

## Many Nights Ago

Kayden felt a slight sense of *déjà vu* from jogging parallel to the road with Tham at his side, birds chirping and the midday sun hitting his face and burning his hair. Well, he didn't really know whether it was *déjà vu* or just memory—he had no idea whether he'd done this before—, but something about all this was familiar somehow. A quest to save, crossing the wilds, a friend at his side. He knew much was at stake here, and he couldn't afford to slip and fall, but right now, he felt, for some reason... warm? Maybe it was the fact that he was back. Not just back in the outside world from the prison, but back as a hero.

*I am no hero.*

Kayden's expression darkened. He had failed Stumpborn Village, he had failed Tham's fellow villagers and his own friends. He was no hero.

"You okay?" Tham asked.

Kayden blinked, realizing he'd been wincing. "Yeah, it's nothing."

"Well, let's keep it that way," Tham replied with a slight smile. "My mom used to say that casual conversation sometimes helps heal wounds better than forcing the problem into a solution." His smile vanished. "I mean... *usually* says. We're gonna get her back. Nothing to worry about."

Kayden nodded resolutely.

"So, anyway," Tham said. "Did you notice what today's date is?"

Kayden looked at him with a frown. "No clue. Does it matter?"

"It's February 29th." Tham let out another smile. "I used to hear a story that spoke of this date, as it only comes up in a

leap-year, every four years. The story talked about a place called the Field of Memories, a location a day's walk from Stumpborn Village. It is said that, if you go out into that field on the night of February 29th, if you manage to see a shooting star passing by, you'll manifest in the present a vision of yourself from four years ago. Of course, you'd only catch a glimpse of it if you stand near your past position, and it only lasts a few minutes, but still. It's nice to remember sometimes. My mom and I did it four years ago, to sort of record our images into the future."

"Whoa," Kayden said. "And that's today? What are the odds?"

"Well," Tham said, "dunno about the Skylands, but stuff like that's constantly happening down here. Weird things keep life interesting. Actually, depending on where the imperial caravan heads, we might pass through the field at night."

That left Kayden thinking. "I'll be looking forward to it," he finally said.

They continued jogging behind the caravan for the whole afternoon, only stopping for a few minutes to have a little something to eat –after all, they could spare neither the time nor the food. They were making good time though, and never let the marching caravan out of sight.

"We're out of the route," Tham said after a while, as the sun was close to setting. "We won't pass through the Field of Memories."

Kayden looked at Tham. The teenager was clearly disappointed by that, though he was trying hard to hide it. As Kayden's mind rushed, he made a decision.

"We will turn away from the road," Kayden declared. "We will head for the Field of Memories. Do you think you'd be able to find and catch up with the caravan if we were to be left, say, two hours behind?"

"Yes," Tham replied right away. "You can always catch up with incoming stuff, but can never get back missed memories."

Kayden smiled. "Such wisdom from one so young. We go to the Field of Memories, then. Let's pay a visit to your past selves."

Kayden knew that wasn't the smartest thing to do, and wasn't sure whether he was thinking clearly at the moment or not, but right then and there, making Tham happy was all that mattered to him.

And so they drifted off course, letting the caravan go a separate way as Tham led Kayden to what was the Field of Memories. They arrived just as the sun was setting, a golden glow upon the green field that soon started turning purple, then blue. A turquoise night finally settled in as Kayden and Tham watched, the stars as millions of blinking eyes guarding the world. Fifteen minutes passed, then half an hour, then an hour. Kayden and Tham, lying on the grass, talked about everything, and Kayden learned things about Tham he'd never imagined, and which he thought with a smile he'd always remember but never repeat. Even the sentient sword that was the Mimicker seemed happy to be there, talking and inquiring about everything it could think about for the first time since they'd met. It hadn't said much the last couple of days. For good or ill, it was talkative again.

About two hours had passed since night had fallen when it finally happened. A distant star started flashing brighter than all others, hesitantly at first, then a blinding white, and left its position, visiting all other nearby stars as if saying goodbye. Finally, the sparkling star shot east through the sky, crossing it before Kayden and Tham's eyes. Other stars glittered as it passed by, as if waving their invisible hands.

"There it is!" Tham exclaimed, sitting up and pointing at the sky. "The shooting star!"

Kayden looked up in awe, and as he did, he heard an overly familiar voice several feet to his left talk as well.

"I told you it'd happen! It's so pretty!"

Kayden spun, looking at the source of the voice, and his breath caught in his throat.

It was a group of five people, all late teenagers or young adults, dressed in adventuring gear and looking up at the sky. The one who had spoken was pointing straight up with a grin, his dark brown hair hanging down wildly and slightly covering his

bi-colored eyes. It was Kayden himself, younger and happier. Some of the others he recognized by feeling, though he couldn't have mustered their names. Except for two particular ones. Bakor was acting like he didn't care much, but of course he did. He was glancing all around like a kid in a candy store. Kayden couldn't help but smile wryly at the sight. Classic, carefree Bakor. ...When had everything gone so wrong? And... one certain girl his age, who was as clear to Kayden as the starry night. Lauren Lerahen, co-founder of the Aoyume Knights and, to Kayden, the most important person in the world. Her blonde hair flowed down to her waist. Kayden thought back then that it had to be extremely uncomfortable for fighting, but he couldn't deny she looked beautiful. The five of them looked so *happy*. Only Kayden remained now. Could he really carry on his shoulders the weight of so much happiness?

He wasn't sure how the vision was working –much more than four years had passed– but he just let himself enjoy it. Like getting a gift from the stars.

Kayden looked back at Tham. He didn't know what the teen was seeing. One thing was clear, though –he was happy too. Kayden smiled, feeling tears streaking down his cheeks. He didn't wipe them away.

Both visions lasted about a minute, and as Kayden and Tham got back together, Tham spoke. "It's nice to remember sometimes."

Kayden couldn't do more than nod. The old Aoyume Knights. They may not be with him anymore, but in some corners of the world, in some corners of his mind, they still lived. He had to keep going, for those who didn't anymore.

As they left the Field of Memories behind, the Mimicker spoke.

"Kayden? Tham?" it said from the sheath hanging from Kayden's back.

"What is it?" Kayden asked.

"Are you my friends?"

Kayden paused. No sword had ever asked him that before –they were usually more apathetic. He smiled.

“Yes,” Kayden replied. “The three of us are friends. That won’t change.”

Tham nodded, smiling as well. “Yeah, Mimicker, you’re my friend too. If there’s something I’ve learned, it’s that you can never get enough of those.”

The Mimicker remained silent for a while. It seemed to be reflecting. “I’ll do my best,” it finally said.

The three of them finally left the Field of Memories behind, setting an improvised camp nearby and drifting into sleep, ready for the long, long walk to come.