

Departure

“Now, let’s get moving, Tham,” Kayden then said. “We can’t get the villagers back yet, but we *will* find out where the imperials are taking them.”

“...All right,” Tham replied. He looked nervous, though he nodded with determination anyway. “But...”

“What is it?” Kayden asked.

“I’ve... never left my village before. What if we get lost? What if the imperials spot us following them? What if–”

Kayden stopped him with a firm hand to the shoulder, even if he did feel like needing one himself. “We’re going to be okay. Alright? I’m going to protect you, and we’ll get your village back.”

Tham seemed to want to protest, but he finally exhaled, looking down. After a few seconds, he looked back up at Kayden. He nodded. “All right. Let’s go.”

“Follow me. Stay close behind, and don’t make any noise.”

With that, Kayden broke into a moderate run, back toward Stumpborn Village. The forest was dead-quiet around them. Not the smallest insect was making any noise. As if everything knew what was at stake, and they were doing their part. Tham followed. With each approaching step, Kayden imagined they’d run head-first into an imperial patrol and get killed on the spot. But he didn’t let his fears show, instead smiling reassuringly at Tham behind him. Tham smiled back.

They arrived at the edge of the silent forest and looked upon Stumpborn Village. It still had a decent amount of imperial soldiers, one of them at each important building and the rest at the main square. A fresh trail of cartwheels left the place from where the villagers had been taken.

Kayden raised his finger to his mouth, a 'silence' gesture to Tham as they went around the village.

Fortunately, they were able to sneak into the Grinnin' Inn, from which they quickly retrieved the Mimicker, a dagger, a few days' worth of rations, and changes of clothes for both. It pained Kayden not to see Tham's mother, Tandallie, at home.

Kayden solemnly hung the sword that was the Mimicker on his back, and they kept going with as much stealth as they could. They arrived at the only unguarded end of the village, where the long road left the settlement for the northeast, for the wilderness. Kayden didn't miss a beat as he started trotting parallel to it, but Tham stopped right outside the giant stump, hesitating.

Kayden waited in silence. He could see Tham looking over his shoulder at the village, then back at the road ahead of them. He was making the decision. Stay behind with the few villagers left, or leave the village in hopes of getting his life back? Run away, or fight?

"I'm going," he finally said, gesturing at an imaginary line on the ground. "From this point onward... there's no turning back." He looked at the village one more time, made a military salute, and smiled. "Yeah, I'm going. But I'll return... and I'll bring everyone back with me. That's a promise. All right, Kayden. Let's go. And... I'll reach a Skyland too. I have a hunch I won't be back until I do."

Kayden couldn't help but smile faintly too. Looking forward down the road, they started to run, chasing after the villager-filled carts.

* * *

They found it soon enough. The caravan was composed of ten self-driving monster carts filled with the captured villagers and about thirty imperial soldiers. As Kayden had predicted, they weren't going fast, as all soldiers were on foot, so they were able to keep up, following at a safe distance. They were now surrounded

by trees, so it was easy to hide, but it wouldn't be that easy later on, when they went into the plains north of the forest.

As they jogged far behind the caravan, out of sight, Tham asked the inevitable question.

"Hey, Kayden... Where do you think they're taking the villagers?"

Kayden remained silent for a few moments. Based on what he had rediscovered during his weeks at the village, the choice the imperials would make was quite obvious. Sadly, the most probable option was also the more terrifying one.

"Probably a normal prison," Kayden lied instead, trying to reassure Tham. "I doubt they'd take normal villagers anywhere truly dangerous just for harboring a random prisoner."

"You think so? But I've heard... No, no. Yeah, you're right. They won't be in any danger as long as they stay compliant."

"Don't worry," Kayden said, forcing a smile, "you'll see. In a few weeks at most, you'll all be back in your village, safe and sound, all of this just a bad memory. You'll pretend it was just a bad dream, and it will all be alright."

"But, what about toppling the Empire of the Shattered Sky?"

"I won't force you to help me with that," Kayden answered genuinely. "My quest is my own."

"Oh, right. Speaking of which..." Tham met his eyes. "Tell me everything. Everything. Make me trust you again."

Kayden winced. It was true. He had kept too much information from Tham ever since they had first met. He couldn't hide who he was any longer.

"All right. I..." Kayden started, "am Skyborn. I come from the Higher Skylands. From Starland."

Tham gasped. "*What?! You're... from Starland?! I thought it was a legend.*"

Kayden looked down. "Yes, I am. I know you all hate us, but believe me, I want to cause you no harm."

Tham didn't meet his eyes either. He just stared away as they jogged, looking betrayed. "...If the other villagers find out

about this, they'll lynch you for sure," he said at last. "Maybe... maybe it was wise not to tell. You should have told me at least, though. Now, keep going. You're Skyborn. Why are you here?"

"I'm not going to lie any longer. I... I don't remember. I believe that, while using my Timebending abilities so much, something went wrong. My mind was affected, so I can't remember any details of my life, just some events and feelings," he said with uncertainty. Needless to say, he didn't know whether there was anything important he had indeed forgotten. He could just hope for the best.

"Oh. I'm... I'm sorry," Tham said. "How long ago did you come down exactly?" he then asked.

Kayden did some quick maths. "You're probably not going to believe this, but... 217 years ago. I came with another boy and a girl. The girl's name was Lauren, and the boy was Bakor."

Tham just stared at him, dumbfounded.

"I'm a Timebender, you see," Kayden explained. "I can regress time on myself to make myself younger. That's why some call me Timeless"

"Oh." Tham nodded, though he was clearly still blown away by the statement.

"So, long story short," Kayden continued, "I believe this girl, whose name is Lauren, betrayed me. Therefore my imprisonment."

He omitted the fact that Lauren had been the one to become the Everbender, the empress of the Empire of the Shattered Sky. He still needed Tham to believe his story, after all. He'd tell him eventually.

Kayden tried to say all that as casually as possible, but he soon realized he was shaking slightly.

"Are you okay?" Tham asked him, noticing it too.

Kayden looked at him with a pained expression on his face. "...No," he admitted. He wasn't gonna lie any longer. "I... Lauren's betrayal was my fault. I don't know why nor how I know it, but I just do. If only I'd talked to her about it." He closed his eyes shut to stop the tears of frustration from spilling out. "Maybe then..."

maybe then everything would have been different. Maybe then... the original Aoyume Knights wouldn't have had to die. But no. Because of my idiotic pride, I lost everything. Because of it, I lost the person I cared about the most." He bit his lip in frustration. "Blast! It's all my fault! And, worst of all, I know she cared about me too. You know why she let me live imprisoned instead of straight-out killing me?" He met Tham's gaze. "Because she cared about me, Tham. Because of that, if I had acted when I needed to, she would've probably changed. Blast! She would've changed, Tham! It's all my fault! All of it!"

Tham looked at him with sadness painted on his face, pursing his lips. "I don't know all the details," he finally said, "but I know one thing. People don't forget easily. Not by one year or a hundred. If she's still alive, then there's still a chance of getting her back. If she's still alive, then she can still go back to who she once was."

"Thank you, but..." Kayden whispered. Blast. He had to tell him everything. "She's the Everbender."

Tham froze, stopping to a halt. "...What? The empress? Wait a minute... you knew the Everbender *before* she became the Everbender?"

Kayden nodded, looking at the ground.

"...Then it'll be a little harder than that," Tham muttered.

Kayden nodded again.

They kept jogging after the caravan, a heavy silence upon them both.

Kayden's face was darker when he spoke again. "I don't remember her personality, but I remember feelings. Courage, determination. Warmth. I know she wasn't always how she is now. I just *know* it. But, how much she changed... *Why* she changed... I don't know."

"Do you *want* to know?" Tham asked, looking at him.

"...I have no idea."