferred to spend the day just focusing on getting the letter, but if he wanted to truly pass by as a soldier, he had no choice. They returned to the tent, and after Alvoren put on his new military uniform, they headed towards the communal dining hall.

It was a massive tent full of wooden tables and benches, in which more than a hundred soldiers were having breakfast at the moment. They sat down along with another group of soldiers on a not-so-crowded table and started to eat. Although Merdilen was a great guy and Transmutator, he couldn’t make food that had once been alive, so Alvoren really enjoyed the meat sandwiches they were now giving the soldiers. After a quick breakfast, they headed out of the dining hall, towards a group of soldiers standing at the bottom of the mountain.

“Are you ready?” the captain was saying.

“Sir, yes, sir!” the whole squad said, Alvoren and Hogrel along with them, having just arrived.

They had arrived just in time.

“So, as you all here know,” the captain proceeded, “we’ve been assigned with the important task of examining the mountain, as to make sure there are no other exits that aren’t accounted for. Let’s get going!”

Kayline hit the pillar supporting the roof hard with her sword, and dashed away. She quickly got out of the room and started to walk away quickly, trying to look as casual as possible. She probably had a few minutes before the roof in that section collapsed. She walked quickly towards her father’s office, where he was, and ignoring the sadness that he caused, started to speak.

“Hey, I’ve got a question,” Kayline asked him. “How did you get those flashy powers of yours?”

“Huh?” her father said, looking up from his papers. “So you’re interested, huh. Well, I guess it makes sense. It’s one of the reasons you joined us, after all. I guess there are no reasons not to tell you. You see, there is a fortress a few weeks south from here, a fortress which was once full of incredible powers.”

Morkilen Farenthar’s fortress?! Kayline wondered, surprised.

“I heard of this fortress long ago, when I was still with you three,” he continued. “That’s what prompted me to leave. The lure of adventure. The search for power. You’d get it, right, Kayline?”

That’s no reason to leave a family behind, she thought, clenching her fists. *It has never been and never will be.*

“I... understand,” she lied, her voice trembling slightly. “I... guess I would have done the same thing.”

“Good girl,” he told her. “But, you see, it had been looted clean long before we arrived. All that we found... was a pair of serums. I injected one of it into myself, and that was what gave me my powers. The power to manipulate gaseous matter. I... am a Manipulator. The other one can be yours, if you prove to be loyal to me. It is right over here,” he then said, tapping a safe on the

wall. "But be warned: if you steal it without my permission, there's no place on Earth where you'll be able to hide from me."

"Of course, I would never," she told him. But her mind was still wandering on something else. "The fortress had been looted clean? That means... there's nothing left in there anymore?"

"Well, the accessible part had been looted clean," he corrected himself. "There was this massive obsidian wall in there. I'm sure there was way more stuff on the other side of it. Believe me, we tried. But, no matter how much we tried, we couldn't--"

He was suddenly interrupted by a loud rumbling, followed by a crash as rock hit rock.

"What the-?!" he exclaimed, running out of the room and towards it, leaving her alone.

The distraction had worked. Kayline quickly headed towards the stack of documents on her father's desk, and took the bottom one, in hopes that it'd be harder to notice it. She stuffed it into her jacket, then prepared to leave. She looked towards the safe in which the power serum was in. She'd have to remember that. Maybe she wouldn't need to kill her father after all. With those thoughts in mind, she left the room, successfully taking the letter with her.

Alvoren kept trekking through the mountain, searching for entrances. Playing the part of the villager Axerhos was quite easy to him, as most of that character was taken from his own person. Besides, he had always been good at role-playing. Role-playing as a villager-turned-soldier just came naturally to him. For Kayline, it must be way harder, he thought. She had to hide as a bad girl in a cave full of bandits, having to face her father who had left her on a daily basis. It was way harder for her. And, how would Merdilen be now? Did he know that Kayline was in the same cave as he was? He probably did. He could probably overhear plenty of conversations from over there. How would he be feeling? Alvoren just hoped he didn't think Kayline had betrayed them. He had too

many questions, and no way to answer them. Not yet. He could just focus on the task at hand.

Alvoren had quickly found out searching for entrances in the rock was extremely boring. It was just trekking through the mountain looking at the ground, examining every hole and crevice. And there wasn't even a good landscape to see from there; all he could see in the Southern Wastes was just barren dirt. He just kept looking for exits, until he heard—or, better said, felt—a rumbling in the ground. The ground started to tremble, then suddenly, a big section of the mountain collapsed, falling down to... the bandits' lair.

All the squad soldiers looked at it in awe, quickly preparing their weapons. A new exit had just been formed.

"What...? How...?" Hogrel wondered. That wasn't natural. "We'll have to send more soldiers to cover this exit. We wouldn't be enough if the whole bandit army decides to escape this way."

But, before long, they saw a group of ten bandits heading their way, looking as surprised as they were. As soon as the bandits saw them, they dashed towards them, weapons at the ready, jumping upwards through the debris. There were eight soldiers. And they had the high ground. They could take them on.

Alvoren ran to meet them, his sword ready, and slashed towards one of them. The bandit clumsily blocked the strike, not expecting the sudden offense, and Alvoren hit him backward with his shield, making him trip and fall once more down the hole. The bandit hit his head with a rock, passing out. They kept hacking and slashing at the bandits until all ten of them were either dead or unconscious. Fortunately, they hadn't made much noise, so he doubted they'd alert the rest of the bandits. But then, a single bandit emerged from where the others had come from. Although he luckily didn't seem to recognize Alvoren because of the soldier uniform, Alvoren recognized *him*.

Kayline's father. The bandit who could seemingly control the wind. He grinned.

“Uh oh,” Alvoren said. They couldn’t take him on. Especially if the rest of the soldiers didn’t know of his powers. “This is no normal bandit! *Run!*”

Alvoren started to back off, but the rest didn’t follow. They attacked. The bandit started to move his hands rapidly, and the wind followed, pushing blades away and changing their course. All soldiers, except for Alvoren, had attacked. But not one of them had managed to hit the target.

All soldiers looked at him, scared, and started to back off, heeding Alvoren’s counsel. But the bandit reached out with his hand, and a wind current started to push a soldier towards the bandit’s outstretched dagger. It was Hogrel. None of the other soldiers were able to do anything, all paralyzed in fear. None except for Alvoren. He would never let a companion die. Not again.

He knew he wouldn’t be able to reach the bandit and attack him before he killed Hogrel, so he didn’t head for him. He headed for Hogrel. Alvoren kicked Hogrel in the side, pushing him away from the wind current, and he fell far to the side, hurting but free. But, as Alvoren had kicked him out of it, he was now in his place. The wind current started to pull him towards the bandit. But Alvoren had an idea. Instead of pulling against it, he pushed *towards* it, dashing towards the bandit at an alarming speed.

The bandit raised his dagger, but Alvoren, in turn, prepared his shield, holding it in front of him. The current kept pushing him towards the bandit, and when he got to him he hit hard with his shield, pushing the bandit backward, back down the hole. Pushed by the momentum, he raised his longsword to defeat Kayline’s father once and for all, but another wind current erupted from him, pushing Alvoren backward and high into the air.

“Run!” he exclaimed to the rest while falling.

Alvoren fell to the ground, hurt, and as Hogrel pulled him up, they started to run down the mountain. The bandit got back up, but he was too late. They had escaped.

Merdilen wondered about what he had been able to hear about what Kayline's father had told her. So he had gotten his powers from Morkilen Farenthar's fortress. But, he said the accessible part had been wiped clean. Did that mean... there were more people with powers similar to his roaming around the Southern Wastes? Everything would get way harder from now on. But, fortunately, they didn't seem to have been able to take anything concerning the Transmutation.

So he made an impenetrable wall that can only be crossed using the Transmutation, Merdilen thought. *Well played, Morkilen.*

Manipulation. What seemed to be the ability to manipulate matter. Kayline's father could manipulate gaseous matter, huh. That explained why it seemed like he could control the wind. But, he then seemed to be able to deflect every attack thrown at him. How were they meant to overcome that?

But that wasn't his main concern. Kayline seemed to really be allying with her father now. And what about Alvoren? Was he really dead? During the last few days, Kayline's father had come to him several times, forcing him to Transmute gold for him, but he had refused each and every time. Therefore, they hadn't fed him in all that time. He had endured, thinking it to be something temporary before Kayline and Alvoren came to save him, but now he wasn't that sure. He hadn't even known Kayline for all that long. What if she had *really* betrayed them?

Merdilen had no idea. He had no way of knowing. And that was driving him mad. Besides, as he was still drugged, he couldn't even Transmute to get out of there. Was it really over? No. He had to trust in his friends. But now, he was starting to doubt.

Alvoren, Hogrel, and the rest of the soldiers arrived running at the military camp a short time later, and while a few

other soldiers went to report the news to Colonel Mandron, Alvoren and Hogrel headed back to their tent, tired.

“Hey... Thank you,” Hogrel told Alvoren. “For saving my life, even though you have known me for less than a day.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Alvoren said. “It was the right thing to do.”

As they spoke, they heard a large group of soldiers preparing outside.

“So, our soldiers discovered a new exit today,” Colonel Mandron told them. “We’re now going to secure that entrance, to make sure ours is still an efficient siege.”

“Should we go with you, sir?” Hogrel asked, exiting their tent.

“Don’t worry, son,” Colonel Mandron said. “You’ve already done enough for today. Rest.”

“Thank you very much!” both Alvoren and Hogrel said.

So, as the soldier unit left, both of them re-entered the tent, lying down in their bedrolls to rest a bit before having lunch. Suddenly, Alvoren realized something. The whole Anti-Transmutation Strike Team, including Sir Grendar, was going with the unit. This was his chance to steal the letter.

“I’ve got to refresh myself,” he told Hogrel after making sure the unit had already left, exiting the tent once more. “Be right back.”

With that, he left the tent, crouching and heading for Sir Grendar’s tent.

Most soldiers were now out securing the new exit, so he was able to evade every soldier he saw, which wasn’t a lot. After a short stealth walk, he arrived at Sir Grendar’s tent. He was pretty sure this was his tent, as he had seen him exiting and entering it several times in the morning and the night before. After looking around to make sure there was no one around, he entered.

It was the biggest tent of the camp, and any guards that it would have had were now in the soldier unit securing the exit.

Alvoren quickly headed towards the nearest stack of papers and took the bottom one. It was a letter sent to Sir Grendar from one Sir Tromlen, talking about a certain dispatch of supplies towards the camp. This would perfectly do the trick. Using his fingernails, he scrubbed out all instances of the word ‘supplies,’ replacing them with ‘reinforcements,’ just as he had discussed with Kayline before they separated. Fortunately, the paper was thick, so it didn’t crack or break with the alteration.

Done! Alvoren thought.

He left the tent, stuffing the letter in his pocket, and headed back to his tent. Hogrel didn’t pay much attention to his arrival, not sensing anything suspicious with him. He took a deep breath. The first part of his mission had been a success. The next day, he would probably be sent once again on a mission to search for exits, as they hadn’t been able to search the whole mountain before, and later that night, Kayline and him would exchange letters. They would succeed. He knew it.

Kayline headed back towards the rock in which Alvoren and herself had separated, a heavy cloak wrapped over her head and shoulders to hide her appearance, her stolen and altered letter hidden beneath it. A lonely figure in soldier attire was sitting behind the rock, examining the landscape in search for her. Alvoren.

She raised her hand, greeting him, and he greeted her back. When she got next to him, Kayline spoke.

“You got some fancy clothes, huh?” she joked.

“I seem to be a full-fledged soldier now,” Alvoren replied, grinning.

“I assume you got the letter?” Kayline asked, going straight to the point.

“I did,” he confirmed. “What about you?”

“Me too. Bandits are disgusting,” she said with a shake of her head.

“Soldiers weren’t that bad. I got real close to beating them in poker,” Alvoren added. “I’m guessing we should make this quick. It would sound suspicious if I spent ten minutes ‘refreshing myself.’”

“Agreed,” Kayline said, handing him the letter.

Alvoren handed her his own letter, and she opened it, quickly checking it. It said of a Sir Tromlen who was sending reinforcements to Sir Grendar, along with his signature. It was pretty much the same content as in her own letter. It seemed pretty convincing. It should work out.

“Great,” he said. “We don’t really know which of the two armies will attack first, so we must be ready for anything. See you later.”

“Yeah. See you on the battlefield.”

Deception

April 14th

Year 2120

Southern Mountain Range

Southern Wastes, Gartaena

“Hey, I found something!” Kayline exclaimed, running towards her father, trying to sound surprised. “I carefully went outside to refresh myself, and I saw what I think was a messenger heading towards the enemy camp! After killing him, I found this letter on it.”

“Huh?” her father said, looking at her. “What does it say?”

“Here, take it,” she said, handing the letter to him, hoping with all her heart he took the bait.

Her father, Garnent, examined it for a while, looking surprised, until he finally spoke, also addressing Juhen, the big bandit, who was also in the room with them. “It seems the Fergahnian army is getting reinforcements soon. If we keep waiting here, they’ll just break the siege and invade the tunnels. I doubt we’d be able to hold the lair against any more soldiers.”

“Then what are we going to do?” Juhen asked. “If we attack, we’ll get destroyed. They’ve got many, many more soldiers than we do.”

“Hmmm, that’s right,” Garnent agreed. “We can’t do anything rash. But still, we will be in an even worse situation if they actually get reinforcements.”

“Is that letter even real?” Juhen suddenly asked, squinting his eyes.

“I-I believe it has the signature of an enemy commander,” Kayline said quickly.

“That’s right,” her father agreed. “I have heard of this particular knight. It’s real. And he’s strong. We can’t afford to risk fighting the reinforcements too.”

“We have the high ground,” Kayline bluffed, trying to inspire confidence into the two bandits. “And we have you, father. If we fight them, taking them by surprise, we can certainly win. We *have* to do this. We must have a few days at most before the reinforcements arrive. If they get here and realize the main army has been destroyed, they’ll definitely back down.”

“That’s right,” her father said. “We’ll attack tomorrow at first light, during the guard change. They’ll have their guard down, as guards will be just taking up their shift and most soldiers will still be asleep, and that’s when we’ll strike.”

“I’ll go spread the word,” Juhen said.

Yes! Kayline thought. The second part of their plan had been victorious. Alvoren had already gotten her the letter, so even if he wasn’t able to convince their commanders to attack, they had already been successful. The battle would occur, and they would succeed.

Alvoren headed quickly towards Colonel Mandron’s tent, holding the letter in his hands. When he got to it, he knocked hard and quick, trying to show the importance of the matter.

“Come in,” Colonel Mandron’s voice called from inside.

Alvoren entered, trying to look alarmed, and quickly snapped a salute.

“What is it?” Colonel Mandron asked.

“Sir, I was going to refresh myself, when I saw an enemy messenger trying to sneak into the bandits’ lair! I found a letter on him when I defeated him. I think you should see it, sir.”

“Let’s see,” Colonel Mandron agreed, receiving the letter from Alvoren. “Oh, no,” he said after a while of inspecting it. “This could be bad. Come, soldier, let’s take it to Sir Grendar. He’s the one who calls the shots around here.”

Alvoren tensed, paling. Sir Grendar?! *I... guess you just gotta make sure they don’t see you.* Kayline’s voice echoed in his head. If the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team recognized him, he’d be done for. But, he didn’t seem to have much of a choice. *What to do, what to do?* Alvoren pondered, getting increasingly nervous.

“M-maybe you could take it to him alone. It might look strange if a mere foot soldier enters the tent of an army commander,” he bluffed in a desperate attempt to prevent the encounter.

Colonel Mandron raised an eyebrow. “That doesn’t make any sense. Are you scared of him or something? He won’t bite you,” he finally said sarcastically.

“I-I’m not, sir.”

“Then what’s the matter? Let’s just go. We have no time to waste.”

“S-sir, yes, sir.”

Maybe, just maybe, Alvoren could stand at the entrance of the tent while the two officers spoke. It’d be hard for Sir Grendar to recognize him from a distance. It would be risky, but he didn’t seem to have much of a choice.

Colonel Mandron and Alvoren then left the room, Alvoren getting increasingly nervous with each step they took towards Sir Grendar’s tent. They got to it alarmingly quick, and Colonel Mandron knocked on the wooden pillar supporting it. After a few tense seconds, a grave voice invited them in. Colonel Mandron pulled open the door of the tent, revealing the insides. Standing behind a desk Alvoren had already seen before was a big and thick

figure, almost square in its shape, made of pure muscle and dressed in a military outfit. It was Sir Grendar himself.

Uh oh.

Colonel Mandron entered, with Alvoren staying behind, standing next to the doorpost. Fortunately, Colonel Mandron had taken the letter while they walked, so Alvoren wouldn't have to approach the big knight. Sir Grendar received the letter from Colonel Mandron and started to inspect it. After a short while of reading, he spoke.

"...This is bad. Quite bad. Where did you say you got this from?" he asked Colonel Mandron.

"Soldier Axerhos here said that he found it on an enemy messenger," Colonel Mandron answered. Isn't that right?"

"Y-yes, sir," Alvoren answered, his voice trembling slightly.

"The man deserves a reward. Step forward," Sir Grendar called to him.

Alvoren hesitated, but finding no other way out of his dire situation, did as requested. Sir Grendar looked at him with an inspecting eye, examining him.

"You look familiar," he finally said. "Have I seen you before?"

"I-I don't think so, sir," Alvoren replied, his voice trembling, his heart beating hard in his chest.

"Oh, I *do* think so, soldier," Sir Grendar then said, squinting his eyes. He addressed Colonel Mandron, saying, "This man right here is a traitor to the kingdom of Fergahn and to mankind itself. This man... is an ally of the Transmutator."

Alvoren tensed. He had lost.

Colonel Mandron's eyes widened in shock. "A-are you sure about that, sir?"

"Absolutely. He even fought the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team, several days ago, when we tried to kill the Transmutator. If he wants to ally with the Transmutator, then he'll suffer his same fate. He... deserves a death sentence."

Alvoren paled. *A death sentence?! Isn't that too much?!*

"I understand," Colonel Mandron answered. "Is dawn tomorrow a good time?"

"That's perfect," Sir Grendar said. "Keep him shackled and under guard during the night."

"Right away, sir."

With that, Colonel Mandron called in some other soldiers who pulled the stunned Alvoren away, shackled him, and locked him up in an empty tent.

What... is going to happen to me now? Alvoren asked himself. *What is going to happen to the plan? Can Kayline rescue Merdilen alone?* Even if she could, he couldn't die here. He wasn't ready to die yet. But, there seemed to be nothing he could do now. He had failed. Would he now have to pay the price for his gamble?

Full of those depressing thoughts, he spent the night cold, alone, and sad.

"Get ready, you slackers!!" Juhen exclaimed towards the bandits, walking around the lair. "We're attacking *now!*"

Kayline got up from her bed, strapping her twin longswords to her back. Fortunately, she had been able to get her original ones back, as she had found them lying in a corner of the bandits' lair the day before. They were way better than the ones they had gotten at the village of Hedron, and she felt more confident with them.

Still, she was extremely nervous. The time had come. The time had come for the battle between the bandits and the Fergahnian army. She just wanted it to last long enough so Alvoren and herself could save Merdilen. As both factions were enemies of themselves, she didn't really care about who won. Still, it'd be... interesting.

"We won't allow this damn siege to last any more!" Juhen was saying. "Today, we'll fight, and we'll kill those Fergahnian bastards once and for all! We have the power of Manipulation with

us. They won't be taking neither these caves nor the Transmutator, and we'll get infinitely rich!"

The bandits started to cheer and shout, full of energy and thirst for battle.

"Let's go!" Juhen finally exclaimed, and all bandits rushed out from their lair, towards the unsuspecting Fergahnian army, ready to kill.

Alvoren had had a bad night. He had barely been able to sleep, and he had been full of depressing thoughts. Would he really die at dawn? He wasn't like Merdilen. He couldn't escape using the Transmutation. There wasn't really anything he could do. He just had his hands tied up, not his feet, so he had tried to sneak out, but had been quickly caught. Now, he had his arms tied up to a stake, so there really wasn't anything he could try to do anymore. Still, he felt like he should do something. He couldn't just let his journey end here. But there wasn't anything he could do.

The moon started to slowly lower, and the sun started to rise. It was dawn. Soon, a group of five soldiers entered the tent, untying him and pulling him up.

"Time to die, traitor," one of them told him, spitting at him.

Alvoren thought about retorting something, but fear kept him from doing it. He was carried out of the tent, out towards the rim of the camp. And there, he saw where he was being taken to. A gallows.

Oh, no!

He started to twist and move, trying to free himself, but the soldiers just grabbed him harder. They brought him against his struggling towards the gallows, and when they got to it, they pushed him atop a simple bucket, pulling his head through the rope.

A soldier prepared to kick his bucket from under his feet.

The moment he did, Alvoren would start to hang, and he would soon die. Not as a hero, but as a monster. He kept

struggling, trying to get out, but the firm hands of soldiers kept him in place.

“Any last words, traitor?” one of the soldiers asked, his voice full of venom.

Alvoren looked upwards, towards the mountain in which Merdilen and Kayline were... and he couldn’t believe what he saw.

“Bandits!” a soldier called out, his shout being repeated by the rest.

Soon, the whole camp was getting up from their bedrolls, getting ready to fight.

“W-what?!” one of the soldiers exclaimed furiously, right before his expression turned to surprise as he saw the incoming group of attacking bandits.

“Defend the camp!” Colonel Mandron exclaimed from somewhere Alvoren couldn’t see. “Don’t let them win!”

At that moment, most soldiers in Alvoren’s presence left him, leaving him with just two guards. Alvoren, not missing a beat, struck the soldier closest to him with his elbow, trying to escape. He fell backward, and Alvoren kicked him on the head, knocking him unconscious. But then the second guard attacked him, grabbing him. As Alvoren had his hands tied up behind his back, he couldn’t resist the grapple, and the soldier started to choke him.

“Die, you scum!” he bellowed at Alvoren.

Alvoren was unable to breathe, and he slowly started to pass out.

I can’t pass out now, he thought, panicking. *If I pass out, they’ll kill me*. But he just couldn’t resist the strong grapple with his tied hands. *I can’t... pass... out*. But mere moments before he lost consciousness completely, he heard a punch, then a scream, and the soldier choking him fell to the ground, releasing him.

Alvoren breathed once more and started massaging his neck, desperate for air. He looked up to see... Hogrel, looking down at him with determination.

“It was the right thing to do,” Hogrel told Alvoren, giving him a curt nod. “I owed you one.”

“...Thank you very much,” Alvoren genuinely said. “You saved my life.”

“Now we’re even,” Hogrel then said, cutting through Alvoren’s bindings. “But I can’t do much more than this, lest I be charged for treason too. Now run. Don’t stop running until you’re free, and... never stop doing the right thing to do.”

Alvoren thanked him once more, to which Hogrel nodded once again, and Alvoren ran away. He ran towards his weapons, and when he got them, he started dashing towards the chaotic battlefield, towards his and Kayline’s meetup point. He might have just barely evaded death, but he still had a job to do.

Kayline dashed out of the lair with the rest of the bandits, but instead of running towards the Fergahnian army with the rest of them, he headed towards the right, towards the rock that was her and Alvoren’s meeting point. The battlefield was chaotic, with men screaming, falling, and attacking each other, but Kayline tried to evade it as much as possible, sprinting to her objective. Soon, she saw Alvoren coming from the opposite direction, also headed towards the rock, now wielding a longsword in a hand and a big shield in the other.

“Everything okay?” Kayline checked when they met up.

They started to spar, trying to make it seem as if they were in the middle of a fight to not look suspicious.

“I was almost executed right now, but yeah,” Alvoren replied, and then exclaimed with a raised fist, “The great hero Axerhos would never be defeated by a mere gallow!”

“...Oh. Good that you survived, though.”

“Yeah,” Alvoren agreed. “But we have no time to lose. You know how to get to where Merdilen is being kept, right?”

“Yeah,” Kayline said, nodding. “Let’s go.”

With that, they left the battlefield stealthily, trying to look as casual as possible, and quickly entered the mountain. There were almost no bandits in there, as all of them were fighting on the battlefield outside. It was as labyrinthine as ever, but Kayline guided them with expertness through the maze, heading directly towards Garnent's office.

"Garnent, my father, stayed behind to guard Merdilen," Kayline told Alvoren as they walked.

"Uh oh," Alvoren muttered at the prospect of fighting him in his own territory. Sure, he had thrown him to the ground, but that had been as he had surprised him. Still, he hadn't been able to deal the killing blow, as Garnent had pushed him away with ease. Had the battle continued, Alvoren was sure Garnent would have won.

"But don't worry. I... think I have a way to beat him," Kayline added. "Leave him to me."

"...You sure?" Alvoren asked, and after a curt nod from Kayline, added, "Okay, it is better to fight others one-on-one to not hit your ally, but I'll obviously still be there, just in case."

"Seems correct to me," Kayline agreed.

With that, they kept heading through the dark corridors, until they encountered a big and strong man, wielding a greatsword and guarding the passage. He was clad in strong, splint steel armor.

"What are you doing here with an enemy soldier, little girl?" Juhen asked, cracking his knuckles. "Or, should I say, *traitor* girl?"

"Uh oh," Kayline muttered.

"Leave him to me," Alvoren told her in a low voice. "You run forward. I'll catch up."

"Are you sure?" Kayline asked. "Believe me, he's strong."

"Still..." Alvoren said, and then turned to face Juhen.

"You're no match for... the great hero Axerhos!"

“Ha, ha! The great hero Axerhos, huh?” Juhen mockingly said, then grinned, preparing his greatsword. “Let’s see how great you really are.”

“Go!” Alvoren exclaimed towards Kayline, to which Kayline gave some hesitant steps forward, then ran past Juhen and towards the end of the corridor.

“She won’t get past the boss anyway,” Juhen commented, his voice full of confidence. “Me letting her go doesn’t change anything. Now, to deal with you. This should be some fun.”

Alvoren got ready to fight, breathing in. He might not be as versatile as Merdilen, nor as fast as Kayline, but he was clever. He had some quick thinking. And, throughout his several years as a swordsman, he’d learned that knowing was half the battle.

“Yeah,” he answered, grinning as well, adrenaline pumping him up. “This should be some fun.”

Juhen raised his greatsword, smashing it downwards towards Alvoren. The greatsword was going with too much force as for Alvoren to block it, so he raised his shield, deflecting the attack, and dashed forward. He slashed at Juhen’s side, his sword cutting through his skin in a certain spot with no steel strips, but although Juhen grunted in pain, it had clearly just been a superficial strike.

Juhen attacked once again, diagonally upwards from the bottom right. Alvoren sidestepped with ease, dodging the slash. He had realized something: the underground corridors were too tight for Juhen to swing his massive greatsword horizontally—all his attacks would be either vertical or diagonal. That gave Alvoren a massive advantage, as he would have an extremely easy time in figuring out where his opponent would attack next.

Alvoren slashed twice at his opponent, testing him, and even though he was able to break his guard with the second attack, the cut was, once more, just superficial. His armor was too strong. Alvoren looked around, looking for something he could use. Soon

enough, he found it. A rock pillar stood in the middle of an adjacent room, holding the roof.

He remembered how Kayline had gotten her letter, which she had briefed him on during their walk through the lair. She had brought down a pillar, creating a distraction. Maybe he could do a bit more than that.

He took several steps backward, dodging several swings from Juhen's greatsword, and then sprang into that adjacent room. Juhen stepped in too, grinning as he realized he'd be able to swing horizontally now too, as there was plenty of extra space in the room. They exchanged a few more blows, neither of the two being really able to hurt the other. Alvoren stopped trying to attack entirely, restraining himself to just dodging and blocking attacks. He had to get Juhen as angry and frustrated as he could. And, after several more failed swings, Juhen got as Alvoren wanted.

Frustration made people stop thinking clearly. It made them act merely on instinct. And that was what Juhen was doing now. He started to swing his greatsword with incredible strength, getting angrier and angrier. All according to Alvoren's plan.

"I will *kill* you!" he roared.

"No," Alvoren said, grinning. "You lost the moment you entered this room."

"What?!" Juhen bellowed, furious.

But Alvoren didn't answer, and instead, jumped towards the center pillar, the one that held the whole room. Juhen slashed once more towards him, full of rage, and Alvoren dodged. His massive greatsword bit deep into the pillar, cleaving through it and getting stuck there. Alvoren took the chance, running out of the room.

"Stop running, you coward!" Juhen exclaimed at him.

"Maybe you're the one who should run," Alvoren answered.

"Huh?!"

As if on queue, Juhen pulled his greatsword out, and with the pillar cleaved through and nothing to support it anymore, the

whole roof came down, rocks falling down towards the room and burying Juhen underneath it.

“You were no match for the great hero Axerhos,” Alvoren muttered, still grinning.

Kayline arrived at her father’s office. She breathed in, then stepped into it, unsheathing her swords as she entered. Her father was standing in the middle of the room, walking around with his dagger unsheathed, ready to ‘defend’ Merdilen.

“Huh?” her father asked as he saw her, raising an eyebrow. “What are you doing here?”

Kayline answered nothing, approaching him with her swords.

“H-hey, get away! Go fight!” he exclaimed. When she kept approaching him, he added, “It’s an order! I’m not just your boss, I’m your father too. I own you.”

“No, you don’t,” Kayline said, looking at him angrily. “You have no power over me. Not anymore. I... am my own person. Now give me Merdilen.”

“Oh, you want Merdilen?” he asked, his voice suddenly turning dangerous. “Come get him.”

With that, Kayline rushed him, her swords ready to her sides. She wouldn’t be able to win by power. But she had something else. She wasn’t even able to reach him before a wind current pushed her backward, and she skittered in the ground, coming to a stop in almost the entrance. She got up once more, rushing him again. Kayline got now pushed towards a pillar, and she hit her back hard, falling to the ground in pain. Garnent grinned slightly. Garnent was too careful, Kayline would be able to do nothing he couldn’t stop. But there was an easy way of making someone let their guard down. Overconfidence. And Garnent was full of it.

Kayline kept charging, unsuccessfully trying to attack him, getting pushed backward time after time. The wind pushes pushed

her against pillars, walls, and rocks, hurting, bruising, and cutting her. Garnent's grin widened with each failed attempt. Kayline made herself look weak and damaged, for Garnent to become even more overconfident. It wasn't hard. And finally, after almost ten failed attempts, she realized the time had come.

Sheathing her right longsword, she pulled out a dagger and charged once more. Analyzing him, the day before, she had realized the strength of the wind he Manipulated was directly proportional to the amount of wind needed. Therefore, to push her backward each time, he had to Manipulate *all* the wind in the room and push it forward. And she was going to exploit that weakness.

As soon as she started running, she threw the dagger towards him, its tip aimed directly at Garnent's head. Manipulating the wind, he deflected it with ease, and chuckled.

"I know a distraction when I see one, girl," he said.

He then pushed Kayline away, feeling like he had already won. But at that very moment, he lost.

When pushing Kayline away with the wind, he pushed using the wind from the whole room, Manipulating it all forward, towards Kayline. The dagger hadn't fallen to the ground yet, it was still in the air. And as it had flown right past his head, Garnent was directly in the way between Kayline, the objective, and the dagger, which was in the air. The dagger was pushed alongside the wind forward, and as the wind pushed Kayline backward, it pushed the dagger towards her. But there was something standing in its way.

The dagger impaled itself in Garnent's back with a sickening noise. Garnent's eyes widened in shock, and his own dagger slipped from his hands, falling to the ground. He fell on his knees a few seconds later, collapsing completely in a pool of blood.

Kayline got back up with effort, heading towards Merdilen's cell. She broke the lock with her longsword, opening the door.

"Hey," she told Merdilen, smiling.

Merdilen looked up at her with surprised and hopeful eyes. He was noticeably thinner than before, his clothes were ragged, and his hair was dirty. He looked like he hadn't eaten anything in several days.

"K-Kayline...? I-I thought you had become evil..." he muttered. He was clearly under some kind of drugged effect.

"What? No, of course not!" she exclaimed. "It was an act, an act to save you. And it worked."

"Then, is Alvoren alive?" he asked with hopeful eyes.

"Of course!" she answered, to which Merdilen breathed out in relief.

Alvoren arrived at the entrance to the cell a few moments later, having emerged victorious from his battle against Juhen.

"Hey, Merdilen!" he called out, grinning. "Long time no see!"

"Yeah," he answered, chuckling slightly.

"Let's go," Kayline said. "We haven't got much time. And... I know you were just freed, but there's something I need you to do."

Kayline had considered just letting her father die, for all the evil he had caused his family, but then, she realized something. If she killed him, she'd be as evil as he was. If she killed him, she would never be able to move on. She had to demonstrate she was her own person, free from the evil that bound her father. And that... they were still family, after all.

"S-sure... What is it?" Merdilen asked, getting up with help from Alvoren.

"You see..." Kayline started, unsure of what to say. "My father was evil, but... he was still my father. I don't want to be as evil as he is. Could you... please... heal him?"

"Damn that man," Merdilen muttered. "But... okay. Only because you want to."

"Thank you."

Then, Merdilen headed with Merdilen's help towards the fallen Garnent, and after almost a minute of effort, he finally managed to heal the man's stab wound.

"I guess I can officially heal others' small wounds now," he mentioned, smiling weakly.

"But, won't he come back after us once he wakes up?" Alvoren asked.

"Yeah," Kayline said. "But I think there's something we can do about it. Merdilen, do you think you could extract the Manipulation serum from his body?"

"Not if I don't know what I'm looking for," he replied.

"Does this work?" Kayline then asked, heading towards a safe in the wall and extracting a serum with white liquid. "He said this was a Manipulation serum, same as the one he had."

"...I can try."

With that, Merdilen crouched once more beside Garnent, with one hand in the Manipulation serum and another one in Garnent's chest.

That probably wouldn't work with a Transmutator, he thought, as a full-powered Transmutator would be able to block his body from being Transmuted by someone else, but as this was a gaseous matter Manipulator, he wouldn't have those kinds of defenses.

Merdilen focused, trying to feel his power through his drugged body, and fortunately, he was able to. It seemed like his cell was the drugged one, not his body, fortunately. He slowly searched in Garnent's body for anything resembling the Manipulation serum, and soon enough, he found it. It was some kind of liquid in his blood, and after several minutes, he was able to turn it all into fine dust. The dust was extremely thin, so it shouldn't damage his body in any way. Still, he wouldn't be able to Manipulate anymore.

Merdilen considered killing him, for all the damage he had done, but after looking at Kayline, decided against it.

“We can’t leave this serum here,” Merdilen finally mentioned. “Kayline, would you take it? It was your father’s, after all.”

“Sure,” Kayline said, taking it and putting it into a belt pocket, where she’d be able to protect it. “Just in case.”

With that, Merdilen Transmuted a tunnel out of the bandits’ lair, and Kayline, Alvoren, and himself left it behind, along with the battle between soldiers and bandits raging outside. They had, once more, succeeded.

Manipulation

April 15th

Year 2120

The Gap

Southern Wastes, Gartaena

“Thank you, both of you,” Merdilen told Kayline and Alvoren.

As soon as they had exited the mountains, they had run south, trying to make as much distance as possible between them, the bandits, the Anti-Transmutation Strike Team, and the Fergahnian army. They had been running and then walking for several hours, until they had long left the Southern Mountain Range behind.

They were now in a place only known in their map as The Gap, in which absolutely nothing was marked. Around the area of the Southern Mountain Range, there were several mountains, and even a settlement, marked on their map. Now, there was nothing. Just Morkilen Farenthar’s fortress, far south. They were going in totally blind. They had just sat down to have lunch, and Merdilen spoke once more.

“I mean it. You both saved my life.”

“It’s okay,” Alvoren said. “You saved my life too. I guess we’re even now,” he added with a slight chuckle.

“Yeah, it was the right thing to do,” Kayline agreed. “Don’t worry about it.”

Merdilen smiled at them, leaning on the ground with his hands behind his head.

“What about some meat to celebrate?” Kayline suddenly asked. “I really miss meat, and you, Merdilen, must be starving. After all you just went through.”

“Yeah, but, how are we meant to get meat?” Merdilen asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I’m certain there must be some kind of animal around,” she answered. “I’m going to search for anything I can hunt. Don’t worry, I’ll try not to get into trouble.”

“That’d be epic,” Alvoren agreed.

“Sure. But be careful, don’t get too far away,” Merdilen warned. “This is a dangerous area.”

“Don’t worry, I will,” Kayline said, getting up. “I’ll be right back.”

With that, she unsheathed both longswords and stealthily walked out of their makeshift camp.

“Hey...” Alvoren called out to Merdilen after Kayline was gone. “There’s something I haven’t told you. Something I thought about after freeing you.”

“Huh?” Merdilen asked. “What is it?”

“You see, this has to do with my own story...” Alvoren started. “My father was a drunkard, and my mother died when I was young, so I never had anyone to really be there for me. During my whole life before meeting you two, I had only one friend. Trambler Nerlumen. Trambler had similar family problems, so we both used to play make-believe together. In school, we heard a story about a great hero, a story we both started to love. The story about... the great hero Axerhos, a hero that fought several years after the Transmutation War, and helped rid the kingdom of Fergahn of shadow monsters. So we used to play about being the

great hero Axerhos and his loyal companion, the great hero Brenkon. You know why?"

"No, why?" Merdilen asked.

"To feel valuable," Alvoren continued. "To feel important. No one thought us to be worth anything, so we wanted to show ourselves we could actually be heroes. If everyone else told us we were worthless, we'd make ourselves feel worth something. And it worked. Even though we never did anything actually useful, we considered ourselves heroes, and you know what? We were happy. Even though the rest of the world considered us useless boys, we were happy. For the first time in our lives, we were happy. But nothing good can last forever.

"On a certain occasion, a group of bandits attacked our village. Of course, we went out there to be real heroes. We fought. Trambler didn't survive the battle. Although us villagers eventually defeated the bandits, my friend, the great hero Brenkon, died during the fight. He died a hero. Other people would have given up on being heroes after that. But not me. The great hero Axerhos... would never give up. That's why I decided to officially become Axerhos, and become a hero. But I hadn't been able to do anything *that* heroic... until I met you, Merdilen. Thank you. You have made me feel valuable, like an actual hero. Thanks to you, and now Kayline, I can fulfill my friend's wish and actually be a hero."

Merdilen smiled. "You deserve it. You are the worthiest person in the world of wearing the mantle of the great hero Axerhos."

"Thank you," Alvoren replied, smiling too.

A while later, they saw a form walking through the bushes, and Kayline appeared with a hog over her shoulders.

"I found lunch!" she said, grinning.

"Great!" Merdilen exclaimed.

Using his Transmutation, he lit a small campfire, making a grill and placing one of the hog's legs on top of it. The leg started to slowly roast, letting out a rich and tasty smell. The Fergahnian

army had no way of knowing which specific direction they had gone off to, so they probably had time to have lunch properly before heading off again.

“It wasn’t easy to find a hog in this place, but I found one wandering around,” Kayline mentioned.

“This will last us for easily a whole week!” Alvoren exclaimed happily.

About half an hour later, the hog leg was roasted and ready, and they began to eat. It was good to finally eat meat again, as most of their rations were composed of other non-perishable foods, and Merdilen couldn’t Transmutate anything that had once been alive. They feasted on the pork, enjoying it. Merdilen hadn’t eaten good meat like that since he had left the house of his ancestors, almost one month ago.

Merdilen suddenly realized something. In two more days, on April 17th, he would have been on his adventure for a full month. It had been a full month already since he had left his ancestor’s home. There had been so much action and adventure during his journey, time had really flown by. It was strange to realize a whole month had gone by already. That was why the Fergahnian army vanguard had been able to reach the bandits’ lair so quickly. They had already had their army at the ready. They would have to move with haste.

“Hey... I saw something while hunting for the hog,” Kayline mentioned. “I didn’t want to say it earlier to not ruin the mood, but I have to now. I saw a group of three strange men walking around, with strange black tattoos on their faces. They didn’t seem to be bandits. And... they had shadow monsters with them. One for each man. I... I think they were tamed.”

Merdilen’s eyes widened, and Alvoren paled slightly.

Merdilen remembered clearly the words of the bandit who could tame shadow monsters, the man they had been hired to capture. *A group of men attacked us, seemingly belonging to some kind of cult, a cult that treats shadow monsters as superior*

beings, he had said. They had learned to tame them and to use them in battle.

“Uh oh. Did you see where they were headed to?” Merdilen asked. “Can we avoid them?”

“Yeah. I think they were just patrolling, as they were walking casually, looking around,” Kayline answered. “I don’t know *why* they were patrolling that area, but I do believe we should be able to evade them with ease.”

“Okay,” Alvoren said. “Let’s finish lunch quickly so we can leave this place.”

They ate the rest of the pork leg quickly, and after dividing the remaining hog between the three of them, got up and started to walk once more. They veered slightly to the east, planning on evading the group of mysterious cultists.

They kept walking for a few hours, until Merdilen suddenly felt three powerful presences approaching them at perilous speed.

The shadow monsters from before?! he thought, alarmed. How did they find us? How is it possible?

“Shadow monsters!” he called out to the others. “Get ready! They’re coming!”

Kayline and Alvoren looked at him, confused, but they both unsheathed their weapons.

A moment later, the three shadow monsters sprang towards them from behind a small unnaturally sharp hill, one cultist riding atop each shadow monster. They rushed towards them, roaring, their sharp fangs and claws glistening in the sunlight. Alvoren raised his shield, Merdilen Transmuted a shield of his own, and Kayline jumped to the side, each resisting the attack of one of the shadow monsters.

But there were too many of them. They had never fought against so many shadow monsters at once. And their usual strategy—blinding them by slashing at their eyes—wouldn’t work this time either, as the whole back of the shadow monsters was occupied by their cultist riders.

Merdilen realized this too, so he strengthened his clothes, Transmutating them into steel, in an attempt to buy time. The shadow monster confronting Alvoren attacked him once more, and when he raised his shield again to block... it broke, overwhelmed by the shadow monster's force. The shadow monster slashed at the defenseless Alvoren with its claws, creating deep gashes in his forearm.

Alvoren screamed in pain, and both Merdilen and Kayline called his name. But he was too far from either of them. The cultist rider spurred the shadow monster, and it roared, opening its jaw and preparing to bite Alvoren's head off. Both Merdilen and Kayline sprinted towards him, but both were too far away, having been fighting their respective shadow monsters. Merdilen was slower than Kayline, and he was being slowed down by his armor too, so it was up to Kayline to save Alvoren's life. But she wouldn't make it in time either.

What could she do? *What?!* Acting entirely on instinct, she took from her belt their last option, their only hope. Their trump card.

The Manipulation serum.

While running, she took it out, and injected the syringe into her arm. If this didn't work, and quick, Alvoren would die. As soon as the serum made contact with her blood, she heard a siss, like some kind of electric jolt, and a substance she had never felt before entered her body, running through her blood. Suddenly, the world seemed to grow clearer. Not visually, but she suddenly felt everything. She felt the lifeforms all around her, she felt the source of power that was Merdilen, she felt the dark presence of the shadow monsters. But most importantly, she felt the wind. Not thinking, acting entirely on instinct, Kayline concentrated, and prepared to Manipulate.

Everything seemed to slow down around her, and she tried to visualize the wind she was about to control. She visualized it surrounding her, pushing against her hair, her body, and

everything on her. She then imagined it pushing her towards Alvoren, and her body shot forward at an incredible speed, pushed by the winds surrounding her.

She got to Alvoren a moment before the shadow monster chomped off his head, and pushed him to the side. The wind currents automatically supported her arms, and Alvoren flew to the side, far from the shadow monster's reach. She then jumped upwards, testing the Manipulation, and the wind complied. She slashed with both longswords at the cultist, and the longswords cut with incredible speed, throwing the man backward and far from his monstrous mount.

Meanwhile, Merdilen took advantage of the distraction, and Transmutating the ground, created a massive spear, several feet long and a foot thick, and thrust it towards his shadow monster's mouth. It killed the beast instantly, and it slumped down, throwing its master to the ground.

"A-a Transmutator *and* a Manipulator!" the third cultist exclaimed in a hard accent. "W-we can't fight this!"

With that, he started to ride away in fear, with the other two fallen cultists running after him.

Kayline took a deep breath, sitting down.

"...Whoa," Merdilen said, looking at Kayline.

"That was *insane*!" Alvoren exclaimed at the top of his voice, looking at her too. "You used the Manipulation serum!"

"...Yeah," Kayline confirmed. "I didn't really want to use it, but it was the only choice."

"Damn, now I'm the only one in the party without a special power," Alvoren jokingly mentioned.

"So you're a Manipulator now," Merdilen muttered, his eyes wide open, trying to grasp the weight of the situation. "That's amazing. But you're gonna need training."

"...I'm a Manipulator now," Kayline muttered too, not believing it herself. "Merdilen, could you share with me what you know about these powers? If you don't mind."

“Sure,” he agreed. “But let’s get as far away from here as possible. Somehow, they found us; we have to make as much ground between those cultists and us as possible.”

“That’s right,” Alvoren agreed. “Let’s go.”

Merdilen, Alvoren, and Kayline walked for about an hour directly east, trying to make ground between them and the strange shadow monster cult, until they finally arrived at a clearing that seemed to be peaceful. They set their things down, and after a short while of Merdilen healing Alvoren’s arm using his Transmutation, Merdilen started to speak to Kayline.

“So, I’ll try to teach you the aspects of Transmutation that might be shared with the Manipulation,” he said, to which she nodded. “First of all, Transmutation is a mental power. It all depends on one’s strength of will, so for example, if one wants to do something especially difficult, the more determined you are to succeed, the better it’ll come out. That’s why I was able to heal you, Kayline, and Alvoren, something I before thought impossible. Because I’m determined to keep you two alive. On the other hand, if you think you can’t do something, you probably won’t be able to.”

“Oh... I understand,” Kayline said, nodding. “But then, why can’t you Transmute at range?”

“Because it also requires experience,” Merdilen answered. “These powers are usually hard to control, so I’d probably be able to do it once or twice in dire situations, but not often, at least not until I’ve done it several times.”

“Oh.”

“But, mind you, the fact that it’s a mental power isn’t always good,” he then warned. “That also means that it’ll take mental strain to do stuff, which often causes headaches if you’re doing stuff too big. For example, my head would probably hurt like hell if I were to suddenly Transmute at range. You gotta be

Careful with that, as suddenly having a massive headache in the middle of a fight can be a real pain.”

“Got it.”

“Also, something else, that I think will apply a lot to you,” Merdilen added. “Sometimes, the hard thing isn’t using your power, it is *not* using it.”

“Huh? What do you mean?” Kayline asked.

“So, I think you haven’t been in this situation yet, but I believe you will find that sometimes you will accidentally use your power subconsciously. For example, try and jump over to that rock over there.” He then pointed at a big stone situated a few feet away from her.

She looked at him with confusion, but then did as instructed. Instinctively, she tried doing a long jump, and the wind currents instinctively pushed her forward. She shot towards the stone, passing on top of it and arriving several feet behind it. She had overjumped, by a *lot*.

“See?” Merdilen pointed out. “I thought so. Your powers’ intensity is different than mine, as my power had been weakened by several generations of mixed blood. Your power is pure and raw, much more intense than mine. Therefore, it’ll be harder to control it. Try jumping towards the rock again.”

Kayline did it, and once again, she overjumped. She looked towards the rock angrily in frustration.

“Don’t worry. It happens to the best of us,” Merdilen said with a chuckle. “When I was little, I was constantly Transmutating everything I touched to toys and stuff like that, as that was what I desired those things to be. It takes practice to gain control of one’s thoughts. Let’s try that again.”

“Is there some kind of switch for this, to turn it on and off at will?” Kayline asked, frowning. “I don’t think I want to have it on *all* the time.”

“Sorry, but there isn’t,” Merdilen asked. “You either have it or you don’t. There’s no way to turn it on and off at will. The only

alternative is to truly learn to restrain the power, as we're practicing now."

Kayline kept jumping towards the rock, again, and again, and again, until finally, at about the tenth attempt, she did it. She arrived at the rock.

"Nice," Merdilen commented, and Alvoren clapped a little.

"...I guess it is possible to control this," Kayline commented, stumbling towards them. "Still, it's *very* frustrating."

"True," Merdilen agreed. "But practice makes perfect. You okay?"

"My head hurts a little, but I'll get used to it," she mentioned.

"Yeah, you get used to it."

Then, Merdilen Transmuted the ground into what looked like a massive stone shelf, with thick ledges being several feet apart, the first one several feet from the ground too. It was farther than what any normal human could jump. But Kayline was no normal human. Not anymore.

"Jump to the first ledge," Merdilen told her.

Bracing herself, she Manipulated the winds once more, jumping upwards and landing swiftly and effortlessly on the first ledge.

"Nice. Now get back down and jump to the second ledge," Merdilen then said.

Kayline jumped down as instructed, and then repeated the procedure, jumping to the second ledge. She was able to do it, but barely.

"Be careful when coming down this time," Merdilen warned. "Try to Manipulate the winds to slow down your fall, or else you'll take damage."

She did just so, making the wind push slightly upward, reducing the speed of her fall.

"Try to get to the third ledge."

Kayline tried, Manipulating the winds, but her head already hurt, so she fell just short of reaching it with her feet. She grabbed the edge of the ledge with her hands, pulling herself up.

“Get back down. I think that’s enough for now,” he then said. “Try to keep using your powers during the day, so you get used to it. Practice makes perfect.”

“You’re a good master, you know that? Maybe you should try to become a teacher instead of an adventurer,” she teased, jumping down from the third ledge.

“Heh, maybe I will,” Merdilen joked. “Once we fix this world. Who knows.”

To that, Kayline and Alvoren chuckled, and Merdilen added, “But I can assure you one thing. You’re gonna sleep like a log tonight.”

Kayline did *not* sleep like a log that night. They had kept going for several hours, finally set camp, and were now each lying down in their bedrolls. But Kayline could not sleep. A thought kept coming to her mind, disturbing her, worrying her.

She had originally embarked on her quest to kill Merdilen, the last Transmutator. That was because, during her whole life, she had grown up hating them. Her family had always been the same way. They had all felt that way, as it was because of the Transmutators that the world of Gartaena was the way it was.

So, now that she was a Manipulator, a person with similar powers to the Transmutators... would they hate her too? She thought they would probably accept Merdilen’s help, but would they accept their own daughter becoming one of them? Becoming similar to the very thing she had sworn to destroy? Would they accept her then?

Everything would be hard when she got back to her home. They would have to get accustomed to having a Manipulator among them, and no one would trust her anymore. She probably wouldn’t be able to make any new friends, and she doubted

anyone would want to hire her for anything if they knew what she was. Life would be hard.

And, coming to think of it... how would she tell her family about her father? Knowing that he had become an evil bandit and criminal... that would definitely break their hearts. How would her mother feel when she found out she had stabbed him in the back? Even though they hadn't seen each other in years, she had once loved him. She might still do. How would she tell her about his fate...? Worried about those troubling thoughts, she fell asleep, and had dreams of rejection, family, and hate.

"Breakfast is ready!" Alvoren called out.

Kayline drowsily sat up in her bedroll, looking to the side. Several feet away from her were Merdilen and Alvoren, cooking in a small campfire one of the hunted pork's other legs.

"You seemed to be extremely tired after yesterday's training, so we didn't want to wake you up earlier," Merdilen mentioned.

"Yeah, thanks," she agreed.

"You okay? You seemed to be having a bad dream," Alvoren said. "You were mumbling things last night and moving around in your bedroll."

"Really? Oh," Kayline said, flushing slightly. She considered not telling them about her dream, but she wanted to get it out of her chest, so she finally spoke. "I... dreamed about my family. In my dream, I happily went back to our apartment, but as I am now a Manipulator, they angrily rejected me, and I had to go away."

"Don't worry," Merdilen said, and Alvoren nodded.

"They're still your family. If they are as loving as what you have said about them, there's nothing to worry about. They'll accept you no matter what. They are still your family, after all."

"Yeah," Kayline agreed, smiling slightly. "Thank you."

“But, let’s move on to happier topics,” Merdilen then said, cutting a slice of pork for himself. “Can you do something for me with your Manipulation? After breakfast, of course.”

“Sure,” she said, cutting pork too. “What is it?”

“I want to see how fast you can run. When saving Alvoren, you ran really fast. Do you think you can replicate that?”

“I can try,” Kayline replied.

“Great, thank you. That will help a lot in measuring the limits and abilities of the Manipulation,” he added.

So, they quickly finished having breakfast, and Kayline got up.

“Try running to the foot of that hill over there,” Merdilen told her, pointing to a close-by short hill.

Kayline got ready, and once more imagined the winds flowing around her. She then Manipulated them and shot forward, the winds pushing her on. She soon enough reached the foot of the hill Merdilen had pointed, and stopped suddenly. She stumbled around, almost falling, dizzy because of the sudden speed. Her head hurt too, but she still managed a thumbs up. She walked back towards Merdilen and Alvoren, not wanting her head to hurt any more.

“Damn,” Merdilen mentioned. “That’s about the speed of a horse in full sprint. For a human, that’s *fast*. You can run about twice as fast as any normal human.”

“Wow,” Kayline mentioned. “But I fully sprinted back there. My head hurts because of that, much more than yesterday. I doubt I’d be able to keep up that speed for long, or run that fast often.”

“Of course,” Merdilen agreed. “Still, it’s good to know. What about a race?”

“Huh?” Kayline asked, confused.

“What about a race between you and me? I’ll Transmutate a flag we have to reach close by, and the first of us to get there wins,” he explained.

“But... I run twice as fast as you do. Won’t I immediately win?” she asked.

“Not necessarily. I can create obstacles for you. Earth is a great conductor for the Transmutation. That will also help us understand your dexterity and maneuvering ability while running.”

“...Sure,” Kayline agreed. “Just let me rest a little.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, the long-awaited time has come!” Alvoren exclaimed, pretending to be a sports commentator. “The super-powered race is about to begin! To our right, we have... Merdilen Arthenmon, the last Transmutator and an experienced fighter! To our left, we have... Kayline Sherdaine, a new Manipulator and a determined challenger! Who will win?! We’re about to find out!”

He was standing next to the flag that was the finish line, roughly three hundred feet away from the two participants. Merdilen and Kayline were standing in a half-crouch side by side, ready to run. There were no rules; the only requirement was to try not to hurt the other person. Whatever means of getting to the flag were allowed.

“Three... two... one... Go!” Alvoren exclaimed, raising his hand high in the air.

Both Merdilen and Kayline sprang into action, Kayline dashing forward at an alarming speed. Merdilen Transmuted a big spring under his feet, shooting forward too. He quickly caught up to Kayline with his enhanced leap, and Transmuted a small wall right in front of her. Meanwhile, Merdilen used again the spring trick, leaping forward once more. He had supposed Kayline would have to stop or circle the wall, but instead, she just jumped forward, passing by the wall from up high.

They both kept running, Kayline using the winds to push her forward and Merdilen leaping forward by means of springs and other platforms. He stopped momentarily, pressing his right

hand on the floor, and Transmuted the whole section of the ground Kayline was standing in into sand. She fell downwards with a yelp, falling into the small hole, and Merdilen got the advantage once more. He saw her come out shortly after, though, but he was already up front.

Merdilen suddenly felt a jolt of force in his back, and he fell to the ground as a sudden gust of wind pushed him to the ground. His eyes widened as he looked upward just to see Kayline, grinning and running past him.

I didn't know she could do that! he thought in amazement.

Without getting up from the ground, he Transmuted, using his whole body as focus, and created a massive stone wall right in front of Kayline and himself. She stopped suddenly, and after realizing it was too big to be jumped over, started to run to the side, trying to circle it. Merdilen got up once more and ran straight towards it, Transmutating an entrance and getting to the other side.

He was close to the flag now. He could almost grab it...

Merdilen suddenly felt Kayline coming up next to him, and Transmuted the glove of his only hand into a much bigger and longer one, reaching out to the flag. Kayline shot another gust of wind, trying to pull the flag towards it. They both reached at the same time, and grabbed it.

The flag split in half.

"It is a *tie!*" Alvoren exclaimed, putting an end to the competition.

"Your Manipulation is quite strong, huh," Merdilen said, catching his breath. "I'll give you that. Kayline Sherdaine, Manipulator. It has a nice ring to it."

Sacrifice

April 17th

Year 2120

The Gap

Southern Wastes, Gartaena

Merdilen, Alvoren, and Kayline kept walking for the next day with no problems, not seeing anything strange. In fact, they hadn't seen any untamed shadow monsters for a few days now. Usually, they could always see shadow monsters in the distance, but not anymore. It was as if they had all been taken away. As if they were being... kept somewhere.

The three of them were now having a short rest after lunch atop a small unnaturally-flat hill, with Kayline drawing something, Merdilen reading *Transmutation War: Cataclysm*, the book about the end of the Transmutation War, and Alvoren telling both of them one of his infinite tales about his adventures and stories.

"...And that was how I, with my broken sword, courageously defeated Slyther, king of all serpents!" Alvoren finished.

"Cool," Merdilen said, who hadn't really been paying attention. He had just finished a chapter of his book, and so he stood up, walking around and stretching his legs.

Suddenly, as he walked around, he spotted something far away to the north. A massive army was marching towards them in

the distance. Merdilen couldn't see how many they were, but they had to be several thousand men. And in the front... Even though he couldn't see them, he knew they were there. The Anti-Transmutation Strike Team.

W-what?! Merdilen thought, stumbling backward. A full army... are they all after me?!

"What is it?" Kayline asked, raising an eyebrow.

Merdilen raised a finger towards the faraway soldiers.

"A-an army! They're coming this way! We've gotta get going."

Kayline and Alvoren both paled visibly, and all three of them started to pack their things, preparing to leave.

"Of course," Kayline muttered. "The 'army' that sieged the bandits' lair wasn't the whole army, it was just the vanguard. They were sieging to make time for the bulk of the army to arrive. It seems we hurried up the process, but the army still arrived eventually, and now they're all marching towards us."

"B-but, isn't that way too much for a single Merdilen?" Alvoren asked.

"For them, it's not a single Merdilen," Kayline clarified.

"For them, it's a single Transmutator. The last descendant of the biggest mass murderer in the history of Gartaena. And Merdilen surviving this long after having an elite group of fighters chasing him all around the world only increases the danger he poses in their eyes. They want to make certain he's wiped out."

They had run away from the army as fast as they could, and about half an hour later, saw several immense structures rising in the distance. They were massive partially-collapsed buildings, each as tall as the House of Records. It seemed to form what had once been a city, although most of the buildings were toppled over and broken. They were ruins of a destroyed civilization. Remnants of a forgotten world.

"Whoa..." Kayline muttered. "They're massive. Is this how the world was like before the Transmutation War?"

“Seems like it,” Alvoren replied, as amazed as she was. “But, how did this city survive the Transmutation War when most others perished?”

“I may have a theory,” Merdilen said. “From what I read, the blast that ended the Transmutation War and destroyed the world had been caused by an ignition of all fires in the world almost at once, those fires being kitchens, campfires, chimneys, and more. If this city had been abandoned because of it being in the center of a warzone, then there would have been no fire there to explode. Therefore, this city has been damaged only by time.”

“Ohh. Makes sense,” Kayline agreed. “Still, it’s impressive.”

They kept approaching it, until they saw several figures walking around in the city, agglomerating near a specific building.

“Look!” Alvoren pointed out. “There are people there.”

“Crouch!” Kayline told them, hiding behind a small ruined house. “We don’t know if they’re enemies or not. We probably don’t want to be seen.”

“True,” Merdilen agreed.

The three of them kept looking at the strange people, examining them, until they saw something terrifying. Several of them had shadow monsters with them. Tamed shadow monsters. And there were hundreds of people, with more shadow monsters than they had ever seen in a single place. They were the shadow monster culture the shadow monster tamer they captured had talked about.

“Uh oh. Let’s go,” Merdilen muttered nervously. “We can circle them. They won’t be able to see us.”

“Yeah,” Kayline agreed, nervous too. “Let’s go.”

“Wait, look!” Alvoren called out to them, pointing at the strange culture. “They’re doing something.”

They were bringing in people tied up in a straight line, like prisoners of some sort. And they weren’t just men; there were women and children too.

“What are they gonna do with them?” Merdilen asked in a whisper.

The captors took them up to a giant hole in the ground—an especially large and steep crater—and threw them in. They fell with a scream.

Merdilen, Alvoren, and Kayline winced, looking at the horrible spectacle. The men then guided their shadow monsters with a sort of veneration towards the pit, and they jumped downwards. Towards the captives. The captives screamed, helpless. The three of them couldn’t see the bottom of the pit from where they were, but their stomachs lurched all the same.

“What is wrong with them?” Kayline whispered, horrified.

The shadow monster tamer’s words came back to Merdilen’s mind. *A group of men attacked us, seemingly belonging to some kind of cult, a cult that treats shadow monsters as superior beings.* They were... making sacrifices to the shadow monsters.

“They’re horrible...” he muttered.

“Let’s go. Now. I don’t want to know what would happen if they saw us,” Alvoren said.

“...Yeah,” Kayline agreed, and they started to slowly and sneakily walk away from the cursed event, starting to circle the city as Merdilen had proposed.

“Guys, I... I have a dilemma,” Merdilen said when they had gotten far enough away from the city, heading south. “When I saw that culture doing that, I... I hated them. I felt like I should have killed the cultists that attacked us the other day. Should we... kill them if we come across any of them? They are truly monsters.”

“Of course not,” Kayline said immediately. “They are still human beings. If we come across any of them—which I hope doesn’t happen anytime soon—we should try to inhabitate them somehow, as you did with my father. Not kill them. Killing is never the answer.”

“I know, but...” Merdilen hesitated. This was something that had been on his mind for a long time. Longer than he would like to admit. “Everything would be easier if we just killed our enemies. For example, if we had actually killed the Crimson Ruby bandits instead of striking a deal with them in the first place, I would have never been captured, and Kayline would never have had to face her father. I know everything turned out right in the end, but I fear we won’t always be so lucky. I fear what will happen with us letting the shadow cultists live the other day.”

That left both Kayline and Alvoren thinking, and none of them answered for a while.

“That would mean losing ourselves,” Kayline finally said. “Sure, it’d make things easier, but it would mean losing sight of our morals and ideals. Ideals are what made you want to become a hero, Merdilen. Ideals are what made Alvoren join you. Ideals are what made me spare your life and later join you too. If we stop being who we are, then what good is defeating our enemies at all?”

“...Wow,” was all Merdilen was able to say. “That was deep. But... I think you’re right. I won’t kill, at least for now. I just hope nothing bad comes out of it.”

The three of them kept walking for a few hours, until Merdilen suddenly sensed something, something big, coming up quickly behind them. He paled. They were shadow monsters. Dozens of them. Kayline felt it too, as she perked up.

“Run!” he exclaimed at Alvoren and Kayline.

The three of them started to dash through the wasteland, running south, looking for a place to hide. But there was nothing. The place they were in right now was just one plain, big valley. Soon enough, they saw them. Dozens of shadow monsters, each with a rider, approaching in the distance behind them.

How did they find us?! Merdilen wondered, terrified.

They couldn’t outrun them. There was no way. Kayline probably would be able to, using her Manipulation, but there was

no way she'd be able to carry two grown men with her. Merdilen started to think of options, his mind racing.

He could Transmute a tower for them to lock themselves up in... No, it wouldn't be resistant enough. It would topple eventually. He could Transmute a cave... That wouldn't do either, as they'd have to come out eventually. He could Transmute armor for all three of them... No, they weren't used to it. They wouldn't be able to fight properly. Especially considering Merdilen only had one hand. He suddenly realized.

A wall! He pressed his only hand to the ground, and concentrating hard, he Transmuted. A massive wall erupted from the ground, rising, rising, rising, until it crossed the entirety of the valley. It was the biggest Transmutation he had ever done. Merdilen stumbled backward, his head hurting like never before.

But then, he heard a ground-shaking boom. Then another, and another, and another. The shadow monsters were hitting the wall, acting as living battering rams.

"Oh, no," Merdilen muttered, on the verge of unconsciousness. "Distraction... We need a... distraction..."

"But, what?!" Kayline asked. "What can we do?!"

Merdilen couldn't fight anymore, and there were dozens of shadow monsters on the other side of the wall. The wall wouldn't last long. They had to run, and for them to successfully escape, they needed a distraction. If not, they would all die, painfully trampled, cut, or eaten by dozens of shadow monsters.

"I'll go," Alvoren said suddenly. "I'll go to the other side of the wall, distract them, then catch up to you."

"You can't!" was Kayline's immediate reaction. "You'll die if you do!"

"Someone needs to do it," Alvoren stated, full of determination. "Besides, you two are more important than I am. You two are a Transmutator and a Manipulator; I'm just a man with delusions of grandeur."

"No, you're not. You're a hero!" Kayline argued.

“I know. And I’m going to act like one.”

“Why?!”

“Because I...” he said, grinning, “am the great hero Axerhos.”

“Please don’t,” Merdilen whispered, almost unconscious.

“See you,” Alvoren said, still grinning. “I’ll catch up to you. They’re no match for the great hero Axerhos.”

“You’ll die if you do!” Kayline exclaimed, almost tearing up.

“Then I’ll die a hero,” he declared. With that, he unsheathed his sword, prepared his shield, and dashed towards the wall.

“Come back to us,” Merdilen whispered, still stunned.

“I will,” he replied confidently.

“Alvoren!” Kayline called out, but it was too late.

Alvoren Vandmorn dashed towards the wall, running at the top of his speed. He soon reached it, and started to climb up the mountain, getting to the wall’s top. He walked on top of it, and when he was in the middle of the wall, jumped downwards, towards the middle of the swarm of shadow monsters.

During his whole life, he had been called worthless, useless, stupid, and many other things. Even though he had later played to be the great hero Axerhos, he had never actually been a hero. Until he had met Merdilen. With him, he had actually been able to fight for something worth fighting for, for something with purpose. He had become a real hero. But not all was fun and games. A hero had to be always a hero, no matter what. Even if it meant sacrificing your life. And he was about to prove he was the greatest hero of all time. He was about to prove he was worthy of bearing the name Axerhos.

Alvoren fell in the middle of the shadow monsters in a three-point stance, his feet crouched, his fist on the ground, his sword straight to the side. He slowly looked upward. He was not afraid. He was grinning.

“This is for you, Brenkon,” he muttered.

All the shadow monsters and riders froze, surprised to see a fighter just jump fearlessly into their midst.

“You all are no match for me,” he said, grinning. “Because I... am the great hero... Axerhos.”

With that, he sprang into one of the shadow monsters, his sword ready at his side. He didn’t really have to win. He just had to make enough time for his friends to escape. The shadow monster attacked Alvoren at the same time, and he blocked with his shield, slashing at the rider atop it. The rider fell to the ground, and Alvoren kicked him unconscious.

A shadow monster slashed at his back, but he ignored the pain and kept fighting. He kept slashing wildly left and right, trying to keep all shadow monsters at bay, but soon enough, another shadow monster broke through his defenses. He bit his sword arm hard, and he screamed, not letting his sword fall. Even against the excruciating pain, he gripped his sword tight and kept fighting. He kept hacking and slashing at the shadow monsters and riders, until he had a small pile of injured riders at his feet. But he was weakened, and wouldn’t last much more. Still, he kept fighting.

But then, a shadow monster kicked his shield hard, breaking it, splinters flying everywhere. It thrust its claws at him, and he wasn’t able to block. It buried deep into his chest, and the shadow monster retracted it wildly, making him fall to the ground. But he kept fighting. Slowly, steadily, he got back up, roaring and swinging his sword at the nearest shadow monster. He slashed at the rider, cutting him across the chest, but then, another shadow monster pierced his chest.

Alvoren stumbled backward, coughing up blood, and then charged once more. He kept attacking the shadow monsters, making slow but steady progress, until, suddenly, one of them slashed upwards. It hit Alvoren’s sword out of his hand, and it lurched upwards, passing over the wall and landing on the other

side. His sword and shield were now gone. His body was severely wounded, his stamina drained. His enemies were as strong and numerous as ever. But still, Alvoren took out a dagger from one of the riders' unconscious bodies, and kept fighting. He stabbed at one of the shadow monsters, dealing no damage, but not giving up anyway.

He turned just in time to see a shadow monster stabbing at him with its claw, and raised his shield arm desperately to block. But there was no shield anymore. The claw pierced him from chest to back, and Alvoren fell once more. He pushed upwards, trying to stand, but the shadow monster stabbed him once more. The great hero Axerhos didn't get back up.

Merdilen kept looking at the massive wall he himself had Transmuted, expecting Alvoren to appear at any moment. He had started to completely recover his consciousness shortly after Alvoren had left, and was now fully awake. Along with Kayline, they were standing in an elevated rock far away from the wall, waiting for Alvoren. They were much farther away than they would have been able to if Alvoren hadn't served as a distraction, and were ready to quickly run away once Alvoren arrived.

"Why is he taking so long?" Merdilen asked, his voice trembling slightly.

"He'll come," Kayline declared confidently. "He'll come."

But then, they saw a long and thin object fly over the wall, falling to the ground on their side. A sword. And, even though they were far away, they recognized it. It was Alvoren's longsword.

"Alvoren!" Merdilen called out, desperate, and Kayline gasped.

They both knew what that meant.

"We gotta save him!" Merdilen exclaimed. "We gotta defend him!"

"...We gotta go," Kayline said, her voice trembling. "We can't let his... sacrifice... go to waste."

“But... we can still save him,” Merdilen muttered. “We *have* to go!”

“No!” Kayline exclaimed. “If we go, we’ll die too.”

“You only want to go because you didn’t know him for as long as I did,” Merdilen accused.

“Of course not, you idiot! I want to go because I don’t want you to die too!”

Merdilen seemed taken aback by the comment, but then he exclaimed, “Well, *I’m* going to save him! You may not care about him, but I do!”

At that, Kayline grabbed him by the shoulder, and... slapped him in the face.

“*Wake up!* Can’t you reason for once, for the sake of his sacrifice?!” she exploded, shouting angrily. “Do you want to die too?! Do you want to defile his sacrifice?! Do you want to make his death mean *nothing*?! Sure, I may have known him for a bit less than you did, but I still cared about him! But those shadow monsters are gonna break through that wall at any moment now! I won’t let you throw your life away! You hear me?! You know why he sacrificed his life and his dreams?! For us to *survive*! If we throw our lives away now, everything we have done so far will have meant *nothing*!”

Merdilen answered nothing. He didn’t argue anymore. He had noticed something. Kayline’s eyes were wet with tears, some of them streaming down her cheeks. She was crying. He realized with a start that his own face was wet. He was crying too.

“...Okay,” he whispered. “Let’s go. Goodbye, Axerhos. See you on the other side.”

Several hours of walking later, Merdilen sat on a rock, during his night guard shift, trying to process the events of the past day. Trying to process Alvoren’s death. It was strange to think he was just gone. Everything had happened so quickly. So... suddenly.

Even though he had taken it for granted, Alvoren's happy, carefree, and optimistic attitude had always cheered up the party. Now that he was gone, everything was much more silent and gloomy. He looked sadly to the side, to a small stone monolith. Alvoren's tomb. Merdilen had Transmuted it out of a tree, placing a Transmuted replica of Alvoren's sword on top.

Merdilen was sad. He would truly miss him. But more than that, he was angry. Angry at himself. If he had killed the trio of shadow monster tamers they had encountered the other day, then they wouldn't have alerted the rest that there was a Transmutator and a Manipulator nearby, that horde of the shadow culture wouldn't have come looking for them, and Alvoren wouldn't have had to sacrifice himself for them to escape. If only he had been hard enough...

"Damn it!" he exclaimed, punching the stone he was sitting on.

If only he had been a little harder on them, Alvoren would still be alive. He had always thought it was bad to kill, and he had never killed anyone before, but now, he thought something else. He should have killed those shadow cultists when he had the chance. The next time he saw them, he wouldn't hesitate. He *hated* them.

A short time later, his chance arrived. He felt the characteristic presence of shadow monsters in the darkness. Three of them, approaching from the south. Merdilen tensed up, getting to his feet. He did not wake up Kayline. Not because he didn't need her help. But because he didn't want her to restrain him.

Shortly after, he saw them. Three shadow monsters in the distance, each with a rider on its back, all coming towards him. They crossed the remaining distance in a dash, roaring, and jumped towards him.

Merdilen sidestepped, dodging the charge, Transmutating his Transmutation glove into a steel sword and heating the metal to burning degrees. He slashed at one of the riders and managed

to cut him in the back, making him scream, but not throwing him off the shadow monster. The shadow monsters turned around from their charge, facing him once again.

“I’m going to kill you all!” Merdilen roared, pressing his only remaining hand against the ground and Transmutating once again.

He Transmuted the ground, turning it into three massive spires that rose upward from the ground, towards the shadow monsters. Two of them managed to evade them, but it impaled a third one, crossing it from bottom to top and killing it instantly. The rider fell to the ground, his sword falling far from him, so he scrambled around, looking for a weapon. And he found one.

He dashed towards Alvoren’s tomb, heading for the longsword atop it.

“Don’t you *dare* get near his tomb!” Merdilen exclaimed in anger, reaching out towards him with the Transmutation.

He reached out with his feelings, visualizing his power as a golden stream flowing towards the running rider, Merdilen’s anger and determination pushing the power forward. For the first time in his life, he Transmuted at range. Mercilessly, he Transmuted the rider’s simple leather clothes into metal spikes pointing inwards. The spikes impaled the rider all around the body, killing him painfully and instantly. Merdilen didn’t regret it, turning over to face the remaining two shadow monsters and two riders.

Transmutating at range, same as last time, he turned the leather clothing of both riders into metal spikes pointing inwards, killing them both instantly. Their bodies fell from their shadow monsters, hitting the ground. Both remaining shadow monsters roared in rage, charging Merdilen. Merdilen crouched, picking up two rocks from the floor, and hurled them at the nearest shadow monster’s mouth.

The rocks entered the shadow monster’s mouth, and Merdilen then Transmuted at range, transforming them into a

single, massive metallic blade. The blade cut the shadow monster from inside, killing it. He repeated the process with the second shadow monster, Transmutating the stones into blades inside its mouth, killing it.

Merdilen stood there in the middle of the battlefield for a few seconds, panting, catching his breath. He was afraid. Not because he had just killed three human beings, an act he had never committed before. But because he didn't regret it the slightest bit.

Kayline woke up, shaken by all the commotion.

What... just happened? she wondered, rubbing her eyes. She sat up in her bedroll, looking to the side. There, she saw it. Merdilen, catching his breath, his fists clenched, standing in the middle of a corpse-littered battlefield.

"You... killed them," she muttered, horrified. "You killed human beings."

Merdilen looked back at her, a cold stare in his eyes.

Seeing him standing there, his blade burning, the battlefield littered with corpses, and his cold stare, he looked different. She didn't know if it was just the pain of Alvoren's death, the moonlight, or something else, but he looked different. For the first time in a long time, she saw him, not as a hero, but as something else. As a monster.

THE END OF PART TWO