

Quests and Regrets

Kayden stumbled through the howling forest, hungry, thirsty, and exhausted. Mind-numbing darkness covered his vision, and as he walked, the trees and bushes pulled away from him, disgusted by his sight.

The last two days since he had left the prison and seen the Skylands falling were a hazy nightmare. His first urge had been to head toward the Skylands, to find out what was going on. But instead he had turned around and gone the other way.

Fortunately, he had not encountered any monsters in the forest yet, but there was something else tormenting him now.

When Kayden had first escaped from his cell, he had felt exhilarated. Excited, even. But now, all the guilt of everything had come down to him. And he suffered. When he had escaped, he had felt optimistic, happy to be once more free. But now, that happiness was gone, leaving only hollowness.

He was not the hero he had once been. He was not the Swordsman of Time anymore. Had he ever truly been? He now was just another fugitive, stumbling through the lone wilderness, simply trying to find a place to eat and rest.

But more than that, he was alone. Throughout his whole life, he had always had *someone* with him, whether someone from his hometown, a classmate, or one or another member of the Aoyume Knights. Now, he was completely and truly alone. He didn't have anyone left.

The Mimicker, his new sword, could speak, but wasn't a real person to him. It had tried to start conversations a few times, but Kayden didn't really remember whether he'd deliriously replied gibberish, or hadn't said anything at all. All he could do now was think.

Kayden was desperate to know information about the present world and about his own life. But, unfortunately, after escaping he had soon entered this giant forest, and hadn't yet been able to get out. He had seen no signs of humanity anywhere, neither structures, nor fields, nor settlements. But he was getting desperate. He was already starving, and he feared the water he could get from rivers and springs just wouldn't be enough.

In theory, he would be able to Timebend himself and regress time to grow less hungry or less exhausted, but that would return him to the state and place he was at in the past, which would do him no good right now. Even though those things hadn't changed anything while he was in prison, he couldn't afford those disadvantages here, in the middle of the hateful wilderness. He'd just have to keep going and hope for the best.

Kayden kept stumbling through the forest, moving forward. He really hoped he wasn't moving in circles, because encountering the prison-golem in the state he was in wouldn't be great. But he didn't have energy to even think, let alone take in his surroundings. He had no idea where he was.

Kayden's mind then started rattling. He winced as he felt the whole world shaking, a big boom every three seconds. What... was that?

With each repetition the shake grew, becoming more intense, and... closer?

This can't be my head, Kayden thought. *Right? This can't–*

Then a bark. A thundering, ear-splitting bark. It came from behind him. Kayden turned, confused and afraid. And then he saw it.

Leaping above the trees in the distance –but closing that distance with terrifying speed– was an enormous dog-like monster, shaped like a long furry block, drooling everywhere, with excited eyes, and rushing straight toward Kayden. On top of it, trying to ride it but more like struggling to hold on to its fur, was a tiny woman, holding the flag of the Empire of the Shattered Sky high with her remaining hand.

“In... the... name...” the woman shouted at Kayden with a surprisingly loud voice as they started coming closer, struggling to be heard over the booms of the dog-monster’s footsteps, “of the... Empire... of the Shattered... Sky... surrender!”

Kayden frowned, unsure of what to do in that situation, but then decided the wisest course of action was to run. No time to brood anymore.

But his legs wouldn’t budge, so exhausted he was. He had trouble catching his breath, and he hadn’t even started running yet. Besides, he had such a heavy *sword* in his back. Couldn’t he just drop the Mimicker?

Split second decision. He *hated* split second decisions.

Kayden grunted and started running.

“Make it worth it,” he muttered at the Mimicker in his back between breaths.

“Yes, sir!” the Mimicker replied. “Won’t we fight back?”

Kayden didn’t have enough energy as to reply.

As he ran, he could hear the dog-monster crushing trees and rocks, shortening each leap, pinpointing his location.

What now?!, he thought. Where could he *run* to? He wouldn’t be able to outrun the dog-monster for more than a few seconds, not even progressing time on himself to move forward.

“Stab me into the ground!” the Mimicker exclaimed from his back.

Kayden frowned, without daring to even look back as he ran.

“Trust me!” the Mimicker kept calling out. “Stab downward!”

“Why?!” was all Kayden could say.

“We’ll escape through falling!”

What is it talking about?

Kayden was exhausted. His legs would give way any moment now. He didn’t have a choice. So, in another disgusting split-second decision, he unsheathed the Mimicker and looked back at the massive dog-monster closing in on him.

Kayden raised the Mimicker high in the air.

“With all your might!” the Mimicker said.

And then, he stabbed downward, piercing the ground with the Mimicker as its blade started spinning at a low angle at high speed, grinding the soil in an instant and opening up a hole. Without thinking twice, Kayden jumped sword-first into the newly formed hole, and as the Mimicker continued digging a hole with its sharp-as-fire blade, they continued downward.

Kayden felt the full weight of the dog-monster fall down onto the ground, slamming the spot he’d just been standing in, but they were too deep underground for its reach now.

The Mimicker, unstoppable, continued burrowing down, burying Kayden alive into the ground, as Kayden closed his mouth and eyes shut so as not to eat dirt.

“I choose to believe!” the Mimicker exclaimed.

And then, everything gave way.

The ground –the earth– opened up in front of him, giving way to direct sunlight and a massive open valley below him. A small farming village could be seen down in the distance, its crops and farms thriving in a nearby river.

Kayden fell, overwhelmed, beyond the Mimicker-made tunnel and down into the sky.

Was this too a-?!, he somehow managed to think before the Mimicker called out at him.

“Brace yourself, Timeless!” the Mimicker shouted, shifting itself into a pair of connected steel boots on Kayden’s feet. “We’re coming in *fast!*”

“What now?!” Kayden asked, desperate.

The Mimicker’s weight in his feet made them point downward, and he continued falling down toward the faraway surface, like an arrow shot straight at the ground.

“Flex your legs as you hit the ground!” the Mimicker said. “I’ll try to absorb the impact!”

Try to?!, Kayden couldn’t help but fearing. But it was too late for anything else now.

He crossed the sky as he fell, feeling a strong sense of *déjà vu*, as if he’d already been there and done that. Had he?

The surface approached. Kayden and the Mimicker built up speed. Kayden braced for impact as his every sense was overwhelmed.

Three... two... one...!

And then everything seemed to explode.

The next thing Kayden knew, he was standing safely at the bottom of a deep crater, his heart pounding and his legs perfectly flexed.

Were they... on the surface now?

He breathed in.

“Good job,” the Mimicker said. “Now, I’ll let your feet go. You’ll feel weak for a moment. Try to hold on.”

The moment the steel shifted away from his feet, Kayden dropped to the ground. Could exhaustion kill a man?

He glanced once more at the Skyland-covered sky as his vision flickered and then blacked out.