

Chasm's Depths

Kayden walked, and walked, and walked.

The Mimicker's weight on his back didn't make the trek any easier and, to make matters worse, there was barely any air down there.

"So, Harkatronic," Kayden said after a while. "He seems like a big deal around here. What's with him? He mentioned something about his dad and becoming an emperor."

The Mimicker sighed. "Harkatronic's as stubborn as they come. He denies all suggestions, comments, and accusations with quotes from his father. He kinda worships him. If you ask me, Harkatronic's just plain annoying."

"I see," Kayden said. "Well, I'll beat him up anyway."

"I'm hoping so, but he's the warden for a reason! Harkatronic's the strongest guy around here, by *far*."

Kayden nodded, even though he still didn't get half of what was going on. He then frowned.

"Hey, uh, Mimicker..." he said. "Was my heartbeat always this loud?"

The Mimicker laughed uncannily. "That's the golem beast, not you!"

Kayden paused. "Golem beast?"

"Huh. I thought you knew," the Mimicker said. "What else did you think this place was? Nothing is as safe and hard to find as a traveling colossal golem beast."

Kayden shrugged.

"We must be approaching its heart!" the Mimicker then added. "We won't see it, though. It's so far deep, no imperial has ever been able to—"

The orange-lit tunnel opened up into a circular chamber with a pillar at its center. The pillar's center sphere glowed and pulsed, chained all around to a piece of metal that was in turn connected to the wall. The rhythmic vibrations here were so strong that Kayden's whole body seemed to shake.

"*The heart!*" the Mimicker exclaimed. "What?! This is *insane!*"

"I thought it was impossible to reach," Kayden said, looking up at the veined pillar.

"Nah," the Mimicker said. "Just extremely unlikely. ...Ooh, I know! Thrust me into it. Kill the beast! That'll destroy the prison and let you escape. Am I not brilliant?"

Kayden hesitated. "...But it's a living being, right?"

"It doesn't matter!" the Mimicker exclaimed. "This is a once-in-a-lifetime experience!"

It would definitely make things easier. Kayden pursed his lips.

"...No," he finally said. "It deserves a second chance at a better life." He smiled slightly. "Seems like I'm getting one. Why wouldn't this beast deserve it too?"

"So we'll just let it be?" the Mimicker asked, confused.

"I've got something better in mind," Kayden said with a grin.

With great effort, he cut through the chains surrounding the golem beast's heart. They screeched at the Mimicker's touch, heating up in anger, but eventually gave way. They drooped, hanging from the rock in dismay.

It was then that Kayden realized his miscalculation.

"We're still inside it," he said as much to himself as to the Mimicker. "How will we now—?"

A deep, rumbling roar sheared the air. Rough and growling, as if the rock itself was shouting—which might actually have been the case after all.

Then everything turned quite literally upside down. The 'ground' started leaning upward at an alarming speed, and Kayden soon lost his footing with a yelp.

“What did you think would happen?!” the Mimicker exclaimed as Kayden slipped downward —backward— over the stone, picking up speed as he failed to grab onto anything that could have been of help.

Kayden paled, his heartbeat picking up speed. He hated heights.

Sliding turned to falling. The Mimicker shifted into an ample but thin shield, absorbing blow after blow as Kayden plummeted back through the tunnels and bounced around in the now-vertical labyrinth of rock, yelling and terrified. Gravity stumbled back and forth as the golem beast roared and shook.

“We’ll pinball to death!” the Mimicker squeaked.

Kayden didn’t get it. He was too busy trying to hold his guts together and grasp the shield-Mimicker tight to listen to what it was saying.

Now what?!, he kept thinking.

The moment Kayden decided it couldn’t get any worse, the rock wall a few feet to his side exploded, and from it leaped Harkatronic, roaring and lifting a new warhammer as he shot toward Kayden with his own custom gravity.

“You...” he shouted, swinging the warhammer around as Kayden fell past him, “destroyed... my realm!”

I returned it to life!, Kayden tried to reply, but all he did was grunt as he slammed against yet another rock pillar. How *deep* was this thing? His stomach wouldn’t survive these shifting heights much longer. Neither would his sanity.

“This is really bad,” the Mimicker said.

A single bad crash against the rock or the warhammer would mean the end. Harkatronic’s shouts were catching up, even though the big guy seemed as unsettled by the shifting gravity as Kayden was.

They crashed into an open cavern as if breaking through glass. Kayden found himself in a surreal painting as floating black water slowed him down. Was this really how gravity worked?

“Stay here!” the Mimicker yelled at him. “No matter what you do, don’t leave the cavern. You can fight back in this place!”

Kayden was falling toward a wall, and fast. His stomach was all messed up, and his head was spinning. But he'd already decided he wasn't going to die anytime soon. He was going to find the Megalo Sky. So he absorbed the blow with the shield-Mimicker, pressing his feet against the surface right away.

For a moment, he actually managed to remain standing up. He breathed in deeply, and the Mimicker shifted back into a broadsword.

"Come at me," he called out, "Harkatronic!"

The massive warrior shot at him from above like a meteor, his eyes shining white.

Kayden couldn't have described what happened next. Acting entirely by instinct, he swung the Mimicker through the gravity shifts that followed, slashing and parrying with his every sense on edge. For each hit he'd receive, he'd regress time on himself, but not even that could stop him from flying through the cavern and then all throughout the prison as Harkatronic kept tunneling forth and throwing him along.

They wreaked havoc through cells, dining halls, storage rooms, and bathrooms. Kayden didn't know whether the shaking came from Harkatronic's frantic tunneling and his own desperate struggle not to hit any surfaces too hard or from the golem beast's unpredictable moves.

"Let go of that sword already!" Harkatronic shouted.

Kayden held on to it even tighter. Even so, he hadn't managed to keep Harkatronic in the black water cavern for even ten seconds. What chance did he have? The Mimicker and his own strength were good resources, but he couldn't defeat Harkatronic with them.

Think, Kayden, he told himself, heart at a thousand beats a minute. *Think!*

Kayden breathed in deep as best he could while avoiding yet another warhammer attack, the Mimicker briefly turning back to a shield as he slammed into a wall.

"I thought you'd be stronger than this!" he blurted out. "Your father was."

That gave Harkatronic pause for a fraction of a second before his blood-shot eyes widened in rage.

“Don't you *dare* use his name against me!”

Sorry, Kayden couldn't help but thinking. He hated using family against his foes, but he had no choice.

“I mean,” Kayden said between breaths, “you don't seem like much of an emperor yet. Your father failed, huh? Maybe you do share that with him.”

“*Shut up!*” Harkatronic screamed. “If it weren't for you, I wouldn't be stuck here. It's all your *fault!*”

“Thanks for taking care of me, but I gotta go,” Kayden called out as he fell through the newest tunnel. Was he getting used to this?

Harkatronic seemed furious. Good.

“I'll kill you,” he shouted, standing tall on a rocky peak. “I'll kill you! Even if I have to tear the whole place down!”

Uh-oh.

Kayden slammed shield-first onto the cavern surface, scrambling to his feet at the unexpected break.

“Get ready,” the Mimicker whispered. “I think he's gonna saturate.”

“I will become the Emperor of Athoren,” Harkatronic declared, “and show the world that my father was right!”

With that, Harkatronic raised his warhammer at Kayden, and the air itself seemed to explode. A wind current unlike anything Kayden had ever felt slammed against him, tossing him back against the far wall in but a fraction of a moment. He screamed as he heard something crack.

He reopened his eyes to see Harkatronic leaping at him with his warhammer at a speed no human should be able to endure.

He raised the shield-Mimicker with trembling arms.

“You gotta hold on!” the Mimicker exclaimed. “He's only got ten seconds!”

Kayden pressed his whole body against the inside of the shield. Then came the clash.

The air boomed as Harkatronic's warhammer slammed against Kayden's shield-Mimicker, the force of Harkatronic's rage colliding with the resistance of Kayden's determination.

One second. Two seconds. Kayden's arms started shaking as he struggled to steady his feet against the back wall. Three seconds. The focused hurricane was hurling stones and debris in Kayden's direction as he bet his all on the shield. Four seconds. His whole body was trembling. He was strong, but he wouldn't last much longer. The Mimicker had said ten seconds, right? Five seconds. The surface behind Kayden started cracking with the force of the wind. Six seconds. Harkatronic started groaning, then screaming. The wind started cutting off unevenly, popping and creaking. Seven seconds. Kayden held on. Just... a little... longer. Eight seconds. The Mimicker was insanely strong. But he wouldn't make it.

The rock behind him burst open, and light flooded the dark.

Harkatronic blasted Kayden backward through the abyss of sky, and then... he was out. The world swam. Then gravity pulled its card.

Kayden saw the oversized warden get sucked out into the clouds a moment before he himself started plummeting. Behind him, the gargantuan rock bear-like golem dashed away. Kayden's heart stuck to his throat as it raced out of control, his stomach clenched and his eyes teary. He stuck his hand out to the sky as he crossed the ocean of white.

This is it, Kayden thought, desperate, watching the green surface solidify before his eyes. He had always been terrified of heights.

Even so, I can't die here!

"Timeless!" the Mimicker then exclaimed. "You survived the prison. You'll live through this!"

Harkatronic dove by his side, piercing the whiteness, his heavy armor pulling him down faster than any chain or shackle. Was he unconscious?

Kayden couldn't stop the thought. *He won't make it.*

He had promised himself that he'd never leave someone to die.

"I know what you're thinking," the Mimicker called out. "Trust me!"

Kayden didn't think twice. Acting on sheer force of will, he struggled to focus, channeling his power. He couldn't breathe. Not like this. Even so, he still had some air left.

"I trust you," he gasped out to the Mimicker, and regressed time on Harkatronic.

Kayden couldn't see him anymore. But he believed he'd be safe. Everyone deserved a second chance.

Then, Kayden crashed. His vision turned green as tree foliage caught him, scratching at him with its embrace and easing his fall with stubborn branches. He plummeted into a bush and blacked out for who knew how long before stumbling to his feet.

And then, just like that, he was out.

He gasped, seeing the outside world once more. How long since he had last seen this sky, these dancing mountains, and the burning sun? Fresh air filled his lungs, and the distant singing of charmbirds reached his ears.

Kayden ran through the forest he'd fallen into, ignoring the pain, rushing freely through the wilderness, the Mimicker on his back and a broad smile on his face.

Kayden was free. But, where? And, when?

The trees opened up to a long valley between two mountain ranges, spectacular in its scope and relieving in its openness.

Then, he saw it, and froze.

"What happened?" the Mimicker asked from the sheath behind his back, confused.

"It can't be..." Kayden muttered. Tears welled up in his eyes.

The enormous shadow cast over the continent couldn't be anything else. A shiver ran down Kayden's back as he saw the massive landmasses levitating on the horizon, high in the sky. The floating islands he had strived so much to protect.

His home. Skylands. And they were visible.

Kayden didn't remember the last time he'd seen the Skylands. The whole point was for them to be too high above the clouds for the human eye to see. Not anymore.

That meant they were going down.

"We fought so hard," Kayden whispered in a flickering moment of remembrance.

He could see the Skylands' roots. He could see the *roots*. They were stretching downward, desperate to join Mother Earth once again.

The human world wouldn't survive something like that. The chaos and war that would ensue would be too much for any civilization to handle. Kayden couldn't allow the world to become a battlefield once more.

We need the Aoyume Knights, he thought. But then, he remembered. The Aoyume Knights had indeed risen.

It had failed. It was too late for that now.

Kayden fell to his knees as he winced.

Did I really come back to this?

Someone had to stop the Skylands from falling. Kayden knew it. ...It wouldn't be him. It was over. True, he had come back, somehow. But it was too late.

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The imperial messenger straightened her back and lifted her chin as she strolled into the throne room of the over-the-top palace-fortress known as Empire's Heart. She needed to look confident. She knew what she was doing –right?

The tapestries coloring the long hall depicted blue flowers this time. The messenger had to admit she liked this about visiting the palace. She never knew what she was going to find. She didn't know if it was worth it, but it was *something*.

Her Highness the Everbender was on a crystal throne today. Lying sideways with her legs over the armrest, she looked... unenthusiastic, to say the least. Her blonde hair made the metallic

mask covering her mouth and nose more passable, but it still sent a chill down the messenger's spine. She cleared her throat.

"Your Majesty," she called out. "Reports have arrived from Chasm's Edge Prison, in the Region of Beron."

The Everbender sighed slightly without looking at her. "Hey, sorry, but I'm kinda not in the mood for raising salaries today. Can't those guards get that it's a privilege?"

"It's not that, Your Eminence. It'd, er, be more accurate to say reports have arrived *about* Chasm's Edge Prison."

The Everbender didn't bat an eye. "Go ahead. Shoot."

The messenger took heart.

"A prisoner broke the chains to the rock golem that housed the prison and escaped."

"Huh. Must be quite the man. Or woman. Name? It may ring a bell."

The messenger gulped.

"...Kayden Almerth."

The Everbender was upon her in an instant, breathing heavily.

"Are you telling me..." she said with bloodshot eyes, "you let Kayden Almerth escape?"

"It wasn't me," the messenger squeaked.

"First, you fail to awaken the King in Blue, and now you let your highest-ranked prisoner escape?"

"I don't know... what you're talking about... Your Highness..."

The Everbender sighed. "For now, recapture Kayden Almerth. In the long term, though, I guess we need a change of plans. And right now, I'm feeling the urge. Someone bring me my Skyshatter Blade."

"Excuse me," the pale messenger stuttered. "I'll head off to my duties now."

The empress grabbed her by the collar of her shirt. "You ruined my mood. You're not going anywhere."

The messenger physically froze. Even after the Everbender let go of her, she couldn't move an inch. Not a finger. Her screams

failed her as she heard the Everbender unsheath a sword behind her back.

“You’ll be a fine canvas,” the ruler of the world told her. “As with all art, I aim to reach the heart, in a quite literal sense. So stand still. That’ll make my work easier.”