

The One Once Called Timeless

Breathe. Regress time. Breathe. Regress time.

That was all Kayden Almerth, the one once called Timeless, could do.

His unyielding shackles felt as cold as always on his wrists and shins, his body hanging high in the air.

How long had passed? Months? Years? Decades?

Would he ever be able to escape, or would he be stuck forever in this infinite loop of his own invention, this infinite loop of life and—

Regress time.

The blue forget-me-nots in the rock behind Kayden embraced his body like sky shards, or maybe sea fragments.

The bitter contrast against the surrounding gray seemed a reminder of how far the sky was from here. Of its distance, but of its existence too. The Skylands were out there somewhere. Kayden didn't notice it anymore. He was using all the energy he would've needed to revive his empty gaze to—

Regress time.

The other prisoners, hanging like meat in a slaughterhouse, seemed unresponsive. They all knew they had a long time coming.

They also knew calling out was useless. No one listened down here.

Regress time.

“Fight again, Kayden.”

Where... did that voice come from?

Then, the shackles didn't feel as cold as always anymore. A small piece of something incomprehensible broke away and fell to the ground.

Kayden opened his eyes, forgetting to, once again, regress time.

The tiny piece of steel hit the stone floor with a sharp *clang*.

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The darkness of the cavern enveloped Kayden, forming black shapes and silhouettes as if laughing at him, its only illumination coming from below the gate at the end of the pulsing-rock room. The heavy air made it hard for normal humans to breathe, reminding him of all the disgusting smells of the outside world. Of course, that was no problem for a Skyborn like Kayden, but still. The few other prisoners there, hanging around far in the other walls, all seemed to be either overbored or overexhausted –they knew they had a long, long time coming. Rats and roaches thrived in the corners of the room, their tiny squeals echoing around the room. Kayden knew they were constantly badmouthing him in their own tiny language.

And, after hundreds, maybe even thousands, of time regressions, the piece of steel, a shard from his shackles, hit the floor with a sharp *clang*. It heated up the ground in protest.

How is that possible? Kayden thought.

Steel didn't just *break apart*. Did it? No, Kayden was pretty sure it didn't. Unless... How long *exactly* had it been? For how long had he been like this? Had the steel... rusted away? The odds were slim. It looked really angry. And what had been that voice he heard?

Kayden stopped bending time entirely, his mind rushing. As far as he knew, steel could endure for several decades before going mad. But it couldn't have been several decades, could it?

When am I?, Kayden wondered. How long *exactly* had passed?

There was only one way to find out.

Kayden started to pull against the shackles, pressuring them, forcing them to give way. They protested by heating up, but he bit his lip and endured the pain. He doubted any people guarding him would listen, though. The cavernous room he was in was oversized, and sound wasn't traveling far here. Even so, he didn't doubt there would be plenty of guards.

As, last time he checked, he was the biggest enemy of the empress of the Empire of the Shattered Sky. The Everbender.

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"Can you believe it, Kayden?" Lauren said with the widest smile, seated on a bench at the edge of the world, her legs hanging onto infinity. "These adventurers explored the Skylands in sky ships! Isn't that amazing?"

"Whoa," Kayden admitted, holding on his lap a thick and heavy book. "I wish I was like them."

"We can," Lauren said. Small silence. "We can be adventurers too. Appear in history books." She smiled again. "Transcend."

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Was she still alive? He had no idea. Could she be? Kayden didn't remember. He frowned. Why didn't he? He felt like he should know, but he just... didn't.

Thinking of her brought back tormenting memories, memories he had for long tried to keep buried. But those memories were few and far between, with gaps within them.

What is happening to me? Kayden thought. He seemed to just... not remember some things. How much had he forgotten?

Kayden still remembered when they came down from the sky. Kayden still remembered when Lauren declared herself the Everbender. Kayden still remembered how, one by one, he lost everyone. But no more. He only knew he had to save the Skylands. He was the leader of the Aoyume Knights, and that was his quest.

What is happening?

The time regressions.

The realization hit him. How many time regressions had he done on himself? How many times had he altered his own body to keep himself alive? Could something have gone... wrong?

How did I get here?, he wondered. Not even that he remembered. *Why am I imprisoned?*

Kayden was certain it had something to do with Lauren being the Everbender, and with all his friends being... dead. But after the death of the others, everything just went blank. The next thing he knew, he had been chained to a wall by his wrists and shins, being mocked by the cavern around him, knowing he had regressed time on himself who knew how many times.

Did I just lose my life?

Silent tears threatened to flow, but he forced himself to remain calm. This was neither the time nor the place to think about that. For now, he needed to escape. And pulling against the shackles just wasn't going to cut it.

Forcing down the feelings, he started to think of a practical way of breaking his weakened shackles. He couldn't regress time on himself to appear out of the shackles –he had probably tried countless times already. The shackles, he soon found, regressed with him, just as clothing would. He had no weapons. No knife, no dagger, nothing to cut the shackles with. In fact, there was nothing metallic at all in the room. Nothing but the shackles themselves.

The shackles themselves.

It was then that Kayden got the idea. He started to move and shake about, trying to make the shackles clash with each

other. Almost... there... But no. They just wouldn't reach with what little strength he had left in his arms.

Kayden had sworn he'd protect the Skylands, the floating landmasses that had once been his home. He wouldn't stop fighting until he knew they were at peace.

He then started to try with his whole body. Kayden started to shake in the air from one side to the other, struggling to fully turn around. With each shake of his body, he gained more momentum, almost spinning enough as to turn completely and make the chains collide. Just a little more. Just... a little... more...

Yes!

Finally, he did it. He managed to turn around in the air, and the rusty and weakened steel bounds clashed, then, as he shook further, started to successfully grind against one another. Left foot chain with right foot chain and left hand chain with right hand chain. They were so hot Kayden felt as if he'd light up in fire, but continued grinding. After a long and tedious process, and what seemed like hours, he heard a final ear-splitting screech, and the chains gave way, breaking apart by the grinding. The foot chains split first, leaving him hanging for a moment before the hand ones gave up too, letting him fall to the ground in disappointment and anger.

He hit the stone with a loud thud. Even though he still had the shackles at his wrists and shins weighing him down, he was no longer bound by the chains.

Kayden didn't have freedom yet, but he had something else. He had a chance.

He started to walk slowly but steadily toward the exit of the cavern, his muscles aching and protesting but eager for battle. The rock was pulsing all around him like a beating heart, but Kayden could hear his own heartbeat above it still.

I'm getting out of here. I'm getting my life back!

* * *

The guards posted outside the ancient cavern-like cell yawned, bored. Nothing had happened here in a long, long while, but the Everbender insisted that this prisoner be fully guarded at all times with maximum security, no matter what. Even though they had never been informed who he was or why he was being kept alive. They only knew him as the Timeless.

The first guard monotonously dropped another card into the stack of playing cards between both guards, unsatisfied. Even the cards themselves were yawning and half-asleep. *What a way to waste a Lawbender*, the guard thought bitterly. He'd rather be fighting the anarchists at the wastes, that was for sure.

Suddenly, they heard muffled screeching of metal echoing through the cavern behind the metallic cell, and after a while, a muffled thump, as if something very heavy had just dropped to the ground.

"I didn't like the sound of that," his guard companion and fellow Lawbender called out, in a slightly clipped accent indicating nobility. "Let's go see, peasant, lest Harkatronic whip us again."

The guard sighed. "Fine, follow my lead," he said in a more relaxed, peasant voice.

Confidently, but with a hint of nervousness in his posture, the first guard opened the gate to the cavern-cell, and both of them peeked inside. What they saw made them freeze.

The prisoner was free.

His uncut dark-brown hair went down wildly to his shoulders, and his sharp body showed an amount of training that no nineteen-year-old should need to go through. Of course, he looked nineteen, but both guards knew he was much, much older. His blue right eye stood in sharp contrast to his left brown one, almost as if lit up.

The prisoner started to approach them, making them finally react.

“Go, go, go!” one of them exclaimed nervously. “Don’t let him get away!”

The first guard rushed him, unsheathing a sword. The second guard stayed behind, guarding the gate. They couldn’t allow the prisoner to escape.

The prisoner entered a full sprint toward the first guard, ready to ram him head-on. But, as they were about to collide, the prisoner... disappeared. Neither guard could have explained what happened. One moment he was running toward them, and the next he was just... gone.

The second guard heard the gate to the cavern-cell close slowly, and spun around, expecting to see the prisoner running away on the other side. But instead, the prisoner had trapped them *with* him inside, shutting the gate. The guard felt a chill run down his back.

The Timeless started to approach them once more.

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Kayden approached the fear-stricken guards one more time, breathing heavily, catching his breath, replenishing his power. A full-on time progression like that consumed a lot of air, even though the effect was just on himself. He’d have preferred to just lock the guards in and run away immediately, but he needed the armor to disguise himself to have a shot at getting out of the prison he was in. Once his breath stabilized, he started to run toward the guards.

“Get them, Timeless!” Kayden heard someone call out. It was one of the other prisoners. They were cheering him on. But there was no time to think about them now.

Instantly, one of the guards began to run forward, with the other covering his flanks. It was a typical move for two-person Lawbender parties. When several people were fighting at the same time, a Lawbender got mentally confused, and risked affecting his

ally instead of his enemy with whatever offensive effect he chose to use.

The guard threw his sword toward Kayden as he ran. The sword raised no more than a few feet, and Kayden smilingly frowned. But then, the guard took a small metallic ball from his belt with surprising speed, and pointing it toward the falling sword, pushed the air forward with his hand and metallic ball, and the sword shot forward through the air, toward Kayden. The guard seemed to be a Magnetbender –and a skilled one at that. Several of the other prisoners gasped, having woken up at the interruption of who-knew-how-long they'd spent in absolute silence.

Kayden breathed in deeply without stopping his run. As he was about to thrust himself into the sword, he stepped to one side, and progressed time on the flying sword by less than a second. Enough to make it appear beyond Kayden, who in a split-second reached forward and snatched it by the hilt mid-air. The sword, commanded by the guard, immediately tried to change direction and magnetically shoot downward at Kayden's metal shin shackles, but Kayden was smarter than steel.

It happened in an instant. He took advantage of the guard's unarmed state and kicked him hard in the stomach, letting go of the sword. The guard gasped, but didn't give up his Magnetbending control. The sword kept shooting toward Kayden's shin shackles, and as Kayden quickly pulled back his foot, the hilt hit the guard's stomach with all its might. Chance or not, Kayden was kinda relieved to not have to see the guard be split open by the sword's tip. The guard was pushed backward by his own sword, his face wrinkling up in pain and his eyes widening in surprise. The other prisoners oohed and aahed as the guard fell to the ground, overwhelmed by his own weapon. Kayden crouched beside him, slamming the guard's head against the stone floor with just enough force to knock him out.

One left.

Kayden turned to see the other guard looking away, frustratingly trying to shut up the enthusiastic other chained prisoners with his annoying clipped accent. They were roaring and cheering Kayden forward, having just seen their only bit of action in who knew how long. The guard turned toward Kayden in disbelief as he saw his fallen partner, and Kayden picked up the guard's longsword with a grin. It was heavy. Good.

Kayden set himself up in Fireform stance as the guard prepared his own blade, feeling the itch of his first actual one-versus-one with swords in, again, who knew how long. His muscles felt sore, but not weak. The time regressions had kept him physically stable, which was why he hadn't died of hunger or thirst as well. The guard started dashing at an incredible and unnatural speed, crossing the feet between them in an instant, thrusting his sword forward, toward Kayden. A Speedbender, this one. Different Lawbender. Different strategy.

Kayden sprinted toward the guard as well, accelerated, feeling the thrill. The clash between the both of them resulted in a shower of sparks and the shriek of steel against steel as both ally swords unwillingly connected. As Kayden and the Speedbender guard moved back and forth and side to side, swinging their swords around, the clash soon became a sort of almost-choreographed dance, with each swordsman anticipating the enemy slashes and thrusts and getting anticipated as well.

Kayden knew that to any onlooker they would appear evenly matched. And, on sword prowess alone, that could be so. After all, these were the best of the best of the Empire of the Shattered Sky. But any who said so didn't know who the Timeless was. After several minutes of intense fighting, the enemy sword started heating up, turning slowly red. Just as its owner, it was exhausted, slowing down. But not Kayden and his sword. They were as fresh as when they had first locked blades with the guard.

Kayden just continued doing what he'd been doing throughout the whole fight: continuously regressing time on

himself. Not enough to run out of breath but just enough to keep himself in his initial energetic state. He kept barrelling the guard with hacks and slashes, until the guard could do nothing but dodge, and then a little more. It felt so good to fight again.

And then, as the masterful Speedbending guard exhaustedly gave up just a step of his stance, Kayden slashed at his chest.

The guard tried to dodge at an impressive speed. But he was too late. Kayden's sword caught him full-on, throwing him backward in pain, against a tall rock. He fell with a scream and did not get back up. Kayden had won. He took a few tentative steps toward the guard to make sure.

"Harkatronic," the guard said, choking in his heavy breathing. "Harkatronic will make you pay. No one escapes Chasm's Edge."

Kayden frowned. The names didn't ring a bell.

Then... the guard's blood started to gush out into the ground, streaming over to Kayden's feet in insignificant rebellion. Blood. So red. So terrible.

Kayden took a few steps backward, staring at the blood on the ground, and dropped the sword. His acceleration started to die out, leaving only disturbance. Had he caused this? He'd wounded a man. He'd cut through a man, he'd let his blood out. It spun around in the ground, forming monstrous shapes on the rock and screeching at Kayden. Kayden felt sick, his head swimming. Had he really done this to a man?

He just stood there for several seconds, trying to catch his quickened breath. He flexed his muscles, forcing himself with a wince to look away. Even so, he'd regress time on the guard; Kayden was no killer. It still felt strange to move after so much time spent chained. That was probably it. Good thing he still got the hang of fighting. But he could not rest now, there would be other guards around.

Kayden *was* getting out. Somehow, he knew he'd had that clear since day one. He *was* going to survive. And he'd fulfill his quest. He'd save Lauren. He'd save the Skylands. He'd save the world. Catching his breath, and flexing his muscles, he decided on one thing, among everything else rushing in his mind. A determination.

I'm the Timeless. And as long as I keep my name, I know one thing. Nobody dies.