

Trial By Fire

“They’ve stopped,” Tham noticed between ragged breaths after a few hours of following the imperial caravan.

It was true. The caravan had stopped moving for the first time since it had left the village, the soldiers quickly setting up small pop-up tents to lie down for the night. The sun was already setting, darkness arriving.

Kayden sat down on a nearby rock. But not Tham. Even though the teen was clearly exhausted like never before, he remained standing, shifting from side to side.

“Rest,” Kayden told him. “At ease, soldier.”

“Train me,” Tham said, pointing at Kayden with the dagger they had gotten at the village. “Train me with this. Teach me how to fight.” His voice held determination only somewhat deterred by the pants he let out between the words.

“Aren’t you tired?” Kayden asked, genuinely surprised.

“Yes. That’s why I’ve gotta train now. To get used to it.” He flexed his right arm’s muscles. “Look. I’ve got nothing here. I’ve got no strength. I’ve gotta train to save the ones I care about.”

“All right,” Kayden finally said. “I appreciate initiative. But, are you sure you’re ready for this? For this... path you’re about to take?”

“I’m not ready,” Tham admitted. “But I *will* be. That’s a promise.”

“Well, then. Run five laps around this part of this scarlet forest to warm up. But make sure not to be seen.”

Tham set off immediately, running as fast as he could in the direction Kayden had indicated.

Kayden would train this boy. He would *not* let him die. Tham had a lot of potential. He didn’t have the fastest legs or the

strongest muscles, but he had drive. And, in the darkest of times, that was all one had left.

Tham finished the five laps at a remarkable speed.

“What now?” he asked between ragged breathing.

“Well done,” Kayden told him. “Now, take this dagger. Swords are too heavy for you just yet. Still, if I’m correct and you have Spacebending powers, then you’re powerful no matter what weapon you use. You need to get used to this dagger’s weight if you want to fight with it.”

“What about my Spacebending?” Tham asked. “Can’t I use it yet?”

“Sadly, one just isn’t born a natural Lawbender. You have to trigger your powers through intense pressure, forcing your body to either awaken or die.”

“Oh. So, do I have to risk my life?”

“...Kind of, yeah,” Kayden nodded. “But that can’t be forced. We’ll start training you with a dagger. We’ll take care of the Spacebending part later on.”

Tham took the dagger from Kayden and turned it around in his hand, feeling it.

“It’s heavier than I thought it’d be,” he admitted. “So, I just thrust it forward as hard as I can?”

“Not really,” Kayden said. “It truly depends on what you’re trying to do. You see, there are four different schools of swordsmanship, which also apply to knife fighting. At least back in my time.”

Kayden began explaining the basics of dagger fighting, how to properly hold the dagger, and key body parts to strike. Tham repeated several chain attacks, familiarizing himself with the quick motions of Airform. Right, dodge, left, dodge.

“No, no,” Kayden corrected him. “You’re doing great, but you must get this right. Most of the time, you can’t dodge backward. You must dodge to the sides or straight down. Most of the time, you’ll be fighting swordsmen, and their sword’s reach is too long for you to dodge. It’s easier to try to move to their off side

than trying to get out of range. But don't worry, you're doing great. You'll get it soon enough."

Tham continued thrusting and dodging. Right, sidestep, left, sidestep.

After about an hour, Kayden deemed the session concluded, and sent Tham to sleep. He would take the first guard shift, and Tham would take the second.

Tham fell asleep without even pulling up his blanket, so Kayden did it for him.

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Four hours later, Tham awoke as Kayden went to sleep. He felt like in a rush, itching to do something. The adrenaline of it all, the following, the hiding, filled his veins, making him feel invincible. He encouraged that feeling. For, below that, he was *terrified*. His whole life was changing. He didn't like that. But he didn't have a choice.

This is my life now, Tham told himself resolutely –or tried to, at least. *I'm an adventurer. A fighter.*

He got up from the grass floor of the forest they were hiding in and took up the dagger, training his stances and sequences again. Although Kayden was sleeping, Tham wanted to use all his free time to train. He tried not to think about what he might lose if he failed. His life. His friends. His mother. He *needed* to succeed. There was no other choice.

But, was he strong enough? Would he *ever* be strong enough? He was a carpenter, after all.

No, Tham forced himself to think. *I'm a potential Spacebender. One of the most powerful types of Lawbender in existence*, Kayden said. *I can do this.*

He kept practicing his routines, over and over again, until, about half an hour later, he heard it.

A loud howl split the night. Then another. And another. Wolves.

Oh, no.

Tham immediately headed over to hide behind a rock.

What to do, what to do? What would Kayden do?

He would fight against a whole army of wolves if he had to. ...Right?

Tham remembered how Kayden had saved his life, running away instead of fighting, not trying to save the villagers.

Don't think about that. Just don't.

Tham instead remained close to Kayden's sleeping body, watching out for wolves. Maybe they wouldn't see him if he didn't move.

You have to trigger your powers through intense pressure, forcing your body to either awaken or die. Kayden's earlier words drifted back to him. An idea, a terrifying idea, popped up in the back of his mind.

He slowly picked up the dagger and started to move forward.

This is a bad idea. A terrible idea, a part of him said. *I won't be of any use if I die.*

This is my chance to prove myself, the other part of him countered. *I won't be of any use if I don't become powerful anyway.*

He paused, trying to decide. Finally, after a final moment of rushed decision, he kept moving forward through the forest.

It took a while, but he saw it. A clearing in the distance, full of about ten wolves, all howling at the moon. But they were no normal wolves. Their chests were glowing red, burning with a fire inside them that itched to be roared out. He'd heard of these creatures before. Beowolves.

One of them was far behind, roaming in the trees. Maybe some kind of guard or scout? That was his best choice. He approached the beowolf in a crouch, holding his dagger in a trembling hand.

I need to prove myself. I need to prove myself. I need to prove myself.

It didn't seem to have noticed him just yet. Good. But then, he heard a loud cracking noise, and Tham looked down in fear right to see a tree branch breaking under his foot.

The beowolf turned its head straight toward him.

It's now or never.

He tried to move, but was paralyzed by fear. A chill ran down his spine, his heart beating so hard it might as well have been a war drum.

I'm going to die. I'm going to die! Stupid, idiot Tham!

The beowolf sprang toward him, opening its jaw wide. Tham then finally broke out of his shock, rolling to the side and stabbing at the beowolf like Kayden had taught him earlier. Tham's shaking dagger only caused a small cut along the beowolf's side, not nearly enough to wound it. The beowolf then spun and jumped upon Tham, its claws burying into his shoulders. Tham screamed and fell backward, struggling to push the beowolf away from him. The beowolf pushed back, trying to get its teeth to Tham's face. He was terrified. It smelled of blood.

After a few seconds of struggle, Tham saw with horror how the beowolf's chest started pulsating, and from inside its open jaw an orange light started to shine. He was starting to feel heat in his face. Was this the sudden, stupid end? Tham shut his eyes, tears spilling out.

I don't want to die. I don't want to die!

* * *

Tham couldn't move a finger.

"In the Skylands or dead," his mom kept whispering from the other side of the half-open door, sifting through papers with a red marker. Tham knew she'd drank way too much. "In the Skylands or dead."

Tham watched as her tears burrowed through the stash of books. She was looking for something. But, what?

"Where is it?!" she called out to the ceiling with a shaky voice.

Tham was only twelve. There was nothing he could do, right?

His mom noticed him as he turned to leave with his heart on his neck.

"Tham..." she said, struggling to soften her tone. "Did you take the Book of Skies?"

"I don't know what that is," Tham stuttered.

"It's the key," she said. She fell to her knees. "Is it gone?"

"The key to what?" Tham asked, scared.

His mom looked up at him. "Your dad... is either in the Skylands or dead. The Book of Skies is the key to finding him. Oh... I see it now. You will find him. Won't you, Tham?"

* * *

I can't die here. I will reach a Skyland, find my dad, and tell my story in verse!

Tham opened his eyes just in time to see the beowolf's eyes widening as it howled in pain. A black greatsword dashed by.

Kayden Almerth, the one once called Timeless, slashed horizontally through the beowolf, throwing it several feet backward, away from Tham.

Kayden turned to face Tham as the other nine beowolves closed down upon him, the moon faintly illuminating his resolute eyes.

"Run."

The beowolves closed down upon them, spreading to the sides to circle them.

"Run, Tham!"

Tham snapped back to reality, and as he got to his feet, the nine beowolves attacked Kayden. He slashed with wide and broad sweeps, wounding several of them with each slash.

Tham stumbled and ran through an opening between two beowolves, escaping into the forest. Kayden soon followed, striking at the beowolves as he ran. He caught up to Tham and grabbed him by the arm, taking in a sharp breath. The next Tham knew,

they were far away, Kayden having progressed time to save them both.

Kayden threw himself down, sitting in the grass, catching his breath. Tham just stood there, shocked.

"We're far away now," Kayden said. "They won't find us here."

Tham finally snapped back, tears in his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Kayden," he muttered, his voice shaking. "I just—"

"I get it," Kayden interrupted him. "You wanted to prove yourself. Probably trying to awaken your powers. I was like you once too. Just... don't do it again. Ever. Whatever we face, we'll face it together. Because if you die, Tham... then that's on me."

Tham nodded silently.

"Now, let's see to those wounds of yours," Kayden then said. He lowered Tham's shirt to check them, then grimaced. "Not good. These will leave a scar."

"...Let them," Tham said in frustration. "A reminder not to throw myself away again."

He had been stupid. He had failed this time. But, one day, he would become strong enough. He'd save his mother and his fellow villagers. He'd find the Book of Skies. And, just maybe... he might even find his dad. He got up, picking up the dagger through bloodied fingers and gritting his teeth against the pain. That was a promise.