

To Fight No More

Kayden shrugged.

Tham's tavern room was pretty comfortable. It had a small fireplace with dancing flames on one wall, providing both warmth and entertainment. Kayden didn't feel awkward; he had no problem with sharing what he remembered of his story. Even so... Where was he meant to start?

"What did you say your name was again?" Tham asked after a while.

"Kayden Almerth."

"Never heard of you. What's your deal?"

"I'm an adventurer," Kayden said. "...I think. I, uh, actually don't remember much about anything. I'm guessing it's memory loss, but I'm not sure why."

"You're an adventurer," Tham repeated. "I'll need more details if I am to let you stay in my village. Have you, uh, achieved anything I might've heard of?"

"I don't know," Kayden genuinely replied. "What year is it?"

"We're in the year 2724," Tham said flatly. "How did you not—?"

Kayden didn't listen to what he said next.

We're in the year 2724. About 200 years had passed since he'd been imprisoned. He'd been regressing time on himself over and over so as not to grow old. He'd always known he'd have a long time coming, but not *this* long.

"...Oh," was all Kayden could say. "It's been a while."

Kayden remained in silence for a long time, until he finally spoke. "Have you ever heard of the Aoyume Knights?"

"Of course I have!" Tham said. "Who hasn't?"

“...What do you know about it?” Kayden then asked, still feeling sick.

“They’re the group of insurgents who stopped the first invasion of the Skylands two hundred years ago. Slaughtered by the Everbender during the first days of the Empire of the Shattered Sky.”

Kayden nodded slowly, processing the information. Invasion of the Skylands? He didn’t remember any of that, but it seemed to click.

“I lived in a Skyland,” he said, carefully picking his words. “The... fall... must have hurt my head, because I can’t remember my life. I have genuinely close to zero idea about who I am.”

A loud knock rattled the door before Tham could answer.

“Tham!” a female voice shouted. “Where have you been? Who are you talking to? Why is your door locked?!”

Tham froze.

“My mom,” he whispered to Kayden.

“I’ve got the master key, dumb-dumb. I’m going in!” she warned.

“Hide!” Tham told Kayden.

Kayden scrambled as well as he could into the boy’s wardrobe, closing the doors as the tight space struggled with his intrusion.

“What... What *happened* to you, Thamlar?” his mom said.

Tham sighed. “I fell while rushing for the book salesman again today. Needless to say, he didn’t have the tome, and I ended up running for nothing. I got humiliated by the current disaster that’s my clothes, so I held off on my return until I knew no one would see me.”

Tham’s mom started to say something Kayden couldn’t hear, as he was too busy trying to stop the wardrobe from toppling over. Ironically, that particular piece of furniture seemed to be made of pretty cheap wood. Kayden felt a chill as it started leaning forward, one of its feet audibly cracking.

“Why is there blood—?” he heard Tham’s mom exclaim.

A much bigger concern filled the room as the wardrobe's front feet snapped under Kayden's weight and it crashed onto Tham's bed. Kayden dropped to the ground from between the broken wooden planks, defeated.

He raised his hands in the air.

"I can explain." His voice was weak.

"*Excuse me?!*" Tham's mom demanded. "Who are *you*? What are you doing in my son's wardrobe? Creep!"

"This is Hayden!" Tham said quickly. "New in town. He's, uh, claustrophilic." He then leaned conspiranoically toward his mom. "He can't help it. It's clinical."

"...Yeah," Kayden nodded, thoughts rushing. "I just love wardrobes."

"That's not what it means!" the Mimicker whispered very loudly from the side wall.

Silence.

"We don't need any more talking swords around here, thank you very much," Tham's mom said, evidently trying to keep her cool. She then turned to Kayden. "Whoever you are, you broke my son's wardrobe. You're not welcome here. And you..." she trailed off as she realized. "You're bleeding." She pursed her lips, then sighed. "Tham! Take him to the infirmary. We can't have him dying on our turf. Once he's safe, though... I'm gonna need some explanations."

Tham shrugged.

"Yeah, I need them too. Come on, Kayden. Try not to stain the floor."

Kayden followed Tham with the Mimicker in hand. He wasn't hurting, but the slightest glance was enough to tell him he was far from okay. Even so, his mind was on something else.

They're worrying about me.

It'd been a while since *that*'d happened.

It wasn't until Kayden let himself onto the Grinnin' Inn's infirmary bed that everything started to hurt. He was so *tired*.

Even so, he couldn't afford to fall asleep. He didn't have the slightest clue as to where on Athoren he was. Danger lurked on

every corner. That Imperial prison warden —Harkatronic— would probably come for him sooner or later. Besides...

* * *

Kayden rattled awake.

He sat up on the bed with enough strength to pull a muscle that evidently didn't want to be pulled. He groaned in pain.

"Hey," Tham said, reading on a chair beside his bed. "If it wasn't for your heavy breathing we would've thought you were dead. You slept for like twelve hours."

"I, uh, I did?" Kayden said.

"Yep," Tham nodded. "Don't get up yet, though. You've healed well, but you're still far from fully recovered."

"...Thanks," Kayden said. "Sorry for not trusting you. Where am I?"

"You're at Stumpborn Village's Grinnin' Inn. Far west of the Region of Beron." He smiled. "As the legend goes, this was once a massive resource-sapping tree that got chopped down by an adventurer with a flying sword. My grandpa was one of the first to carve his house out of the remaining stump."

"That sounds, uh, ignitable," Kayden said without thinking. "But really cool!" he added.

Tham laughed. "Yeah, well, we're all either carpenters or tradesmen here. Our main job is to be careful."

"What happened to the flying sword?" the Mimicker asked.

"It was called the 'Wind Soarer'." Tham said. "A Capital Sword of the old world, one of the few still known to exist. It was Stumpborn Village's most treasured jewel for a hundred years. As far as I know, the Wind Soarer was stolen a few decades ago, but—"

Tham flinched and dropped his book as the door slammed open. He scrambled to get it and mark the page before putting it away.

"Tham!" his mom shouted. "I asked you to tell me the moment Hayden woke up!"

"I forgot!" Tham said. "It hasn't been more than a couple of minutes anyway."

She sighed. "Go fetch your friend some tea."

"Don't you have—?" Kayden clumsily attempted before getting cut off by Tham's mom.

"Hey," she said coldly.

"What?" Kayden frowned. "Oh. I'm sorry, Tham's mom, for, uh..."

"My name's Tandallie."

"Um, sorry, Miss Tandallie."

She sighed. "At least you got the title right. Look, Hayden. I will only warn you once. Don't even *try* to pull my son into some grand quest of yours. He will be a carpenter, okay?"

"I think it was Tham who first..." Kayden started before thinking it over. "I mean, um, don't worry about it. He'll stay safely here. ...If he wants to."

"What was that last bit?!" Tandallie said.

Kayden shrugged. "I don't know. He doesn't quite act like a carpenter to me."

Tandallie pursed her lips. "Whoever you really are, *Hayden*... I won't let Tham end up like his father. My son has way too many stories in his head already."

Kayden was about to say something else when the Mimicker spoke.

"Kayden, maybe you shouldn't argue with the innkeeper while she tends to your wounds."

"Surprisingly wise for a sword," Tandallie said, arms folded, "*Kayden*."

Tham returned with the tea. He seemed smart enough to notice the tension and stay idling in the hallway.

"...Right," Kayden admitted. "Don't worry about it, Miss Tandallie. I've got my own quest going on anyway. I'm really thankful. Once I'm healed, I'm out of here."

"Sounds good," Tandallie said. "Well, lunch will be ready in about an hour. I'd better find you resting here when I bring it."

Kayden forced out a smile. "Sounds like a deal. ...Thank you."

He meant it. It'd been a long while since he'd last been welcomed into a village like that.

"Hey, Kayden," Tham said, setting the tea on the nightstand next to the bed. "I think I got you a job. If you want to stay here, you may work for Barelk as a lumberjack. He's the one in charge of chopping the stump's big branches to make way for more houses."

Kayden paused. "Really? I could... stay here?"

Tham smiled. "Of course you could! Though you've still ought to tell me your story, you seem like a good guy so far. Needless to say," he winked, "we wouldn't think twice about kicking your butt out if you turn out to be something else."

Kayden was tempted to say he would soon leave to save the world, to stop yet another civilization-ending catastrophe. But he couldn't. Not anymore.

"...Thank you," he said instead. "Deal. I guess I'll be staying here for a while."

They sat in silence for several minutes, until Kayden finally asked the question he had long been itching to ask.

"Is the Everbender still in power?" Kayden asked hesitantly.

"Of course she is," Tham replied. "She always has been and always will be. She's the Everbender, after all."

Kayden's heart skipped a beat.

She's alive. Lauren's alive. And she still ruled.

Kayden didn't know how to feel about that. He didn't remember any details about his life with her as kids, but he did remember emotions. Happiness, back when there was nothing to worry about. Back before everything had gone horribly wrong. He itched to go back to those days. But he knew that wouldn't be possible anymore. Not after what she had done. That was one thing he would never forget.

How she had, one by one, killed them all.

"You said something about the Skylands earlier," Tham then said, interrupting his thoughts. "So you have... been to one?"

"Yeah," Kayden nodded. "I mean, I grew up in one."

Tham's eyes lit up. "You did?!"

"I did." Kayden couldn't help but smiling. He'd never seen anyone excited about it before. "They're—"

"Stop, stop!" Tham said. "Don't tell me about them. I'll see for myself."

"You will?"

"Yes," Tham grinned, raising a fist. "I'll reach a Skyland one day and tell my story in verse!"

"Tham!" his mom's voice called out from afar. "Come set the table!"

He sighed. "...If my mom ever lets me go, that is." And then to his mom, "Right away!"

Kayden stayed in bed while Tham hurried downstairs.

"Do you think he'll ever make it?" the Mimicker asked after a long silence.

"Yeah," Kayden said. "Won't be easy. But he'll make it."

"I believe in him too," the Mimicker replied.

Tham seemed to have big dreams. Kayden knew it wasn't a simple thing to carry out, but... If there was one thing he'd realized in his life so far, it was that nothing worthwhile was ever easy. Would Tham be willing to fight for it?

* * *

After lunch, Tham had guided Kayden out of his room and made him meet a few of the townspeople. It hurt more than his sore wounds. Every person Kayden met made him feel more guilty. Tham was keeping his identity secret, but Kayden felt like crying with each new name he learned. Could he really become anyone's friend here? Could he start over?

Would he be able to protect them if the time came?

Kayden felt he shouldn't be there, that he should be out stopping the fall of the Skylands. Stopping Lauren. Or finding her,

at least. But that had been Kayden the Swordsman of Time, not Kayden the failure. And Kayden the Swordsman of Time was no more.

Kayden was now with Barelk the lumberjack at Stumpborn Village's eastern edge, carrying an ax. Even though he wasn't fully healed yet, he'd insisted on getting to work straight away. He turned once more toward where he initially came from, toward the Skylands that still rose high in the sky, that still had a chance. Although he could not see them from here, he could imagine them.

He should be out there. He knew it. But he couldn't afford to fail again. That would destroy him for sure. Everyone he had always known was dead. Lauren was still in this world, but the Lauren he had once known, his Lauren, had died long ago. Right?

From what he'd heard, the rest of the world viewed the Everbender as an absolute mystery. She was more of a concept than a person. Maybe that was right.

He picked up his lumberjack's ax and swung it onto the hardwood.

Someone would save the world.

But it would not be him.