

## “We Said We’d Guard The Sky”

The thick tree branch fell to the ground as many times before with a loud thud of resignation, severed at the bottom by Kayden’s strong ax. He wiped his brow, exhausted, and moved on to the next. Just as he had been doing for the past two weeks.

Day after day he now spent chopping at trees, working with the lumberjack to earn his room in the inn. Kayden had adapted quickly to the job, hiding the fact that he had once been a swordsman, but still, it was exhausting. Exhausting, but peaceful.

Kayden had several times found himself enjoying this new lifestyle. Not just the woodcutting, but everything about this place. The mornings spent cutting trees with Barelk, afternoons chatting with Tham, evenings laughing at the Grinnin’ Inn, nights peacefully resting in a comfortable bed with no danger of being killed.

How long had it been since he had last experienced peace like this? Centuries, that was for sure. He was, after a tiring and catastrophic adventure, finally experiencing peace.

The world had changed so much since he had been imprisoned. Architecture seemed to be more solid, more square, and even this small village seemed the size of a full-fledged town back in his time. He found himself wondering how many soldiers it would take to protect a village like this.

Luckily, he wouldn’t have to fight any longer. He was not an adventurer anymore. He was just the average local lumberjack, chopping at logs.

But something throbbed at the back of his mind, haunting him.

Sure, he had had an adventure. He had failed, and when the world had needed him the most, he had given up.

The Skylands were lower than ever before. He now had a second chance. But he just couldn't. He couldn't fail again. Another hero would rise, he hoped. He didn't need to worry.

Forcing himself to relax, Kayden sat down on a nearby stool, drinking from his waterskin the cold and satisfying crystal water. As he did, he saw the figure of a now-familiar teen approaching from the village, washing away his troubled thoughts. Tham with his two lunch boxes looked just like a younger version of Kayden himself. His wistful song reached Kayden even before the smell of their food. He smiled.

"Hey, Kayden!" Tham called, waving his hand.

"Hey, Tham," Kayden called back. "How's it going?"

"All good," Tham said as he reached the place Kayden was in. "Mr. Harnol's chair is almost done."

"Well done," Kayden congratulated him. "Your mom will be proud."

"Thanks. She always is, no matter how awful my work is," Tham noted with a chuckle. "Hey, I wanted to tell you something," he added. There was a hint of nervousness in his voice. "The newspaper from last week arrived from the city of Marbarth earlier today. And... it talked about you, with a drawn portrait and all. We've had luck so far, but be extra careful in the future. You've gained our friendship and trust –you don't have to worry about us selling you out to them. But, well... we don't know about other people who might come this way. Be careful."

Kayden sat in silence for a few moments, pensive. "Thank you," he finally said. "I'll make it up to you all someday. I'll tell you everything... as soon as I know what's going on." He then asked the question whose answer he feared to hear. "Are the other Skylands still low as well?"

"...Yeah," Tham answered. "I think there's nothing that can be done about it anymore."

"How do *you* feel about it, Tham?"

Tham hesitated.

"I don't really know," he said. "I guess it'd be good for all mankind to be together again, but needless to say, I don't want

war. I think forcing it is a bad way to start. The blood of most people around here boils at the slightest mention of Skyborn, you know. The Empire of the Shattered Sky's got us all on edge down here. Must be nice to be up there."

"Yeah, that's right," Kayden said, relieved. "There are definitely other ways to join mankind that don't involve literally pulling them out of the sky."

"Agreed."

They sat in silence as Tham took some sandwiches out of his basket, handing two of them to Kayden. Kayden took an energetic bite of the first one. Brown bread with cheese and vegetables.

The triviality of the conversation with which they spent the afternoon almost made Kayden forget the pain. It was as they started their way back to the Grinnin' Inn that he noticed.

Fob and his pet pig Geraldine were running around the village, knocking on doors in a panic.

"What's going on?" Kayden wondered aloud, cocking his head.

"I'll go check it out," Tham said, hurrying. He was always so energetic, Kayden noticed idly. A trumpet had started blaring a fanfare from somewhere afar at full force. He saw Tham get to Fob and speak to him briefly, then return running to Kayden. He was pale.

"Imperial soldiers," Tham told him when he got back to Kayden, nervousness in his voice. "We don't know what they want, but Fob fears the worst. He thinks they're looking for you."

"Blast," Kayden muttered. "Let's just wait here and see how it plays out. Chances are, they're here for something else entirely," he said, trying to reassure Tham.

"Villagers of Stumpborn!" they heard a girl declare. "Be honored and delighted by the masterful presence of... the Right Hand of Destruction, Sir Harkatronic!"

Silence.

Kayden's heartbeat spiked.

*He found me*, he thought.

“I received reports, and they don't speak well!” the all-too familiar rough voice they couldn't yet see started. “This village... is harboring a criminal. You will tell my Left-Hand Man where he is, or you will *pay!*”

As Kayden and Tham watched from afar, a group of about ten different carts approached from the main road, climbing the stairs with difficulty to the center of the village, with soldiers walking at the sides. More soldiers started to come out of the carts. Thirty of them in total.

One of the guards approached the growing group of villagers in front of the Grinnin' Inn, with Townmaster Harben walking in front, and they started to talk. Although Kayden couldn't hear what they were saying, the townmaster seemed nervous about something. Soon, he started to raise his arms in protest. Half of the soldiers raised bows, pointing them at the frightened villagers.

*It can't be,* Kayden thought, paling.

With that, the townmaster lowered his arms in resignation, and the villagers, all grown men and women, started to enter the carts slowly, one by one.

*Why is this happening?* Kayden thought, horrified. *Why?!*

He then realized.

*Because of me.*

The Empire of the Shattered Sky had realized Kayden had been accepted here, and now... villagers were being taken away as punishment.

*This is my fault.*

“We must do something!” Tham exclaimed, terrified.

Kayden's mind rushed, formulating a plan. After all, he had once been a fighter... hadn't he?

“Can you create a distraction for me?” Kayden asked Tham, trying to keep his voice steady.

“What should I do?”

“Anything,” Kayden said. “Just buy me a few seconds. I'll defeat the archers and then we can all... I don't know, lynch the others or something.”

“I don’t know about the, er... consistency... of your plan,” Tham said, cringing.

“We have no time!” Kayden explained. “Now, go! Before they’re all in the carts.”

With that, Tham rushed into the open, terrified, but willing to risk his life for his fellow villagers. Kayden briefly considered going to get the Mimicker, but he had no time. His lumberjack’s ax would have to do.

“Hey, you!” Tham shouted at the soldiers as he ran. “Let them go!”

They turned to face him, confused. As they did, Kayden ran parallel to him, behind the houses of the main square, intending to flank the guards and attack them from behind. He didn’t have a visual yet, but...

His mind flashed. Had he... done this before? A different place. A different time. Same situation. A terrible outcome.

\* \* \*

*The moon was high enough in the sky for Kayden to see Bakor's burnt face as he carried his body forward among the debris.*

*Each step was harder than the last. His legs shook. Both of Bakor's eyes were wide open, their pupils falling back.*

*“I’m not letting you go,” Kayden whispered to him. “Blast, man, you’ve gotten heavy. Can’t you walk?”*

*There was no reply. Could Bakor even hear him? Three years of adventuring and Bakor was still not listening to him. The thought brought a bittersweet smile to Kayden's cracked lips.*

*“Come on,” he continued. “We made a promise to Lauren. We’ll live through this, won’t we? We’re the Aoyume Knights.” His voice started trembling. “And you’re my best friend, you know?”*

*Kayden tripped over a stone, dropping to his back with his friend in his arms. The sky was on fire, he noticed. No, not the sky. The world's tallest tower. The sky, with its Skylands, was safe, thanks to them. Then why was his heart burning?*

*“We miss you, Lauren,” Kayden said with a wince, too low for anyone to hear. “We’ll find you. And for that, Bakor, you need to live. We’ll find her together. Right?”*

\* \* \*

Kayden would never leave another friend to die. He snapped back to reality. But he couldn’t move. It took him a second to realize that his blurred vision was caused by tears.

*What... was that?*

He realized with shock that several seconds had passed without him noticing. Tham was now being taken away by soldiers, an ugly-looking lump on the side of his head. Kayden’s body was completely frozen. He couldn’t move a finger.

*I can’t fight again. I can’t fail again.*

But, as Tham prepared to enter the cart, scared, a woman from among the villagers sprung into action. Tandallie. She struggled to tackle the guard closest to her, giving Tham an opening. Three guards raised their bows at Tandallie.

*“Go, Tham!”* his mom shouted.

Kayden watched everything in stunned silence. He knew he should do something. He just didn’t have the courage to fight again.

Tandallie spun, punching a guard hard in the jaw. Harkatronic roared in laughter.

An archer shot his bow. A small explosion resounded in the village. But Tandallie didn’t drop. She appeared a foot to the right, having apparently sidestepped safely out of the way. But Kayden had noticed what no other villager had.

She had not sidestepped. She had ‘teleported’. She had Spacebent.

*What?!*, Kayden thought. The effect had been unmistakable. He had seen it several times before, in... He forced those thoughts away as two more archers prepared to shoot. But only one of them aimed at Tandallie.

The other aimed at Tham.

No.

With that, Kayden rushed out of his hiding spot, progressing time on himself over and over, getting to the main square and the conglomeration of people in a matter of seconds.

Fight, or run away? The decision made Kayden pause. Try once again, or give up? Fight. Run away. Fight. Run away. With a final moment of realization, he came to a rushed conclusion. He couldn't fight again. He couldn't fail again.

Running out of air, he grabbed Tham, not even looking up at Harkatronic, and progressed time for both of them by the maximum amount he could with what little breath he had left. Ten seconds. They appeared crouched behind a nearby terrified house, Kayden panting. Tham was pale.

"What... was that?" he whispered.

"I'll tell you later," Kayden whispered back.

As Stumpborn Village's main square erupted in chaos, Kayden pulled Tham away. The shouts and calls of the other villagers were enough for Kayden to understand. They had been terrorized for too long already.

"They're fighting for us," Tham called out to Kayden as they approached the edge of the gargantuan stump. "We need to help!"

"We cannot help them if we're dead," Kayden said. His voice cracked. "There's too many of them and too few of us. I won't let you die, Tham."

Kayden's heartbeat was at a thousand a minute. He couldn't think straight. He could barely control his breathing enough to continue progressing time on the two of them.

*Where is the Swordsman of Time? He's gone.*

Tears filled his eyes as Kayden left the villagers behind.

Before they knew it, they reached the edge of the giant stump. Too fast to stop, they skidded over the surface's end. If it weren't for the decreasing slope that made them tumble down instead of drop, they would've squashed against the ground. It hurt nonetheless, and not just the fall.

"I *hate* you!"

Tham's declaration resounded in the silence of the forest.

Kayden looked at him with sadness and disappointment in himself.

"It was the only way," Kayden whispered. "I'm not strong enough... to fight enemies like those."

A cheap excuse to make up for his fear.

They sat hidden behind a tree in silence for several minutes. As Kayden looked at Tham, he realized Tham was shaking, his face buried in his arms. He was crying.

*Poor boy, Kayden thought. I... I just ruined his life. This is my fault. All of it. I doomed that village the day I reached it. I should have left when I had the chance.*

Wherever Kayden went, people died. He was like a bad-luck charm, a bad omen. A failure. He didn't remember details, but deep down, he knew this had happened before. But, had he given up? No.

*I'm not the same person anymore,* Kayden thought. He would get up, gather his things, and leave this place, to live a peaceful life in a faraway land. The Northern Frosts seemed good enough. But, then, he looked down at Tham. Could he leave this teenager to his fate? Could he really come here, ruin Tham's life, and leave?

No.

In that moment, seeing Tham cry like that, Kayden made his decision.

"I'm going to save them," Kayden declared, surprising even himself. "It is better to fight and fail than not to fight at all. And now I have a responsibility. A responsibility to fight. So I'm going to go out there, I'm going to find them, and I'm going to bring them back. But... I can't do it alone."

Tham looked at him.

"I don't know how to help," he muttered. "I don't know how to fight."



“Your mother is a Spacebender. Someone who can bend space to their will. One of the two most powerful types of Lawbender,” Kayden told him. “That means... you’re a Spacebender too.”

“What?” Tham whispered. “You mean, I have... powers? Like you?”

“Yes.”

“I want to save them. I really do. But I don’t know if I can do it. I don’t know if I can be of any help,” he muttered.

“I’ll train you,” Kayden said. “And we’ll save your village, no matter where the empire may take them. I promise.”

Tham nodded, though visibly scared.

Kayden breathed in. He’d fight once more.

*You’re a hero, Kayden told himself. Timebender. The Timeless. You may not be the Swordsman of Time anymore, but act like it. Just one more time. For the ones who are not here to try.*

“But, what guarantee do we have?” Tham said, his voice shaky. “What chance do we have against an empire?”

Kayden realized his hands were trembling. He grabbed his right hand with his left, unsuccessfully trying to steady it. “We’re going to win,” Kayden told him, trying to assure himself, trying to keep his voice from wavering. “We’re going to get your family and your village back. That’s a promise.”

Tham remained silent, clearly trying to believe.

Kayden hadn’t noticed the grass around him was full of blue forget-me-nots. They looked beautiful.

Even so... He had gone through so much. He was no mentor figure. He wasn’t ready to become one. But he would try his best.

“We’re the Aoyume Knights now,” Kayden said, meeting Tham’s eyes. “And I... am the Swordsman of Time. I’m the Timeless.”

Tham gasped in recognition. “You were part of the Aoyume Knights?! *You* are the Swordsman of Time? The *Timeless*? And you didn’t *tell us*?”

“I should have told you earlier,” Kayden said, feeling guilt for a thousand different reasons, but determined despite his fear. “I have been ignoring my quest for too long. I won’t just save your village. I... will take the whole Empire of the Shattered Sky down. But for that, we’ll need the Aoyume Knights. The world around us is crumbling. It is time for the Aoyume Knights to rise.”