

Now Presenting... the Wandering Wonderinn

The next day, after having a proper –if lacking– breakfast, they set back out parallel to the road, resuming the jog toward where they thought –hoped– the caravan would’ve gone. They started much faster than before, knowing they’d have to catch up, but invigorated and with their determination steeled by the night before. But they jogged, and jogged, and jogged, and the caravan was nowhere to be seen.

“They couldn’t have gone much farther, right?” Tham asked with a frown. “I mean, they must’ve slept at some point as well.”

“Yeah,” Kayden agreed, pursing his lips. “We should be close.”

Then, as if laughing at them, the road split up before them, forking into two separate paths.

“Great,” Kayden muttered. “Just what we needed.”

“The cart tracks should be visible,” the Mimicker called out from Kayden’s back. “That’s how carts and tracks work.”

“Never been much of a tracker myself,” Kayden sighed. “That I remember.”

Kayden and Tham crouched each in a different road, trying to figure out where the caravan may have gone. And, surprisingly enough, Kayden did see wheel tracks leading off through the road on the right, deep and steady. But just as he looked up to tell Tham, Tham spoke.

“Here they are!” Tham jumped. “Found them!”

“Uhhh, really?” Kayden hesitated.

“Yeah! So, this way.”

“That’s not good,” Kayden frowned. “I... I found them too. Going *this* way. Wait a minute. Now that I look at it. There’s not just this one track. There are a *lot* of tracks.”

“Oh. That’s not good,” Tham said. He giggled nervously.

“Big roads usually have a lot of tracks,” the Mimicker agreed.

“...Good point,” Kayden admitted. “Now what?”

Tham started to look around, into the forest and beyond the road. Finally, he perked up, and called out to Kayden.

“I can see something over there,” he said. “It looks like a wooden cabin of sorts, or an inn. Maybe we can ask over there. They’ll surely have seen something of use.”

Kayden looked over and indeed saw what was a pretty small wooden building, built up in a clearing in the trees. It had some makeshift stables next to it, where plenty of horses and non-imperial carts were resting –way too many for it to make sense.

“Sure, let’s go,” Kayden agreed.

As they approached it they realized it had a sign hanging above the front door, reading, ‘Chafter’s Wandering Wonderinn.’ It looked like a pretty normal inn, though. As they reached it, Kayden opened the door, which opened inward. He paused at the door as he looked in.

“What is–?” Tham started, but trailed off as he saw the inside.

Kayden would have had a tough time describing the insides of the Wandering Wonderinn had he been asked. It shared some aspects with common inns, but it was just... *wrong*. Its interior oversize jarringly clashed with its exterior look, and neither gravity nor space seemed to mean anything here. Doors were everywhere –not just on the walls, but on the floor and ceiling as well. Patrons entered one door on one wall and exited through another door on the opposite wall. The serving bar seemed to cross the entirety of the inn, like a snake slithering through it all. There were windows to the outside, but they all showed different filters of the same forest in different angles.

Kayden knew it should be unsettling and dizzying, but it just felt... homey, in a weird sort of way. Patrons were laughing and drinking everywhere, all outfitted in adventuring gear and armed with all sorts of strange stuff that shouldn't be considered weapons. And they were not all human, either. A single right hand with a face, a sword with a face, a door with a face. Too many creatures and too many faces.

"It is wondrous," the Mimicker said. Kayden, mouth agape, couldn't have said it better.

"Heeeyyy!" a deep, rough, and joyful voice called out to them, pulling Kayden out of his stupor. "New faces!"

The one that had spoken was a broad-shouldered and bearded middle-aged man, approaching them with his arms opened wide.

"Can never get enough of those. What's y'all's names?" he asked, grinning.

"Uhh, I'm Kayden, and this is Tham," Kayden said. "Oh, and the sword's the Mimicker."

With that, the whole Wonderinn and its patrons went dead silent.

Kayden gulped.

Did they recognize me? he thought, nervous. *From the 'Wanted' posters?*

"Did you just say..." another patron from a nearby table whispered, "Mimicker?"

"Uhhhhh," Kayden hesitated. "Yeah. What about it?"

Silence.

"Hey, kid," the man who had greeted them, who seemed to be the owner, started. "Look, it's awkward if you don't know about it, but... that sword you're carrying is one of the most powerful artifacts in the world. It's a Capital Sword."

"Yeah," Kayden said. "I already knew that."

"So..." the man continued. "By carrying it, you paint a bullseye on your back. People will come hunting you from all around the world just to get that sword. Guilds like the Tunique Storm would kill for it. But anyone who attempts violence inside

the Wandering Wonderinn is kicked out. My point?" The man paused for a moment. "You see, my name's Abner Chafter, and I've vowed never to let down a fellow adventurer in need, no matter their quest. Therefore, I've got an offer for you. Stay with us. Join the Wondrous Wanderers Guild."

"But you don't even know who we are," Kayden said. "Why would you offer us this?"

With that, the whole tavern bellowed into laughter. Chafter spoke again. "Kiddo-kid, it may sound like I'm offering the lot of you this chance because of your sword, but we all here know who you are. The whole *world* knows who you are. We're offering you this because we're hiring. There's been a significant lack of adventurers these last couple of centuries. We're here to change that. Besides, if you become a Wondrous Wanderer today you'll get a 15% coupon off all drinks at the bar tonight. One-time offer."

"We actually just wanted to ask for..." Tham started but trailed off as he saw Kayden's expression.

"...An adventurers' guild?" Kayden said. "You could hire me... to have adventures?"

"That's right!" Chafter said with a grin. "Safe adventuring for all ages in a danger-free environment, questing to make the world a better place."

"Can I, uh, think about it?" Kayden said.

"Sure thing!" Chafter said. "We're going north now if you wanna hitch a ride with us. If you've never traveled by Wandering Wonderinn before, this is sure to be quite an experience."

"Excuse me," Tham interjected. "Did you see an imperial caravan going north some hours ago?"

"We did," Chafter nodded. "You following it? We can follow the route it took; after all, we go where we please."

"We would appreciate that," Tham said.

And so they settled down at a table inside Chafter's Wandering Wonderinn, not really sure what was going to happen. A few minutes later and after a call of 'Please steer clear of the closing doors,' the Wonderinn unexpectedly lifted off the floor as if growing up legs, leaving the stables behind, and started swinging

gently back and forth like a ship on the sea. Curiously enough, the doors that closed moments earlier were all see-through from this side, and so through them and the windows Kayden and Tham enjoyed looking out at everything they wouldn't have to walk through.

"This is actually nice," Kayden said as he looked around the Wonderinn. People of all sorts were enjoying the ride, and waiters were moving around handing out drinks, food, and quests to anyone who so wished. It was chaotic, but peaceful nonetheless. Like the chaos of a group of friends enjoying each other's company. "Here we could go on low-stakes adventures, without feeling the weight or guilt of having to save the world."

"We can't stay here," Tham said right away.

"Why not?" Kayden asked.

"Because we already have our own quest to fulfill," Tham snapped. "Saving our village should come first."

Kayden looked at him with curiosity.

"What is it?" Tham asked.

"You called it *'our village.'*"

Tham frowned. "Of course. You lived there too."

Kayden couldn't help but let out a smile. He'd never been told he belonged anywhere since going down from the Skylands.

"Still, it would be nice to stay here," Kayden mentioned.

"No chance," Tham repeated. "We won't let our fellow villagers down. We gotta have our priorities straight."

Kayden looked around at the Wonderinn, but then looked back to Tham. He nodded. "You're right. I –we– have a responsibility. We're saving the villagers of Stumpborn, no matter what. And then I –and you too if you so wish– will overthrow the Empire of the Shattered Sky and find the Megalo Sky. I haven't figured out the details yet, but I know one thing: I won't rest until I know the world is a better place with me than it was without me."

Tham nodded resolutely.

Half an hour later Chafter approached them once more to announce the caravan was already in sight.

"What's your next move, good fellas?" Chafter asked.

“Now we’re gonna get off and keep tracking on foot, as–” Kayden started. He paused. “Wait a minute. We could catch up to them with you. Do you think there’s any chance for you to lend us your strength for one battle? If you could help us save the trapped villagers we’ve been tracking, then...”

“No,” Chafter said.

“...What?”

“Sorry, but that’s not an option, kiddo,” Chafter said. “The Wandering Wonderinn lives in secrecy. Non-imperial adventurers only. The only reason we haven’t been taken over by the Empire of the Shattered Sky is that they all think our adventurers operate independently and alone. If we were to openly strike an imperial caravan, it would be the end for me and my family. We can’t afford such a risk.”

“Your family?” Kayden asked. “You’ve got family here?”

Chafter gestured all around. “*This* is my family. Everyone here is my sibling, or parent, or child. When you join the Wonderinn, you join the family. I won’t put your quest over my family. I’m sorry.”

Kayden sighed, but nodded. “I get it. Don’t worry. Just... thinking about it, how far north are you willing to go?”

“The Wonderinn can’t cross the sea,” Chafter said. “That’s what the trains to infinity are for.”

“Would... Unbadda and the Airtronic mines be an acceptable destination?” Kayden said. “There must be plenty of quests along the way your people can complete.”

Tham gasped in a low voice.

Chafter’s face darkened. “If you so wish, we’ll take you there. We won’t fight, but if your quest there leads, then we’ll do everything in our power to aid you in your journey. You’re our quest-brothers now.”

“Thank you,” Kayden said, forcing out a smile beyond the fear their destination caused him. “It means a lot.”

“Oh, don’t thank me yet,” Chafter then said. “You’ll have to work if you want to earn your place. Field work –questing– is most

common here, but you can also wash dishes, cook meals, or perform other household chores.”

“You can trust us with quests,” Kayden said. “We were pretty much *made* for questing.”

“In a very literal sense,” the Mimicker added.

“All right, then!” Chafter said. “You rest today. Tomorrow we’re sending you out. We’ll have your quests ready by then.”

Kayden grinned. “Counting on it.”

Kayden felt almost excited to go out in casual quests again. But as Chafter left and he looked over at Tham, his heart sank.

“You said... the Airtronic mines?” Tham asked.

Kayden shifted in his seat. “It’s hard to say for sure, and we don’t really know if... well. Look, Tham. You are still a teenager. You shouldn’t be forced to grow up yet. But, the truth is, your world has changed. And there are some truths grown-ups just need to face.” He breathed out. “Chances are, Tham, your –our– village is being taken to the Airtronic mines, the biggest forced labor camps in the continent. *Everyone* goes there. It supports an entire industry exclusively through slaves. It’s horrible. Another truth is that no one that goes in ever gets out. Those truths are hard to face. But here’s another truth. I’ve been alive for more than two centuries; that shouldn’t be possible. We survived an imperial attack; that shouldn’t be possible either. And, most importantly, Tham, you’re your mother’s son. A Spacebender’s –and a hero’s– son. That says plenty. It’s true that this won’t be easy, but nothing ever is. Just, remember: most truths are what we believe them to be. We just gotta believe we can do this. I never was the one to give motivational talks, but the world’s changing, and so are we.”

Tham smiled. “You could write a book with those words. ...Thanks. I trust you. It means a lot.”

Kayden grinned. “Future bards will need *something* to sing about when they recall our legends, right?”

“Agreed.”

The day passed by in a very strange fashion. If Kayden had been asked, he’d have said they’d been just a few hours there, but before they knew it, it was dark outside. It was disconcerting, but it

felt good. Card games and wooden sword duels seemed to be the most popular activities here in the inn, and Tham made a small fortune's worth of foreign chocolate gambling with what little he had to offer. He even picked up a lute from somewhere to play folk songs while singing about his 'grand quests-to-be'. Sleep started to seep in, and after a long while of fooling around with the other happy patrons they settled in their upper-floor bunkbeds. Kayden wished Tham and the Mimicker good night, but Tham didn't reply, having already fallen asleep.

"I like this place," the Mimicker said. "Plenty of swords. They don't talk much, but they make me feel at home."

"I know, right?" Kayden agreed. "When this is all over, when we've saved the world from the Empire of the Shattered Sky, when we're surrounded by friends again, let's come back. Let's quest, free of guilt and pain, and fix the little things of the world."

"I'll 'drink to that,' as they say down below."

Kayden laughed. "I don't think you can drink, but you do you."

Night passed with the gentle swinging of the Wandering Wonderinn, and Kayden slept. Surprisingly, he had no nightmares. He just rested.

The Valley of Broken Statues,

Pt. 1

Kayden could have slept forever that night.

He only woke up because of Tham falling to the floor from the top bed of the bunkbed with a yelp early in the morning. Kayden instinctively sat up in the bottom bed as he heard him, hitting his head hard with the wood below the top bed. The sun had just risen, and all the others whom they shared the room with were still asleep.

“You okay?” Kayden asked Tham, grunting because of his own unfortunate bump in the head.

Tham got to his feet in pain. “...Yeah. Think so. At least I didn’t fall out the window or something. Wouldn’t be surprising in this place.”

“Were you sleepwalking?” Kayden asked.

“I wouldn’t have gotten far sleepwalking atop a bunkbed. More like sleepfalling,” Tham pointed out. “But, no. Just a nightmare. I dreamt of my mom and friends... like the past few nights.”

Kayden pursed his lips. “Yeah, it’s painful. Have you had them often since... it happened?”

“Two of the three nights since we left Stumpborn,” Tham nodded. “The night with the beowolves –though that was to be expected– and tonight. I did wake up abruptly, but I just didn’t have anywhere to fall from before. Surprisingly enough, I slept better the night we went to the Field of Memories than this night here in the Wandering Wonderinn. The soft swinging of the moving Wonderinn did feel nice, though.”

“...Well, at least you’re awake now,” Kayden said, feeling kind of guilty for not adding any more words of comfort but still groggy because of the sudden awakening. “You didn’t hit your head?”

“Nah, I’m fine,” Tham said.

“All right,” Kayden nodded. “Let’s go down, have some breakfast, and see if there’s any quests that need to be completed. Let’s make the fact that we woke up so early worth it.”

“Sure,” Tham agreed. They took turns using the wondrously-hot tub, then, dressed in the same clothing as ever –but that was now spotlessly clean for some reason– prepared to go down.

“Hey, Mimicker,” Kayden called out. “You wanna come?”

“I was waiting for you to say that!” the Mimicker replied.

Kayden knew bringing swords to the dining table was bad manners, but he didn’t care. He smiled and hung the Mimicker in the sheath at his back. As they headed down to the common rooms, they realized the Wonderinn wasn’t rocking back and forth anymore. The front door was wide open, with adventurers going out for quests or coming in to rest. The bar zone was full of hungry adventurers, and there were barely any tables available. As they settled down on one of the few tables left, Abner Chafter approached them with a smile, greeting them and handing them two menus: the ‘Foods’ menu and the ‘Quests’ menu.

“What can I serve you today, gentlemen?” Chafter asked.

After analyzing both menus for a while and after a lot of discussion between the three of them, Kayden spoke in the name of the group.

“We’ll have two portions of fried eggs and milk, along with a ‘Valley of Broken Statues’ quest for two and a half.”

“Coming right up!” Chafter nodded.

Minutes later he brought them the requested breakfast, along with a small scroll containing basic job instructions. The chosen quest, of which they had gotten a small synopsis before selecting it, had straightforward instructions. There was a deep valley a few hours north of their current position, a junkyard for

statues of wars past. As the legend went, those statues held treasures in them, war loot no one had yet been able to recover. Those statues were now broken in mind and body, motionless testaments to what they once were.

The Wandering Wonderinn had to surround the Valley of Broken Statues to keep going on to the Airtronic mines, so the quest said to cross through the valley, grab the biggest gem they could, and meet the Wonderinn on the other side. Straightforward enough. In exchange, they'd keep one third of the bounty and get free stay in the Wonderinn for a week.

Early as it was, Kayden and Tham had breakfast and then headed for the common room, to kill some time before the Wonderinn reached the entrance to the Valley of Broken Statues. As they pulled out a deck of cards, an individual approached them. It was just a single right hand with legs, a face, and a fedora.

"Mind if I join you for a game?" the hand asked with a slightly high-pitched voice.

"Uhh, sure," Kayden shrugged. "What's your name?"

"I'm the Right-Hand Man," the hand said. "Nice to meet you."

"Oh, you're Chafter's assistant," Tham said, recognizing him from the day before.

"His right-hand man," the Right-Hand Man corrected. "I'm there when he needs a hand."

"Checks out," the Mimicker agreed.

As Tham handed out the playing cards, the Right-Hand Man leaned forward on the table in a conspirational tone.

"Hey," he started. "I know you already chose the quest and cannot step back from it, but as you're the new guys around here, I need to warn you about something. Something I found out about that place a long time ago."

How ominous, Kayden thought with a frown. "What is it?" he asked.

"Well, to be blunt, there's some kind of giant monster lurking in there," the Right-Hand Man said with a sigh. "Many adventurers have braved it; few have returned. None with any

treasure. I've heard reports first-hand of something preying down on them from above. Most don't even get a look at it, they just flee. Those who have, describe it as massive. But they're all vague reports; nothing's confirmed. Therefore, the monster isn't even mentioned in the quest archives, and the quest's handed out to anyone. That person fails, and the quest is left for the next one. So be careful out there."

With that, the Right-Hand Man stood from his seat.

"That sounds... dangerous," Tham muttered.

"Yeah, well, thanks for the warning," Kayden nodded, trying not to sound nervous. "Aren't you staying for the card game?"

"I'm just a single hand," the Right-Hand Man said, doing what could be seen as a shrug. "I've never been good at holding cards."

Kayden nodded in understanding.

"Will we see you around?" the Mimicker called out from beside the seat.

The Right-Hand Man winked. "Count on it."

And so Kayden and Tham, after finishing their card game –of which Tham emerged the winner– got up from the table, going back to their room and putting on their equipment. Kayden hung the Mimicker in the sheath over his back, and Tham fastened his dagger to his belt. He didn't really know how to use it well yet, but it was better than nothing.

Kayden approached Abner Chafter in the bar as they waited to arrive.

"Hey," Kayden started, "you, um, seem to know a lot about the world. I'm looking for something called the Megalo Sky. I'm not even sure why, but I'm certain it exists. Have you ever heard of something like that?"

Chafter didn't stop washing jugs as he replied.

"That's an ancient name, one I've heard mentioned but never understood. Dunno if I can be of use, Kayden. What do you know about it?"

Kayden perked up. "I know nothing about it. Just that it's the key to reaching a perfect future. But it *does* exist, then?"

Chafter chuckled. "I thought you were certain already. Yeah. Miss Wonder referenced it all the time."

"Miss Wonder?"

"She once was my mentor," Chafter said. "Is that your dream, Kayden? To reach the Megalo Sky?"

"I'm... actually not sure," Kayden confessed. "It's definitely a goal, but I'm still struggling to come to terms with my 'dream'. Not that I talk much about it anyway."

"I see," Chafter nodded. "Well, better get to it soon. That's how you unlock Airtronic Distortion, kiddo. It's all the rage nowadays. Airtronic vials will only get you so far."

Before Kayden could reply, though, Chafter loudly announced their next stop: the Valley of Broken Statues, heading over to see some patrons off. Kayden had a hunch their conversation had not yet ended, but he let it go.

Minutes later, Kayden with the Mimicker and Tham stepped out of the door of the dazzling Wandering Wonderinn, right in front of a zigzagging path crossing over a small hill before plummeting into the Valley of Broken Statues. A few more adventurers got down there too, all heading in different directions with their various companions and pieces of equipment. After everyone had disembarked, the Wonderinn grew up wooden extremities that lifted it off the ground, and it marched away, rocking back and forth.

"Cool place, that one," Kayden said as they watched the inn they had once thought to be a mere wooden cabin walk away into the distance.

"Yeah," Tham admitted. "Hard floor to fall onto, but a nice experience nonetheless. At least we managed to avoid walking a big chunk of the way, and will now probably reach our... destination... even before the imperial caravan does."

Kayden nodded. "Now we just gotta cross through this valley, pick up the biggest gem we find, and try not to bump into any giant monsters."

Tham nodded, evidently trying to hide his nervousness.

Kayden, without giving himself time to hesitate, headed up the forward path, which started as moderately steep. Nothing too bad, though. Tham followed close behind, watching Kayden's step. As they walked up, the barely-visible road twisting and turning up the slope, the mountains soon opened up before them –only visible at a certain angle– and the steepness ended. In fact, what had once been an ascent was now a sharp fall, into a long and wide valley hidden among the mountains, featuring layers upon layers of statues of all kinds. Statues of giant warriors, of kings, of princesses, of monsters, of inanimate objects.

It all made Kayden feel tiny. Knowing there was so much history behind everything, and that all had been just thrown here to decay, caused a strange feeling within him. Maybe it was because he knew he was history too, just another kind of history. Kayden –and the Aoyume Knights– was part of that unavoidable secret lore that no historians wrote about but was whispered even in the noblest of places. So it was back in his time, so it probably was now too. It also made his stomach lurch. He hated heights. At least the situation seemed to be under control this time.

“How are we meant to get down?” Tham asked.

Indeed, the way down was so steep it was impossible to walk, even zigzagging or using other hiking methods.

How would the Swordsman of Time have done it? Kayden thought before he realized he did. He winced. The Swordsman of Time would've taken the wildest approach possible, and in case of failure, regressed time on himself. The problem was, he'd applied that method to life too. And there are some things one just can't regress time on. Pain threatened to rise, not through memories –most of those were still lost– but through feelings. He forced himself to remain cool and keep his head on the moment.

“Mimicker, can you change your consistency?” Kayden asked.

“No,” the Mimicker replied. “I'm no Shardbender; I can only change shape.”

Kayden pursed his lips, deep in thought.

“All right,” he finally said. “This is gonna sound far-fetched, but hear me out. You can turn into anything as long as you keep your mass, right?”

“Yes.”

“You can only mimic things you’ve ‘seen’ before –however that works. And you keep your hardness for whichever shape you choose,” Kayden continued. “Can you stretch?”

“Correct,” the Mimicker replied. “I’d get thinner, though.”

“So can you make stairs for us?” Kayden asked. “Really long and thin, but keeping the hardness?”

Silence.

The Mimicker spoke again a while later. “...At least you didn’t ask for a parachute or something. Stairs I can do... I think. I’ve never tried before. It’s like a really anticlimactic way to use a sword, but sure.”

“Think smart, not hard,” Tham agreed.

So, as Kayden reached behind his back and retrieved the Mimicker, it stretched and bent until it resembled a paper-thin set of stairs that reached almost to the bottom of the steep fall. Kayden started walking down them, trying not to focus on the fact that the slightest wrong move from the Mimicker could send him and Tham tumbling down into the rocks far below.

“Hey, Kayden,” Tham called out as they were halfway down. “Not to alarm anyone, but I was thinking and... if there really is a monster in here, it probably saw us already because of, you know, the ridiculously long set of black stairs the Mimicker just turned into. Maybe this wasn’t the, uh, stealthiest way to do it.”

“Well, as a wise man once said,” Kayden replied, trying to comfort Tham, “The one afraid of dying better not be born.”

Tham frowned but was unable to suppress a smile. “I’m pretty sure that’s not how it works, but sure.”

They did reach the bottom of the valley peacefully, though. Seeing the rock statues face to face, at arm’s length, was even more imposing than before. The Mimicker snapped back to sword form, as an elastic band after being stretched for too long.

“There’s a lot of knowledge in here!” it said. “The taller statues here are Kosmics, you know. An ancient race of infinitely-powerful humanoids who could control the laws of physics. Like Lawbenders, but, well, better.”

“Ouch,” Kayden said. “Cool, though.”

The Mimicker then gasped loudly, making Kayden flinch.

“What happened?” Tham asked.

“Whooooaaaaa!” the Mimicker said. “That’s me!”

“What? Where?” Kayden asked, turning around.

“You can actually see?” Tham said, genuinely surprised.

“Yeah, over there, to the left!” the Mimicker said, and as Kayden turned toward it, he saw it.

It was the fallen statue of a knight in what once must have been shining armor, leaning on a massive black sword with teeth along its blade and a tongue wrapped across its crossguard.

“It was a weird phase, but I still remember Sir Night fondly,” the Mimicker said. “He taught me to fight and kill. He gave me a purpose as a sword.”

“Sir Night?” Tham asked.

“As I said, it was a weird phase.”

“Well,” Kayden said, frowning, “your purpose doesn’t have to just be ‘fight and kill,’ you know. Swords are not just for killing. Besides, you can shapeshift. You can be anything.”

“Like what?” the Mimicker asked.

“Like, uhh...” Kayden hesitated. “Stairs. Why do you remain a sword, having so much freedom?”

“I don’t see myself as anything more than a sword,” the Mimicker said. “Having been a sword for so long, I can’t just—”

But as he talked, a loud noise from beyond some rock statues interrupted him, vibrating throughout the valley and shaking the three of them where they stood. A roar. A column of pure fire erupted skyward from the spot of the source of the roar at the very same moment, and Kayden yelped.

“I told you we weren’t being stealthy enough!” Tham complained, sporting a look of terror in his face.

“Whatever!” Kayden said, himself scared too. “Hide!”

The column of fire angled downward, melting through some statues and burning a rock statue's head a mere two feet from where they were.

"Follow me!" Kayden then told Tham as he ran in a crouch in the opposite direction, heading toward an opening in the ground between two statues as more roars split the air. "We're not abandoning this quest, Tham."

With that, Kayden jumped down into the opening, expecting a small crack to use as a barricade for whatever came next. Instead, what welcomed him was a ravine in the ground several feet deep, into which he fell with another yelp, hitting the ground hard on his arm and getting something that probably wasn't broken bones but would definitely leave a mark. He grunted as Tham fell onto him as well, already in pain as he was. To worsen everything, he accidentally bit his lip with Tham's impact on him, which seemed to hurt even more than the fall itself.

The Valley of Broken Statues, Pt. 2

Everything was pitch-black down there, with only a column of light coming from the hole above. Kayden could have easily regressed time on himself, but the hole probably wasn't that hard to get out of with normal methods, and they needed the cover anyway.

The roars continued outside for a while, then slowly died off.

"...That hurt," Tham muttered. "At least my shoulder wounds didn't reopen. Now what?"

"Yeah, this was unfortunate, but at least we're safe from whatever roared out there. First off, I can't see anything," Kayden said. "You got flint and steel?"

"...I actually do," Tham nodded. "I picked up some from the souvenir store back at the Wonderinn."

"Great," Kayden said. "You got any wood?"

"...Forgot about that," Tham admitted. "No wood."

"Weird coming from a carpenter, but it's fine," Kayden said, taking off his jacket. "We can burn my jacket. It's cloth; it'll light up."

"Why are you wearing a jacket, man?" Tham asked. "It's still summer here. It's hot."

To hide my scars, Kayden thought, but then forced out a grin. "For if we have to burn stuff."

"All right then," Tham said. "I can't see anything down here, though, so throw your jacket at my voice and let's hope you don't miss. I'm sorry for sacrificing your jacket like this, but it's for the greater good."

Kayden did, and after several minutes of hearing try after try of steel hitting flint, sparks started to fly out onto the jacket, and the corner of it caught fire. Tham dropped it to the ground, blowing on it, and the fire grew. It wouldn't last much, but it'd serve its purpose. As it did, the entire hole –now revealed to be a full cavern– lit up. Gems and precious stones covering the walls and ceiling started to glow orange, revealed by reflecting the firelight. They all had the orange hue, but each one was unique in its original color and shape. The gem-filled cavern continued downward in a tunnel that soon turned and got out of sight.

“...Whoa,” Tham muttered. “*This* was hidden below the layers of statues all along?!”

Kayden was speechless for a good while before managing to talk again. “I guess this is what the monster's protecting. This is its treasure hoard. We've still got hours before the rendezvous with the Wonderinn. Wanna explore a little first?”

“Yes,” the Mimicker replied.

“This is not something you can just walk away from,” Tham agreed.

Astonished, they started walking down the gem tunnel, looking around and trying to take it all in. It was one of the most beautiful things Kayden had ever seen. And to think it was hidden just below the surface, away from the eyes of so many adventurers that had tried to brave what lay above...

The jacket fire died off, but the gems kept glowing. Kayden, Tham, and the Mimicker soon reached an opening in the tunnel, a massive cavern room with a tall mound of gems stacked in the middle. And they were whispering. Kayden couldn't hear what they were saying, but it was clearly the center gems. They seemed slightly different than their wall and ceiling counterparts, but Kayden couldn't quite pinpoint the difference.

“Whoa,” Tham gasped. “Here it is. The treasure. Now it's just a thing of packing as much as possible into our backpacks and we'll have half the quest done.” With that, he approached the nearest gem, and the gem *screamed*, startling Tham and making him stumble backward.

“Please don’t take me!” the gem pleaded. “I’ve got a family to take care of!”

Tham looked back at Kayden with a confused expression, unsure of what to do.

Oh, no, Kayden thought. *They’re sentient*. That would make the job much, much harder.

“Uhh,” Kayden started. “Let’s just...”

Then, the other gems started screaming as well, calling out.

Kayden started shushing them, approaching with a calming hand and trying to make them stop. They yelped as he did.

“What now?!” Tham asked, getting nervous.

A long and deep roar slashed through the cavern, and Kayden tensed, his heart beating fast.

“Hide,” Kayden said. With that, he dashed away into a spot behind a massive gemstone on the wall, trying to fit in as deeply as possible with the Mimicker on his back. Tham ran in the opposite direction, hiding behind a tall gemstone as well.

Kayden pursed his lips, trying to not even breathe too loud. Seconds later, a giant red figure rushed into the cavern, roaring in rage.

Its massive serpentine body was covered in red metallic scales, from which sprouted two front legs and two back ones, all topped by an imposing head of long horns and a thick snout, its open mouth sporting rows of teeth. A red dragon, like in the ancient tales. Except... it had no wings. Kayden was pretty sure all dragons on this side of the world had wings.

But this was not the time to question the dragon’s anatomy. It was crawling around the cavern, sniffing and searching. Kayden held his breath, terrified.

“Whomst dare disturb the slumber of the ancient gems?” it –he– hissed, looking around the cavern. “I can smell you, insignificant one.”

Kayden tilted his head slightly, just enough to take a peek at where Tham hid. And his heart practically stopped. Tham was hiding behind a semi-transparent gem, and even though he wasn’t fully visible, the gem reflected the chestnut tones of his curly hair

and clothes, contrasting sharply with the rest of the cavern. And as if on cue, the dragon seemed to notice too.

Without saying another word, the wingless dragon started to approach Tham, slowly opening its jaw wide. Kayden froze.

Fight, or run away. He wanted to scream. *Not this again!*

The dragon breathed in. And with that, Kayden rushed out of his hiding spot, unsheathing the Mimicker as he did and dashing toward the dragon. He ran over a stack of gems, gaining altitude, and then jumped over to the dragon, slashing down at his neck. But the dragon turned at a surprisingly fast speed, and roared at Kayden, spewing a column of fire in his direction.

Instants before it reached him, though, Kayden regressed time on himself, reappearing running on the floor as the column of fire burnt through where he had just been. He continued running, aiming at the dragon's front left leg instead. The dragon kicked at him, but again before the attack hit, Kayden regressed time on himself by a fraction of a second, avoiding the hit and slashing at the dragon's leg. It was a clean slash, but... it did nothing. The blade just bounced off the dragon's scales, as if it had been nothing more than toy rubber.

Kayden progressed time on himself without missing a beat, appearing beyond his position and behind the dragon. He jumped over the dragon's tail, running over it and getting atop the dragon itself. He grabbed hold of the dragon's neck and pulled, trying to put pressure on its windpipe. But the scales were so thick the windpipe had to be way too deep for Kayden to reach it. The Mimicker transformed into a sort of reins for Kayden to hold onto, and he struggled with the dragon, who was trying hard to shake him off. The dragon tried to unsuccessfully slam Kayden onto walls, but as he had no wings, he couldn't get high enough to squash him against the ceiling.

"Enough!" the dragon said in a breathless voice after several minutes of the strange wrestling. "Stop *struggling!*"

"Only if you do so first!" Kayden replied.

To his surprise, the dragon actually did. It stopped on its tracks, panting and breathing with difficulty.

"I'm too old for these sorts of things," the dragon muttered.

Nearby, Tham walked slowly out of his hiding spot, terrified but curious.

"Don't you want to kill us?" Kayden asked, confused.

"I don't fight battles I can't win," the dragon replied. "The dead have no use for honor. And it's clear neither of us is killing the other today. We're evenly matched."

A small silence followed as both caught their breath.

"You're the monster of the legend?" Tham asked, approaching them tentatively.

"I am," the dragon said. "As long as I keep killing incoming adventurers stealthily, they won't send any real troops to hunt me down. This way I manage to keep the lives of these gems peaceful. It's one thing for another. So let's make a deal. Either you leave this place alive but with empty hands and promise to never tell the truth about what you saw here, or I kill the little one and you leave with empty hands and tell everyone what happened. The second option will end with me and the gems here dead or worse, and the little one dead as well."

"We'll leave," Tham muttered. He looked at Kayden, who was already down from the dragon. "We can always find another quest. I... really don't want to repeat the beowolves incident." But Kayden's eyes were full of determination.

"No," he said, eyes narrowed. "We won't leave here empty-handed, but we won't die either. Look, dragon. If you kill Tham, I'll continue fighting you until the end of time. I'm timeless. You're not. You'll die of exhaustion, and then I'll take all your stupid gems and sell them to whoever asks for them first. So don't lay even a single finger on him, or you'll see how the one who will topple an empire can fight."

"...What do you propose?" the dragon said.

"The world will never stop trying to industrialize places of worth," Kayden said. "These gems will never be free if their secret gets out. So we're going to take a few of the ones without sentience on the walls and say it's all we found; there's nothing more. Only

monsters live here. It's a wasteland, it's not worth it to even come. We'll have our gems, we'll get paid, and you'll be free."

The dragon thought about it. "What's the catch? It can't be that perfect."

"What you'll have to do is this," Kayden continued. "You'll bury this place so as for it to be never found, then you'll leave it forever. You'll never kill again. You're a dragon; you live for centuries. Get a life, man."

"...Why are you worrying about me?" the dragon asked after a long while.

"I guess surviving death gives you a new perspective on life," Kayden said. "One last thing: on February 29th, in four years' time, head to a place called the Field of Memories. You may be surprised."

The dragon seemed to want to say something else, but after too much hesitation, he just nodded his head and left the way he had come. With that, Kayden and Tham took as many gems as they could from the walls, without touching the sentient ones on the stack, and after one last glance at the beauty of the world below, left the cavern behind. Following the rising tunnel they eventually reached the surface, and walked over the long walk through the statue-filled surface to the other side of the valley. The dragon was nowhere to be seen. As they left the valley behind through the opening on the mountains, Tham spoke.

"Why did you help that dragon?" Tham asked Kayden. "I do think you could have killed him, or at least left him there to his own lonely life. After all, he's a bad guy. He's killed a lot of adventurers."

"I guess I'm practicing," was all Kayden said.

* * *

About an hour later, as the Wandering Wonderinn reached the rendezvous point after surrounding the valley, Kayden and Tham walked back in. The Right-Hand Man greeted them,

evidently surprised to see them alive and with their backpacks full of gems.

“Did you encounter the monster?” the Right-Hand Man asked with curiosity.

“Yes,” Kayden said. “There were way too many of them, so stealth was our only choice. We got the gems out, but at the end, we had to bury the valley through landslides. There’s no chance to return there anymore. At least we’ve got plenty of loot.”

The Right-Hand Man narrowed his eyes for a second, but then smiled. “I’m glad,” he said. “I always trusted you guys.” As he said so, a few men walked over to him, handing him some gold coins. The Right-Hand Man winked at Tham. “You’re turning out to be quite the source of profit. Keep it up.”

Right then, Chafter called out in a loud voice, announcing the next station.

“Next stop,” he said, “Unbadda. Airtronic mines.”

* * *

Haroken the dragon left the valley walking on his four legs. He missed his wings; it was shameful for a dragon to live without them. The gems had been the only ones to understand what he went through, his only friends for the last century or so. There, living among the statues, it made him feel part of history. Constant reminders of how people of power had risen and fallen. Just like himself.

Haroken felt like he knew the man who’d fought him from somewhere before. He’d been the leader of the Aoyume Knights of old, hadn’t he? That man had failed so brutally. And yet he still fought and saved. Haroken had done terrible things. Could he save too?

He tried to extend his wings and fly away before remembering he had none. He’d probably never get used to that. But he forced himself not to think about it. Instead, step after step, he left the valley behind. He’d never forget the gems. But there was a world out there that needed to be explored.

Into Unbadda

The atmosphere got heavier as they approached the Airtronic mines of Unbadda, a day and a few random quests later.

Physically and socially, everything seemed to darken. On the outside, trees seemed more crooked, grass seemed grayer, there were less birds. On the inside, people were quieter, laughed less. Everyone knew what they were approaching, and no one was eager to do so. Sure, there were plenty of quests in the vicinity, but the mere knowledge of what went on inside the Airtronic mines made anyone shudder.

Kayden didn't want to go. Though it made him feel guilty, sometimes turning a blind eye was the less painful way to do some things. But he *would* save them eventually, all of them at the Airtronic mines. It was just a matter of time. Nevertheless, he'd go now anyway. Tham's village –*their* village– was his top priority at the moment, and he wouldn't let his shivering change that.

Kayden couldn't see the full height of the city of Unbadda from his seat inside the Wandering Wonderinn. Upon a rising cliff that cut into the ocean, the coastal city was built exclusively in shades of black and gray, with high towers and spires rising from the topmost peaks as if trying to pierce the sky. The Unbadda spires were as high as it got here.

"So *depressing*," the Right-Hand Man muttered with disapproval. "The Empire of the Shattered Sky doesn't know when to stop. No wonder people are brought here to die."

Still a safe distance from the outer gates of the city, the Wandering Wonderinn stopped. It lowered onto the surface, and silent adventurers started walking out its open door. Abner Chafter and the Right-Hand Man approached Kayden, Tham, and the Mimicker as they were about to leave.

“Hey,” Chafter said. “Before you three leave, I wanted to tell you something.” He paused a moment before continuing. “You remind me of an adventuring party I once knew. They wanted to topple an empire too, as many others. But you know what made them stand out? Their happiness. They never stopped messing around. They never let the horrors they faced take over their selves.” He grinned. “They founded the Libertatum Brotherhood rebellion, you know. I didn’t get to know you for long, but I know I want you to stay that way. I’m sure you’ve all faced your fair share of trauma in the past, but what matters most is the present. So don’t change.” He smiled, shaking Kayden and Tham’s hands.

“Yeah,” the Right-Hand Man agreed. “When you lose sight of yourself, you lose everything. I hope to see you again soon. Not just as adventurers, but as friends.”

“Will we see you guys and the Wandering Wonderinn again?” Tham asked.

“The Wonderinn is only found when it wants to,” Chafter replied. “Maybe. Who knows? I’ll be looking forward to the possibility.”

Kayden let out a smile. He’d few times said goodbye to friends before. In most cases he’d never had the chance.

“We’ll be seeing you then,” Kayden nodded.

The Mimicker then spoke, as they were about to cross the door.

“Are you my friends?” it asked.

“We are,” the Right-Hand Man said with a smile.

The Mimicker said nothing, but Kayden knew that, had it had a face, it would be smiling.

“Thanks for everything,” Kayden finally said.

With that, they crossed the door to the outskirts of the air-mine city of Unbadda, and soon after, the Wandering Wonderinn started once more on its way to whatever its destiny was.

All main entrances to the city were heavily guarded by imperial soldiers, and the surrounding wall made it practically impossible to enter through any other way.

"All right, now to find a way in," Kayden said, folding his arms as they examined the city from the nearby hill the Wandering Wonderinn had left them on.

"Have you ever been here before?" Tham asked.

"Not that I remember," Kayden said. "But I remember near to nothing, so that's not saying much."

They spent a while looking at the city, trying to think of something, until Tham spoke.

"I think I have an idea," he said. "But it's, like, a really bad idea, so we should probably leave it for last."

"There are no bad ideas," Kayden said.

"So, uh," Tham started with hesitation. "I can't see the sewers from here, but they should lead below the city and go up eventually. There's a chance we could sneak through there into the city without being caught."

"Ah, yes," Kayden nodded. "Classic. This is a coastal city, built upon a cliff. That means the sewers are probably set on the edge of the cliff, to throw the dirty water onto the sea. Let's go check it out." He smiled, trying to reassure Tham. "I'm sure it'll be a piece of cake."

The freezing coastal wind lashing against the cliff wall made Kayden realize, minutes later, that maybe walking along the edge of the rock hadn't been the brightest idea. Besides the fact that it was ice-cold up there, they constantly slipped over the edge, and Kayden had to regress time over and over on Tham and himself to keep themselves on track. Still, they *were* making progress, and so Kayden thought the best move was forward. No matter how dizzy he felt from the height. He had to stay focused.

"What?" Tham asked Kayden a few steps later as they precariously walked, glancing at him.

Kayden frowned. "Huh? I didn't say anything."

"Someone's singing," Tham said. "Can't you hear it?"

Kayden focused, narrowing his eyes and looking around. Soon he did hear it as well, far in the distance toward the sea. A badly-matched chorus of female voices, singing rough but clear words that cut through the wind.

“What shall we do with adventure’s jailerr?” the women sang. “What shall we do with the calling’s mailerr? What will we do with Tham and Kaydenn? Early in the morning!”

Kayden felt a shiver run down his spine –whether because of the song mentioning their names or because of the freezing cold he did not know. He instantly recognized the voices. Marrmaids. An immortal crew of female pirate cannibals who lured innocent men with their sea shanties and pirate noise.

Kayden without missing a beat ripped a piece of clothing off his shirt and, splitting it into two, plugged it into his ears as deep as he safely could. He couldn’t afford to listen to the hypnotizing song, and neither did–

“Tham!” Kayden called out as he turned around, right in time to see him step off the ledge and into the sea.

Kayden immediately dived behind Tham, in such a way that he got close enough while in the air so as to regress time on both of them. They reappeared back on the ledge, and Kayden grabbed Tham hard to stop him from jumping again.

Tham struggled against Kayden’s grip, hypnotized. As Kayden had both arms busy keeping Tham from jumping, he couldn’t plug Tham’s ears with anything.

“Tham!” Kayden exclaimed. “Stop it!”

Tham muttered something Kayden’s plugged ears weren’t able to hear.

“No!” Kayden said, thinking fast. “They have nothing to offer you. No salary! No health insurance! They’re just going to eat you!”

Tham kept struggling, saying things Kayden couldn’t hear.

The Mimicker called out from Kayden’s back. “They don’t even *sing* well, Tham!”

“It’s not *worth* it, Tham!” Kayden said. “It’s just like with the Wandering Wonderinn! Do you remember why we didn’t stay with them?”

Tham hesitated for just a moment, but then kept trying to force Kayden off.

“Because of your village, Tham,” Kayden finally said. “Because of your friends, because of your dad. Are you willing to give all that up for a bunch of cannibal pirates?”

Tham paused. He looked at Kayden. He looked at the sea. He looked at his own hands.

And then, with a wince, he pressed his ears hard with both hands, dampening the sound.

He whispered something, too low for anyone to hear, and then kept moving forward.

Infiltration

It felt like ages before Kayden, Tham, and the Mimicker reached the oversized circular hole that was the entrance to the sewers. In extreme fortune, it did have a small ledge at either side of the stinking river that were the contents of Unbadda's sewer system.

Kayden and Tham each ripped off a piece of their clothing to use as face masks. At this rate, they'd end their adventure dressed with just their shoes. Even so, the smell was almost unbearable.

As they ventured deeper and deeper into the sewer system, they started getting cold. Sure, outside, summer hadn't yet ended, but as far as Kayden knew, the temperature of caves didn't change with the weather. Both Kayden and Tham were carrying torches –which, due to humidity, had been ridiculously hard to light up–, but they didn't heat much. Besides, they were getting hungry, but knew it would leave them with a bitter taste to take off their face masks to eat with this stench. So forward they went. The only one at ease was the Mimicker –Kayden was really starting to think its capacity to feel senses was selective.

It wasn't long before they came upon a fork in the sewer tunnel, both ways looking exactly the same. Kayden had been here before, he knew it. He didn't remember the exact circumstances, but the right way should be...

"Uhhh, left," Kayden said.

Tham turned to look at him. "You don't sound convinced."

"Yeah, don't worry," Kayden said. "You see, the natural option for everyone is to turn right. After all, it's called the 'right way.' It's instinct. But the Empire of the Shattered Sky is evil in every way possible. Thinking logically, it would never let someone

succeed the right way. So it's reasonable to think we need to go left."

"Well, you're the boss," Tham shrugged. "I have no idea where to go here, so you lead, and I'll follow."

And so the left way they took.

As they reached the source of the water after several twists and turns, Kayden stopped, and spoke.

"Uhhh, Tham?" he said. He let out some nervous laughter. "We're lost."

"..."

"But!" Kayden added. "This only means we know which the right way is. We just gotta go back the way we came and we'll... be..."

He looked backward, only to find them among a roundabout of five different paths, carved into the deep rock.

"...Where," Tham asked, "...did we come from?"

Kayden breathed in deep. "This way," he said, and started marching. He had no idea. But Tham followed.

They marched for a long time into the depths –or heights– of the labyrinthine cavern complex, having to refill their torches several times with the ancient vending machines they very occasionally found along the way. The rock sometimes sported big square openings, as if for some kind of gates, but anything that once occupied those oversized spaces and caverns appeared to be long gone.

Hours of silent walking –only broken by Tham's occasional singing or whistling– seemed to pass before they reached a very particular kind of door. It looked metallic, but the only way Kayden had of classifying it as a door was that it was perfectly smooth and straight, tall and thin in the surface of the rock.

"This must be it!" Kayden said. "The exit to the city of Unbadda. Are you ready, Tham?"

"Yeah!" Tham said, breathing in deep. "Let's go save everyone."

"Is Unbadda underground?" the Mimicker asked.

"No, why?" Kayden replied.

“We’ve been going downward this whole time!” it said.

“...Maybe it’s a staircase,” Tham proposed.

“Yeah, let’s just try to figure out how to open it first,” Kayden said. “It doesn’t seem to have any kind of doorknob.”

“I think I’ve read about doors like this,” Tham said. “Doors that don’t look like doors. Maybe... maybe it’s a mimic. A monster acting like a door to lure adventurers into its jaws. Like the Mimicker, but less cool.”

Kayden took several steps back and picked up a stone.

“Let’s put it to the test.”

He tossed it at the door, expecting a massive mouth to show its teeth or something, but the door instead... crashed and shattered.

“It was glass,” Tham said. “That was... anti—”

An alarm started blaring at full blast all throughout the rock complex, a loud *wee-ooh-wee-ooh* that made Kayden yelp and Tham jump.

“Now what?” Tham exclaimed. “We’re going to be caught!”

“By what?” the Mimicker replied. “There’s no one here!”

A single shining red dot lit up from beyond the broken glass door. It started getting larger as the whirring of machines slowly overpowered the blaring alarm.

“I should be calling 911,” a feminine robotic voice said, “but it’s been so long, I’d rather have some Nine-One-Fun!”

The darkness beyond the doorway lit up to a large hall with circular dinner tables set up since who-knows-when, a multi-colored ball hanging high from who-knows-where, and a diverse array of musical instruments playing themselves who-knows-how.

At the end of the room, to a stage empty save for a microphone stand, strolled in a figure unlike anything Kayden had ever seen before. It was like a person, but fully made of metal, with a square head, a red suit-and-tie, a wide handkerchief around her neck, and a black top hat.

“Our guests have arrived!” she said, spinning around. “Men, get out the fine cutlery! Oh, that’s right, you did that already. Such live wires.”

Kayden frowned. “What is this?” he asked out loud.

“Oh-ho-ho!” the metal woman giggled. “The music? It’s electro-swing, baby! The New Roaring Twenties are here to *stay!*”

“No, I mean—”

“The CEO asked for entertainment, and he’ll get it!” she continued. “Even if he hasn’t showed up in more than half a millennium. We put on the Ritz! We’ll wait fifteen minutes before we start, just to see if any guests arrive later. Is that okay with you, honey?”

“I don’t think—” Tham started.

“Swell!” the metal woman said. “Take a seat and have a bite. The show’s about to begin!”

Insecure of what to do, but definitely craving for some good food, Kayden carefully settled down on a chair at the nearest table, leaning the Mimicker next to it, and Tham followed. There was a metallic half-circle for each chair at every table, which Kayden opened, only to find the dried-up and rotten remains of what way too long ago must’ve been steak. He sighed.

“We don’t have time for this!” Tham told him in a low voice. “We gotta go.”

“You’re leaving already?” the metal woman said from the stage. “Oh, pity. The Skyland Inauguration Ceremony was about to begin!”

Kayden paused. “The what?”

“Hmph! I thought you were leaving. We’ll start right away, then. We can’t wait for the CEO and his friends any longer, and you guys are the next-best thing.”

The lights from the multi-colored ball dimmed as a drumroll started rising.

“Bladies and gentlemen!” she called out. “It’s time for the event you’ve been waiting for the last two decades. We haven’t long. Once awakened, we can only work for a few minutes on our

own power before being plugged in. A bunch of baloney, if you ask me! But well, what am I to do? I'll just hurry up."

She waited for a few seconds while Kayden and Tham politely clapped from their seats.

"As we all know, the situation is critical. The World Empire has lost control of Africa, South America, and Oceania to the Echo Entities. Lawbending still hasn't been perfected, and statistics show it won't be made massively available before the Echo Entities take over everything. We may lose our planet... but we won't lose hope! That's because the Skylands, the greatest marvel of engineering of the Modern Age... have been... completed! The results of the draw for the ones who will make them their home will be published on our website on Sunday, September 1st, 2024!"

2024, Kayden repeated in his mind.

Kayden was too confused to clap. Hadn't Tham said 2724? What... was going on?

"Let's take a tour through the future while we're at it, shall we?" she continued.

A three-dimensional ethereal image grew in the middle of the hall through some ancient piece of technology Kayden didn't recognize. It showed the Skylands. Kayden's home. The place he had for his whole childhood thought was the entire universe.

World Empire... Echo Entities... Lawbending... Skylands... Modern Age... Kayden's thoughts were swimming in an ocean of unknowns. He didn't listen to what the metal woman said next.

"...through Permabenders, powerful artifacts that will store Lawbending for millennia to come and keep the Skylands in the sky!" the woman was saying when Kayden managed to pay attention again. "We'll save the world. Mankind will survive! So let's cheer and dance to this, because the death of the planet will *not* mean the end of-!"

Everything went black.

"They ran out of power!" the Mimicker said.

Kayden was too overwhelmed to reply. Same as Tham, it seemed. What... had just happened?

"Too bad," the Mimicker added. "They had cool music."

They exited the room and continued walking through the cavern complex in silence. They had a *lot* to think about.

Nevertheless, it wasn't much later that they reached a massive chamber-like opening in a cavern. The rock ceiling was so high up, so dark, it could well have been the night sky –except it had no stars. It was cold in there. *Very* cold.

In the perfect center, chained by hands and feet to the ground, there was a man. A tiny man. Dressed in a really strange orange jumper, the dark-skinned man couldn't be taller than half a foot. He was sitting on the ground with crossed legs, his head downcast and hair drooping. The only other thing in the chamber was an apple core next to him. High on a rock wall there was a basket full of apples, but there were way too far for the man to reach.

He slowly looked up as Kayden and Tham entered the chamber. He actually looked pretty well-nourished, but that was the extent of his health. His eyes looked like they'd seen way more than they were willing to remember.

Kayden perked up as he saw him, and ran over to him.

"Hey, um, excuse me?" Kayden asked the man. "Do you know the way out?"

"Food," the man croaked. "Give me your food and I'll give you my wisdom."

"Don't!" exclaimed the Mimicker from behind Kayden's back. "We need our food!"

"But you don't even have a mouth," Tham noted.

"I eat vicariously through you," the Mimicker explained. "If you starve to death in these caverns, I'll starve vicariously."

"We've got no choice," Kayden said, exhausted. He tossed his backpack at the man. "Eat a little and speak."

The man nodded slowly, opened it, and took out all of Kayden's sandwiches, cereal bars, and fruit. He ate the entirety of it in about ten seconds, devouring at a rate no human should be able to reach.

Then he started to grow.

Slowly at first, his body started to enlarge, getting taller and wider. The shackles soon snapped under the newfound mass, and he kept growing, growing, until his body was as big as Kayden, then twice Kayden's size, then three times, and bigger, and bigger. Kayden and Tham took several steps backward with eyes widened as the man continued up, up, until he could reach the basket full of apples. Not even after devouring them did he stop, continuing up, cracking the ground below him, reaching the cavern ceiling, and breaking through.

The man then started running, demolishing the cavern walls and ceiling in his path, clearing an enormous tunnel in the rock and leaving Kayden and Tham far behind.

They stared in awe at the massive hole in the wall as the now-giant man left them quickly behind. As they did, the entire cavern started to shake, rocks and boulders falling from the collapsing ceiling.

"What now?!" Tham asked, looking all around him in fear.

"Well," Kayden said, forcing a smile and shrugging. "I guess we catch up."

“We Said We’d Meet Again”

Kayden and Tham ran.

Kayden felt like he’d never ran that fast before, and Tham sure hadn’t. A single false step could mean the end as they sprinted through the newly-formed and already-collapsing massive tunnel created by the giant man, rocks falling all around them.

Kayden every few seconds would progress time on himself and Tham, exhausting himself but moving forward nonetheless. He had no idea where they were going. They could perfectly be running straight out into sea, or toward an imperial ambush of some kind, or into Athoren’s core. But they had no choice.

They ran until their legs felt like exploding, and then some more, always upward, hoping for the best but fearing the worst. At least they knew where to go now, even if that ‘where’ could be anything.

And finally, after an eternity and some more, the giant man broke out into the light. It was extremely blinding, as if they’d ran so far up they’d reached the sun. But they kept running up, tunneling into a bustling afternoon market street inside the fortified city that was Unbadda. People and animals all around them started screaming at seeing the hole in the ground and the giant man, and a commotion of people not knowing whether to run away or come closer started growing in.

Kayden was the first to react.

“Follow me,” he told Tham, taking him by the arm and dashing into the nearest store. Buyers and sellers complained as they skipped every line and dropped more than a few products on the way to the stairs.

They ran to the second floor, third floor, and then the rooftop. The fresh air felt like a bucket of cool water after so long either stuck underground or in near-death situations.

“Do you trust me?” Kayden asked Tham, his heart racing.

Tham nodded quickly, exhausted to the bone.

“Then jump.”

Kayden breathed in deep, and dashed onto the rooftop’s edge, jumping away onto the next store’s rooftop and falling cleanly on its ledge.

“I can’t!” Tham called out.

“We don’t have long!” Kayden replied. “Imperials will be swarming this place any minute now!”

Tham hesitated.

Déjà vu.

Kayden had lived this before. A different time, different people. The same fear.

“Tham.” Kayden said, firm but confident. “You’re part of the Aoyume Knights. That means you will fight for those who are not here to try. So take the leap, Tham. Because you know you can.”

Kayden could see the flash of decision in Tham’s eyes. But it was just that –a flash. Tham ran toward the end of the rooftop. He jumped. And he made it. His legs buckled as he did, and he stumbled just a bit, but he didn’t drop.

Kayden and Tham jumped toward another rooftop, and then another, getting away.

And as they did, they saw another man running past them on the rooftops as well, going the other way.

A short man dressed in rags, long sackcloth covering his face and body. He was *fast*. Running, he hopped from one rooftop to the other with the dexterity of a cat, toward the giant man. Carrying a rod he didn’t seem to need in the slightest, he was definitely the most agile vagabond Kayden had ever seen.

Hidden among some barrels, Kayden and Tham couldn’t help but watch as the mystery man quickly reached the giant, who was now running through the city wreaking havoc, and jumped. As

he did, he extended his rod forward, and, reaching the massive shoulder, transformed the rod into a long diverging whip, with which he started flicking at the giant man's neck.

"Another Mimicker?!" Kayden said, frowning. "And I thought I was—"

"No," Tham said, eyes shining. "A Shardbender."

The mystery man's —the Shardbender's— whip barely tickled the giant. But Kayden soon realized that that was the point. Annoyed, but unable to stop laughing, he soon started twitching and shaking, trying to throw off the Shardbender, to no avail. The Shardbender then rolled up his whip and it turned into a rock, which he dropped in front of the giant man's foot. The giant, unguarded, tripped on the rock, leaning forward.

Then, the Shardbender stepped off his shoulder, sliding down his back as if surfing a massive wave. And as he did, the surface his boots touched started turning to stone, transforming the giant man's jumpsuit into hard rock. The giant man's expression turned from annoyed laughter to fear as the weight and hardness of the stone pulled him down into the ground. He hit the floor hard, and was unable to stand back up. The Shardbender hopped off the giant foot onto the ground, out of Kayden and Tham's sight.

"Man!" Tham said. "That was a *Shardbender*! Can you believe that?"

Kayden nodded, eyebrows raised. "I gotta admit that was pretty impressive."

"I can do it better," the Mimicker muttered from behind Kayden's back.

"This is our chance," Kayden then said. "Let's get going."

Sneaking down from the rooftops was the easy part. Blending into the population with their worn-down clothes and transformed Mimicker was easy as well. The hard part came when they realized none of them had any idea where the Airtronic mines started in this oversized city, let alone where to find the location of Tham's fellow villagers.

“How?!” Tham exclaimed, frustrated, after a long while of asking for directions and getting uncomfortably ignored in return. “How can there be no freakin’ maps of this city anywhere *in the city*? How do people find their way around?”

“Yeah, this *is* pretty dumb,” Kayden acknowledged, lips pursed. “So close and yet so far...”

What they did start seeing more and more around were Imperial soldiers. Fortunately, Kayden and Tham were just two fellow citizens here –nothing to worry about. ...Until Kayden bumped face-first into a ‘Wanted’ poster of himself, and noticed. He paled just slightly.

“Uhhh, Tham?” Kayden called out behind him. “I, um, have just realized something.”

“Oh, no,” Tham muttered, coming up next to him. “What is it?”

“I may have forgotten that my eyes are of different colors,” Kayden whispered. “Something that anyone looking at my face would have noticed. ...And something that’s pretty well drawn in the ‘Wanted’ posters as well.”

Tham pursed his lips. “Yeah. I don’t know what else to say. You screwed up. Now what?”

“Now,” Kayden started, “we–”

“Kayden.”

A female voice, sharp and strong, from above and behind him.

* * *

“Kayden.

“This is it.”

Kayden turned. The moonlight was the only thing illuminating Lauren’s figure, the two of them far enough from the Aoyume Knights HQ for its light to reach them.

“You’re really leaving, aren’t you?” Kayden asked.

“I am,” she said, softly but determined. “This is too much. I’ll never forgive you, Kayden. But, for tonight, I’ll forget.”

Kayden had trouble meeting her blue eyes. "I love you, you know."

"I know."

Silence.

"We said we'd guard the sky," Kayden whispered.

"We said a lot of things, Kayden," Lauren replied. "Bakor said a lot of things. He's gone now. And so will I be. I'm sorry, but this is just how it is."

"...Will we meet again?"

"We will meet again, Kayden. You know that. Neither of us will give up. And so we'll one day meet on opposite sides of the battlefield. I won't hold back then, and neither will you."

"...That's right," Kayden nodded slowly.

It hurt.

He wanted to hug her. To kiss her. But it was time to leave. The Lauren he knew was gone. It was time to part ways.

"I'll be looking forward to crossing swords on the battlefield with you, Kayden," Lauren said with a forced smile. "Then I'll see if you're really as good as you always say you are. Goodbye."

And, just like that, she was gone.

** * **

Kayden turned around and unsheathed the Mimicker. He wouldn't let himself be paralyzed again. Ever.

"Lauren!" he shouted. "It's been a while. Surprised?"

"Hand yourself over, Kayden," she said. Lauren, the erratic teenager he'd once known, was now a young adult dressed in royal red clothing, floating high up in the air with a metallic mask hiding her mouth and nose. Her long blonde hair waved in the wind behind her. Even so, her eyes looked... bored. "I'm not in the mood for fighting today. Don't make this any harder."

The slightest glance at her face made Kayden's mental armor tear apart. He winced.

"I'll never surrender to you," he replied, trying to keep himself firm and stable.

All around Kayden and Tham, hordes of imperial soldiers started taking up positions, awaiting the Everbender's orders.

"Capture them," Lauren said.

Kayden broke into action.

Spinning with the Mimicker in hand, he struck at soldier after soldier, progressing and regressing time on himself with a mastery only the Swordsman of Time would be able to achieve. He leaped and jumped all around Tham, protecting him, guarding him, as he felled round after round of soldiers.

"You're going down!" Kayden shouted at Lauren.

Slash. Dodge. Jump. Attack. Defend. Protect.

There were so *many* of them. But he'd survive. So would the Mimicker. And so would Tham.

The Mimicker transformed into a mace, back into a sword, a whip, an ax, a bat, a million other things, as Kayden fought by instinct, his purest drive being three words. Survive and protect.

He forced himself not to think. He only fought.

This is it.

And then, with an army of fallen soldiers on the ground and a hundred other armies coming in, Lauren Lerahen lowered to the ground, her hands clasped behind her back. Kayden knew what he had to do.

Kayden dashed toward her, breaking through the ranks of soldiers filling the street with a roar. And as he reached her, time froze. No, not time. *Him*.

Lauren was extending her right hand toward him, and as she did, he felt his heartbeat slow down, his breathing get harder, his thoughts muddy up, his pace lower.

His whole body was slowed down, somehow. And slowing even further.

Everything was hard to process. He didn't know what was going on. His consciousness started to fade. His vision went black.

Lauren!

Tham!

“Kayden!” Tham called out in the distance, terrified.

He couldn’t use his powers. He couldn’t gather enough air for that. So he shouted.

“Tham!” Kayden called back, unable to see, unsuccessfully trying to fight against what he felt like dozens of attackers swarming in on him. “I’ll catch up to you! *Run!*”

But he could hear Tham struggling. They –whoever the attackers were– were on him as well. Kayden at least had the Mimicker, but Tham had nothing. And then, in that fraction of a second, Kayden made a decision. With his last moment of consciousness, and with all his might –which seemed to be nearing nothingness as well–, he threw the Mimicker at Tham.

“Last command, Mimicker!” Kayden shouted, dropping to the ground. “Save him!”

* * *

Tham didn’t remember what happened next. The frantic minute that followed consisted in the Mimicker getting to him, them attacking the ambushing Imperial guards, making an opening, running away, and getting saved by the Shadbender was as hazy as a dream –and a really bad one.

“Where... am I?” Tham asked, slowly sitting up on a hay bed with a wince.

The Shadbender was sitting on a chair next to his bed. Physically looking several years older than Kayden –early-twenties, maybe–, he had wild blond hair and black eyes, the now-absence of hood revealing sharp features and a gaze that looked to have seen much more than what it had signed up for in life. Even so, he grinned.

“I knew you’d wake up,” he said. “The name’s Merdilen Arthenmon. Shadbender. Hero. Nice to meet ya. Don’t worry, kid.” He winked. “You’re safe here. I was getting groceries, but I think they splattered against the floor during our escape. Can’t leave you alone, though. I’ll buy some more later.”

“You’re a real Shadbender?” Tham asked, forcing himself to sound casual.

“Heh. As real as you are.” He swiped back his long blond bangs. “I get ya. I’m hard to believe.”

Then Tham remembered. He got up from the bed, so fast he got dizzy.

“Where’s Kayden?!” he asked.

“Who?” Merdilen replied.

“The man who was with me,” Tham said quickly. “The one from the wanted posters.”

“Ohhh,” Merdilen nodded. “The Timeless. He was captured by the Empire of this world. Why?”

“Well, we gotta get him back!” Tham exclaimed. “We need to—”

“Ehh... What’s in it for me?”

Tham thought fast. If this Merdilen guy was half the Shadbender the legends talked about, then he’d definitely need him to save Kayden. It had all happened so fast... Kayden had given over the Mimicker and his own freedom to save Tham. Tham needed to get him back, safe and sound.

Tham shrugged. “Wealth, fame, power. No matter what you’re at, you’re likely to find it on our quest. ...Well, except for the first one, and maybe the second. We did get some nice loot from the Valley of Broken Statues, though.”

Merdilen folded his arms. “You don’t sound very convincing.”

“I mean, we don’t have much to offer,” Tham admitted. “True heroes don’t look for something in return, but I guess those are hard to find these days. Don’t worry, Merdilen. I’ll find someone who wants to make a name for himself as the one who overthrew the Empire of the Shattered Sky.”

“Good luck,” Merdilen smiled. “I’m sure you will. Your sword’s by the door.”

“Well, then,” Tham said. “I’ll... go find a real hero. Thank you for saving my life. Goodbye.”

Tham headed for the door, grabbed the Mimicker, and left. Alone but determined.

It didn't matter. He *would* save Kayden. And his village. Everything would go back to normal. Right? Tham would make sure it did. No matter the cost. Tham had never held anything more than a knife before, let alone a sword. But it didn't matter.

"It's the two of us now, Mimicker," Tham said.

"Um, three," a voice from behind him corrected.

It was Merdilen Arthenmon. The Shardbender, somehow all suited up already with a black coat and sword.

"It's been a while since I went on a real quest. I gotta say they're in short supply as of late. It's true that I kinda miss those days."

Tham looked at him, incredulously. "I thought you weren't coming."

"It was a test," Merdilen said, not looking at him. "Besides, I would feel bad if I didn't." He must've seen Tham smile, because he added, "Not because you hurt my ego or anything, though. I choose to. Out of my own initiative."

Tham breathed in deeply. "All right, then. Let's go."

The Mimicker then spoke. "Yeah. Let's go beat up some bad guys."

"Kayden," Merdilen said. "Whoever you are, we're coming for you."

The One That Went Missing, Pt.

1

Okay, where should I start?

My name is Merdilen Arthenmon, he thought, soaring from rooftop to dark rooftop, spinning around in the cold air, and I'm the last Shardbender.

He landed on a storefront, momentarily losing balance before Shardbending his boot into a rock-hard substance, adhered to the rooftop, with which he pulled himself back up in one smooth move and continued forward.

I died, but I gotta find out why this afterlife isn't like old books. Running, he could see the next wall ring coming up close, but didn't stop.

It's weird to think I was chosen to save the world, he thought as he leaped straight into it, Shardbending the thick wall surface into sand where he touched it, stepping through, and then Shardbending it back into solid rock as he hopped forward. *It didn't really work out.*

A lot happened in between. Friends died. All that's behind me.

Right now, though...

He stopped, crouching on a ledge while looking over at the highest-security prisoner camp. Where this 'Timeless' friend of Tham should be.

How on Earth am I meant to explain all this to anyone else?

Merdilen needed answers, no matter what. He needed to get back to the 'alive' world. This looked like neither heaven nor hell, but it for sure was something otherworldly. He had a hunch

that, if he saved this Timeless-Kayden guy, he'd get closer to his answers.

Merdilen took his rod from his belt as he Shardbent it to a long black sword.

"All right," he said, leaping onto the next rooftop and dashing forward. "Hehe. Time to make a mess."

* * *

Tham breathed in and out several times.

The plan to save Kayden was simple. Merdilen Arthenmon would go in and make a mess. Tham would go around and take advantage of that mess. While Merdilen was wreaking havoc, Tham would enter the prisoner camp with the Mimicker, find Kayden, and break him out. The main problem, though, was...

"Why are we trusting him, again?" the Mimicker asked in helmet shape.

"Because we don't have a choice," Tham whispered.

Being honest, he was *terrified*. As he walked around the night streets of Unbadda wearing the shifted Mimicker as a helmet, humming some of his favorite tunes to steady himself, he realized he'd never been so alone. He'd never been to a city as big as this before, let alone at night, let alone on his own.

"We just gotta go up," Tham then said. "The upward slope means we're going higher in the security levels."

Tham could feel Unbadda's decay everywhere. The small children trying unsuccessfully to guard the entrances to taverns whose doors had clearly been blown down long ago. The imperial guards beating up women selling sentient gems for not having a permit. Tham would've liked to walk with his eyes closed just to not see how rancid the city was.

Tham's village would be arriving here in the next couple of hours. Without saving Kayden, there'd be no chance of making up a plan, much less actually saving the villagers.

Surprisingly enough, Merdilen's fake ID had gotten Tham and the Mimicker through to the uppermost ring. Now came the

hard part. Supposedly, Merdilen would blow up the wall on the specific prison Kayden was in, but Tham had his doubts.

Tham, wearing his Mimicker helmet, went up to a tavern's rooftop, and there he crouched, looking over at the long spread of prison centers and work camps set up before the monster of a mountain that hid the sky.

Now he could just wait. Watch and wait.

* * *

Breathe. Regress time.

Breathe. Regress time. Breathe. Regress time. Breathe. Regress time. Breathe. Regress time. Breathe. Regress time.

Kayden needed to keep himself alive.

Breathe. Regress time. Breathe. Regress time.

No matter how much longer he spent shackled and hanging.

Breathe. Regress time.

He had already given up once.

Breathe. Regress time.

This time, he was *not* letting go.

Breathe. Regress time. Breathe. Regress time. Breathe. Regress time. Breathe. Regress time. Breathe. Regress time.

His breath caught in his throat. As if time had slowed down. ...Or as if *he* had.

"Will you stop doing that, please?" a flat female voice called out from the darkness of his cavern. An unmistakable female voice. "Also, did you plant those forget-me-nots just now? I'm certain those weren't there before."

"Lauren," Kayden said right away.

"Who?" Lauren said. "I'm the Everbender."

"What do you want?" Kayden said, eyes narrowed.

"Don't worry about it," Lauren said from the darkness. "I came to ask you personally. What do *you* want? Last meal. It's breakfast, by the way. My treat."

Kayden didn't know what to reply.

“Rat got your tongue?” Lauren asked with curiosity in her voice. “What is it, Kayden? Have you got nothing to say?”

Her voice... so soft. So misleading. Kayden breathed in deeply.

“I’ve got until morning, then,” he muttered.

“Huh?” Lauren said. “What was that? No, Kayden. You’ve got nothing. I’m starting to believe you can’t help me find the Sky after all. My change of plans was for nothing. Your prize is death –easier for both of us.”

Kayden frowned. “...The Sky?”

“The Megalo Sky,” Lauren said casually from the darkness. “‘The King in Blue couldn’t allow that, so he reset the timeline.’ You know. The thing to do *that*.”

Kayden’s jaw dropped. “It’s real.”

Lauren sighed. “I guess we’re not getting anywhere with this. You want a last meal or not?”

“No,” Kayden snapped. “Not from you.”

“Your loss,” Lauren replied. “Well then. See you tomorrow.”

He could hear her leaving.

“I have no idea what I’d do if I were you!” Lauren called out from the gate of whatever dark place they were in, “But I’m invested.”

* * *

Merdilen breathed in deeply, the night air filling his lungs.

He pulled on his gloves, both with several compartments full of sand. This last rooftop oversaw the sprawling camp that was the beginning of the prisoner sector of the city, several blocks before the sharp mountain shot upward, holding the highest-security individuals. Darkness.

The camp tents were barely cloth. Most were torn-down or damaged in some way; being subtle was impossible in a place like that. So he wouldn’t be. This was a distraction, after all.

Merdilen extended both arms to the sides, standing up straight on the rooftop. He jumped forward, maintaining his position, diving like a cross into the tents below. His coat flapped in the cold wind as he fell. And right before he hit cloth, he Shardbent.

He Shardbent the rapidly-approaching tent into solid stone and his boots into thick rubber as he hit the surface, not missing a beat as he ran atop it, leaping onto the next tent as he turned it into stone as well.

This is what you wanted, Merdilen thought, determination in his eyes. For this power to help the world. Right, doctor Alekis?

He shifted his sword into a pole with a red banner on top, crouching to swing it through a fireplace next to the tent below, and then raising it high in the air. A burning beacon of justice. And then he kept running.

“With this power, Merdilen, you’ll save the Modern Age.”

He couldn’t forget. He couldn’t forget doctor Alekis. He couldn’t forget his world.

Far in the distance, someone sounded the alarm. Merdilen could feel them. Thousands of soldiers, coming to him. He kept running, holding the beacon high in sky.

“Come at me!” he said, speeding up, turning every possible high surface into stone as he ran.

Don’t look back.

“You’ll lead the charge into the future.”

He kept running, forward, toward the mountain. Arrows and shouts flew around him. One pierced his leg, but he Shardbent it into the thinnest sand possible and continued on.

“You will make it. Because you...”

“...I am...” he shouted, leaping forth, “the one who will keep my world alive!”

The One That Went Missing, Pt.

2

Okay.

Tham nodded to himself, pursing his lips. Wearing the Mimicker as a helmet, he could see him, in the distance. Merdilen Arthenmon. Running toward the mountain, holding a flaming banner.

“This is it,” Tham said. “Right, Mimicker?”

“Yeah, let’s go already!” the Mimicker exclaimed. “We haven’t long!”

Tham narrowed his eyes, and started dashing up the street. The few onlookers, Unbaddians with questionable late jobs, scoffed at him as he ran on the dark cobblestone. Tham was *terrified*. All it took was a single guard to notice him and he’d be doomed.

He ran out into the open night as buildings gave way to tents and onlookers to slaves. There was no restricting wall here anymore. Who on Athoren would dare escape?

Tham didn’t know whether any soldiers noticed him or not. He was too scared to look around. What he did know was that Merdilen’s distraction was being effective. The army following him seemed to have left these streets empty.

Tham’s exhaustion got the better of him halfway through. The Mimicker was *heavy*, no matter if as a helmet, as boots, or as a sword. Drops of sweat hit the dry ground as he panted, trying to catch his breath. He had never been the athletic kind.

Come... on!, Tham thought, desperate. *I can’t stop now! Kayden needs me! My mom will need me!*

He continued running, only to stop a short while later. He glanced over at Merdilen. He was running smoothly, leaping from tent to tent, faster than all chasing soldiers. Then why couldn't Tham even get to the mountain?!

A furtive silhouette scrambled along the corner of his vision. Another did the same on the other side. Tham turned to the left, scared, and exhausted.

A dark-skinned girl about his age leaned toward him from out of nowhere with emerald eyes. Her thick curly hair was so big it made her look even taller than Tham.

"An adventurer!" she exclaimed. "You're here to save us, right?"

A man from behind him spoke as well.

"Thank you," he said. "We believe in you."

Tham paused.

...No. I can't save you all, he thought. But he couldn't say that to their faces. He winced.

"...Yes," he finally said, closing his eyes. "I'm here to save you."

The dark-skinned girl his age approached him, held up his hand in hers, and dropped a small vial of something into his hand.

"Take this," she said. "I think you'll need it."

"What is it?" Tham asked.

She grinned. "Power."

Tham looked at her eyes, those dazzling eyes.

"...Thank you," he muttered. "I'll be back."

The girl nodded.

All around Tham a group of slaves had come together. They all then closed their eyes, clasping their hands.

They were praying.

"...I'll be back," Tham found himself repeating. There were still people who hoped in this world.

Far in the distance, in the mountainside, a chunk of rock was blown away by something Tham couldn't see. That was it. Merdilen's signal. Kayden had to be in there.

He continued running.

* * *

Kayden could hear chaos. It was far away and muffled, but something was *definitely* going on. Somewhere, outside whatever prison complex he was in.

But what? He could just hope Tham wasn't involved. Or in danger.

Maybe he could use it as a distraction to—

The gate to his prison cell opened.

"Hey, Kayden," Lauren's voice called out to him from the darkness. "Is the guy outside your friend?"

Kayden narrowed his eyes. "What?"

"He's really wreaking havoc on my camp," Lauren said through gritted teeth. "Blond hair, black coat, flaming banner. Ring a bell?"

"Uh, no." Kayden genuinely didn't recognize the description. But he wouldn't have said anything if he had.

"Well, if you got a telepathic link with the guy or something," Lauren finally said, her voice farther away, "tell him Harkatronic's coming for him."

* * *

Now what?

Merdilen had already brought all soldiers to his position, then blown a chunk off the mountain by Shardbending it to powder. It wasn't easy to climb while being chased by an army, but he had nothing better to do. He just had to buy some time for Tham to escape with Kayden, and then he was out.

It was clear these soldiers had never fought a Shardbender before. Even so, the adrenaline felt good. It made him feel alive again. Even though this was just an afterlife. What if he died here? He wasn't about to find out anytime soon.

For each jump he couldn't make he Shardbent the sand of his glove pockets into stone steps attached to the rock surface,

turning it back to sand as soon as he hopped off. The soldiers didn't have the same luck. They were having a tough time climbing with their steel armor, and most had already either dropped out or fallen off.

This is gonna be—

A loud ringing in his head. Power. Approaching. He could feel it. Even so, he heard the roar before he saw the threat.

A hulk of a man with greased hair in steel armor was either jumping or flying toward him from the base of the mountain with a warhammer in his hands. No—he was *falling up* at Merdilen.

What on Earth?

It was almost too late that Merdilen remembered how falling worked as the man accelerated toward him to an absurd speed. Merdilen dove to the side, barely dodging the warhammer as it smashed onto the side of the mountain along with the man. Rubble blown away fell into the ranks of the imperial soldiers, dropping several from the heights.

“Okay,” Merdilen muttered as he Shardbent the flaming banner into a longsword. “Things just got interesting.”

“Don't worry, imperial warriors!” the hulking man shouted as he pulled himself up from the rock crater. “*Harkatronic's here!*”

Merdilen started jumping and hopping throughout the mountainside, doing his best to avoid the hammer strikes.

If I get too far, he'll use his falling power and smash me with the force of gravity, he realized as he observed Harkatronic's every move for a blind spot, *but if I draw too close, he'll smash me with the force of his warhammer. My Shardbending range is my weakest point.*

“You play well, kid,” Harkatronic said between breaths as he slammed his weapon toward Merdilen.

“I'm short,” Merdilen admitted as he ducked, “but I'm 22!”

“Still a kid!” Harkatronic roared. “And it shows.”

Merdilen felt his whole body get pulled forward toward his enemy's weapon as a baseball to the bat. It was too late that he realized he could be a target for the falling power as well.

He couldn't change course. So he Shardbent the warhammer into sand and flew straight through, feet first, kicking into Harkatronic's chest. Harkatronic didn't miss a beat as he grabbed Merdilen's feet in response. Merdilen yelped as the hulk of a man spun him around, sending him tumbling down the mountainside.

Were it not for his quick reaction time, he'd have been flattened, but his Shardbending was fast enough for him to turn his entire set of clothes into highly-specific cushioned armor—one could never be too ready. He was running out of air, though. He wouldn't be able to Shardbend for much longer.

"Endurance race," he muttered. "Not a fan of these."

A single deep breath was all Merdilen could take before Harkatronic plummeted down at him, hammerless but with steel-gloved fists as big as Merdilen's head. Merdilen rolled to the side as he Shardbent Harkatronic's armor into something similar to osmium—the heaviest material on Earth according to doctor Alekis, even though Merdilen couldn't get it quite right yet. It should be almost three times the weight of his original steel plate.

Merdilen couldn't help but gawk as Harkatronic got to his feet nonetheless. He stumbled slightly, but didn't for a second lose his footing. He glanced at Merdilen from under sweaty eyebrows.

"I will be... the Emperor of Athoren... you know."

It was as Harkatronic started falling toward Merdilen again that Merdilen realized his mistake. Heavier material fell faster.

The osmium boot stomped into Merdilen's chest with the force of a truck. He still had his cushioned armor, but it wouldn't last long. He felt as if all air—Lawbending fuel—left his body.

Harkatronic grabbed Merdilen's neck, pressing it against the ground.

"Give me one reason why I shouldn't bury you right here and now," he growled.

Merdilen couldn't die here. He maybe had gotten himself into yet another conflict too big for his own good, but failing wasn't in the plan. He still had to return to his real world.

His vision was going black. He could feel his consciousness fading away. He still had *some* air left –if not he would’ve passed out already. So he allowed himself to let out a slight grin.

“Because...” he whispered, reaching out with his hand until he could almost touch Harkatronic’s confused face, “you can’t.”

He could only Shardbend solid matter that had never been alive. So, within range as he was, he transformed Harkatronic’s hair grease into osmium as well.

Harkatronic arched backward with a shout, feeling his very hair pull down his head with unfathomable strength. Merdilen stumbled to his feet, catching his breath.

“It was a good fight,” he muttered, and kicked the desperate Harkatronic in the stomach.

Having lost all sense of composure, Harkatronic misstepped, falling down the mountainside and into the mist below. This time, he didn’t return.

For Everyone Who Ever Believed

Tham ran until he felt he couldn't run anymore, until his legs felt like jelly, until his breathing hurt and his head swam. But he reached the opening in the rocky wall. It was clear of soldiers.

The now-open hallway, burrowing deep into the mountain, was barely lit by a few torches here and there, their fire firmly waving up and down in unison.

Metal doors lined up on both sides of the hallway, each containing a number. How on Athoren was he meant to find out which cell held Kayden? Catching his breath, standing on the threshold to the prison, the realization hit Tham that he was in *deep*. Sneaking into a high-security imperial site... A few months ago, Tham would've laughed at the thought.

He paused for a moment. He had to make sure that whatever—

"Oh?" a deep female voice from behind him said. "An intruder?"

Tham spun, eyes wide, to see a ten-foot-tall armored woman crouching just outside the opening in the mountain, staring at him as if catching butterflies in a field.

Tham froze.

The vial. He remembered what the girl from earlier had told him.

"Take this," she'd said. *"I think you'll need it."*

The giant woman watched him intently, as if studying him. Or... recognizing him.

"You," she finally said. "You let my brother die."

"...What?" Tham whispered.

He then remembered.

The giant man's expression turned from annoyed laughter to fear as the weight and hardness of the stone pulled him down into the ground. He hit the floor hard, and was unable to stand back up.

"He *died*?" Tham asked, disturbed. And Kayden and him were recognized in the chaos?

"He couldn't take the sudden release of power," the woman said monotonously. "He didn't make it. And neither will you."

Tham broke into a sprint toward the depths of the mountain as the woman smashed through the remaining rocks covering the opening in the wall. He barely noticed the place getting darker as he ran for his life, not daring to look behind. But not even half a minute passed before the hallway in the rock opened up into a massive, deep chasm, split only by a stone bridge.

He skittered to a stop as the woman, wreaking through the hallway ceiling, came to a halt a few feet in front of him, oversized mace grabbed hard in her hands and a bloodthirsty smile on her face.

Now what?!

"I can't die here," Tham whispered, terrified.

Just like with the beowolves, so long ago, back near his village. A tiny part wanted to believe that Kayden would come dashing out of some metal door and save him once more, but... he knew he couldn't rely solely on others anymore.

He clutched the vial the girl had given him hard in his hand.

"Your mother will be proud."

Tham knew Kayden's faraway words to be true.

"You shouldn't be forced to grow up yet. But, truth is, your world has changed. And there are some truths grown-ups just need to face."

There were some journeys grown-ups just needed to face.

"Your mother is a Spacebender. Someone who can bend space to their will. One of the two most powerful types of Lawbender. That means... you're a Spacebender too."

His time had finally come.

"I won't die here," Tham said, raising his voice in confidence. "I won't die here! I'm really sorry about your brother, but you won't take my life for his. You want to kill me so badly?"

He extended his arms to his sides, taunting her, forcing out a grin. "Come and get me."

And then he stepped back, dropping himself onto the chasm.

He had no idea what he was doing. But he did it anyways.

The giant woman flew to the edge, furiously trying to catch him herself before he slammed against the bottom.

How deep was this anyway?

Tham grabbed the vial of power with both hands, gravity slapping him and pulling him down into the depths of Athoren.

I will reach a Skyland and tell my story in verse. This is for everyone who ever believed.

The giant woman, frustrated but determined, jumped down toward his falling body. Good.

What if--? No. Just do it.

Tham uncorked the vial, bringing it up to his mouth.

I choose to believe.

A current of compressed air shot straight into Tham's lungs, filling his every vein.

And then, his eyes flashed white.

Now Spacebend.

* * *

"We're gonna be *saved*!"

Hassah of Madron made her declaration of victory and raised her fist in the air. Around her, what remained of her family kept silent. The slave camp's ragged tent leaked in moonlight as the only source of illumination.

"Hassah, my dear," her grandma said slowly, sitting on the tent's only chair. "Haven't you deceived yourself too much already?"

Hassah pursed her lips, downhearted. Her parents and uncle were silent.

“Won’t you at least ask how?”

“The longer you expect, the sicker your heart grows.”

“You really have lost all hope, haven’t you?” Hassah said softly.

“The more you live, the less you hope.”

“Stop trying to *lecture* me!” she said. “Just stop. You’ll see. Empires rise and fall. If you’d read the history books I lent you... you’d know no tyranny lasts forever!”

Her grandma didn’t reply. Though she still tried, she knew better than to argue with Hassah when it came to matters of hope. But Hassah believed. She’d seen the blond man’s power when fighting that imperial warrior. She’d seen the determination in the boy’s eyes. She’d listened when he said he’d save them all.

“I’m just glad that means the soldiers are leaving us alone for a bit,” her uncle said with thick, unfiltered southern accent, lying on the ground with eyes closed. “Doubt it’ll last long, though.”

Hassah’s heart skipped a beat. He was right. There were way too many imperial soldiers in Unbadda. Those two had no chance against them.

“I gotta do something,” she muttered.

“Hey,” her mom cut her off, standing between her and the exit of the tent. “You’re not going anywhere, girl.”

“But I need to help!” she demanded.

“Listen to your mother,” her dad said. “We don’t want any more trouble. We can’t lose you too. There’s nothing you can do.”

Hassah hesitated. She breathed in deep and spoke.

“I’m gonna become a musician and play music from the Humans of Old, you know. I can’t do that here. But, don’t worry.” She grinned. “I’ll come back for you all.”

“Agh,” her grandma complained. “She’ll make her choice. Let her go. But, Hassah, girl. If you do... Be ready to die.”

* * *

Kayden was desperate.

Had that distant voice been Tham? What was the *earthquake* smashing through outside? He couldn't hold it any longer.

"Tham!" he shouted. "You okay?! Tham... over here! Here I am! Tham! Anyone!"

Small tears filled his eyes as he shouted his lungs out.

"Tham! Mimicker! Someone!"

Bakor would've known what to do.

I can't take this anymore!

"Help!"

His breathing quickened. He could feel his heart racing. He could smell his own death.

And then, footsteps. Inside the dark cell. Heavy, hard breathing.

"...Man, it's dark in here," Tham's voice said.

"Tham?!" Kayden said, surprised. He breathed out in relief, blinking out tears. "What are you-? ...I'm so glad you're here."

"Kayden, can you hear me?" Tham asked.

"We're here, Kayden!" the Mimicker called out. "We're here to save you."

Kayden couldn't see anything, except for... two eyes shining white, blinking and looking around in the darkness.

"...Tham?" he asked. "Is that you?"

The eyes turned toward him. "Yeah, yeah! There you are."

"You can see me?" Kayden said. "What's with your eyes? What's going on?"

The eyes -Tham, probably wielding the Mimicker- approached him, and a few precise slashes later, his shackles split, and he dropped to the ground. He couldn't see a thing in this darkness. Curiously enough, that meant the door hadn't opened at all.

"Okay, hold on," Tham said. "Grab the Mimicker. This is gonna be a little weird."

Tham grabbed Kayden's arm, and an instant later, they were standing on a torch-lit hallway, a faraway hole in a wall leading out into the dark night.

"I did it," Tham, now in Kayden's sight, said, his eyes still shining white. "I'm a Spacebender now. I beat a really tall woman, and now here we are." He grinned. "Saving *you*."

"...Whoa," was all Kayden could say before Tham rushed toward him and hugged him tight.

"I missed you, man," Tham said.

"Me too!" the Mimicker added.

"Yeah," Kayden said, returning the embrace. "I missed you guys too. ...I'll need a *lot* of explanations, though."

"Yep," Tham nodded. "We've got some new friends, it seems. But, first... let's get out of here. We probably haven't got long."

"You're the boss," Kayden said. "Where to?"

Tham rushed down the hallway as Kayden followed close behind.

Kayden could see Tham starting to wear down, the glow in his eyes fading. Whatever effect he had ingested, it was fading away. But Kayden knew the powers would stay. He smiled to himself. They always grew up so fast. He was so proud of Tham.

Kayden himself was exhausted too, lacking air, starving, and weakened. But he couldn't stop now.

From the opening in the wall they emerged right on time to see what had to be a full legion of imperial soldiers waiting for them just outside, weapons at the ready, dark against the night. Kayden, Tham, and the Mimicker were high up on the slope, but it only helped to make him dizzier. Lauren –the Everbender– was nowhere to be seen, but this was way too much nonetheless.

"...You said we had some new friends?" Kayden asked as they both stood on the threshold, petrified.

"Yeah," Tham said. "Merdilen should be somewhere around–"

A half-conscious blond man dressed in a black coat landed stumbling in front of them from somewhere above in the

mountain. He made a thumbs-up gesture back toward them even as he struggled not to fall to his knees, looking over at the legion of soldiers.

“I’m...”

The rest was incomprehensible.

“Kayden, Merdilen. Merdilen, Kayden,” Tham introduced, trying to ease the fear.

“In the name of the Empire of the Shattered Sky of Athoren!” a soldier called out from among the ranks. “Timeless and company! Surrender and you will receive an honorable execution and burial!”

Kayden sighed, his mind racing. “Why can’t it ever be easy?”

They had to do *something*. But what?

The legion of soldiers all readied their weapons with thunder of a sound. “You have five seconds to—”

A female scream pierced the battlefield.

A loud, shrill scream, as high as the human voice could get. So loud, the ground started *vibrating*.

Most of the soldiers, the ones farther away from Kayden, Tham, the Mimicker, and Merdilen, covered their ears, letting go of their weapons.

“What on Earth?” Merdilen whispered, still struggling to catch his footing.

“A marrmaid?” Kayden asked.

“No,” Tham said. “It’s her. Over there.”

Kayden looked over to where Tham was pointing. The tall watchtower seemed to have line of sight over half the camps, and atop it, he could see a dark dot against the night.

“You recognize that dot?” Kayden asked.

“Yeah,” Tham said. “I just know it. It’s the girl who gave me the vial that triggered my powers. It’s a distraction.”

“...Well,” Kayden said, “that’s great, but for what? I can’t think of anything.”

Merdilen was staring over to the left, to the east, to where the sun was starting to rise. “For *that*.”

A thundering roar crossed the world.

Deep and rough, loud and extended. A dragon's roar.

"Holy moly," Tham said.

"We know that guy," Kayden added.

A massively-long red dragon. A wingless red dragon.

He was coming straight for them, smashing through houses and buildings, slamming soldiers into the rock and burning watchtowers to the ground with his fire.

"*Dragon!*" a sentry sounded the alarm. The soldiers clearly had no idea what to do.

From their high vantage point, the four of them could see the dragon making his way at a high speed through everything in range. But he wouldn't be able to get up to them –he was way too big to climb.

We're so high up, Kayden couldn't help but think. His head started swimming from the mere thought. He took a shaky breath and focused on not looking down.

"We jump on three," he said to the others with determination. "It's trust or die now."

The dragon approached, the draconic roar intensifying as the female scream died out. It dashed straight toward below their position, faster than expected for a dragon his size.

"Okay, uh, three-two-one!" Kayden shouted in quick succession.

And then, he closed his eyes, and they jumped.

Arrows flew as they crossed the sky. Arrows... and something else.

Kayden's stomach lurched as he was pulled away from the dragon by an invisible force, shooting him toward the rocky ground far below as if gravity had decided he'd gone too far.

"Kayden!" he heard Tham shout from far above.

Harkatronic?!, he thought during the split second in which he crossed the air faster than ever before. *No. Someone stronger.*

Kayden regressed time on himself before hitting the surface, only to find himself tackled in mid-air by none other than Lauren. The Everbender had her lower face covered in a metallic

mask still, her unimpressed eyes the only tinge of expression Kayden could see. She slammed him down into the ground, way too fast.

He screamed as several important somethings cracked inside his body, smashed as he was between the Everbender's superpowered weight and the rock surface.

"I won't let you get away that easily," Lauren told him as he coughed blood to the side. "Where's the art in that?"

Kayden regressed time by a second, and he fell again, atop Lauren's back this time. Lauren's lack of reaction as he lept to the side unsettled him, but there was no time to think about that now.

She looked at him.

"I'm the Everbender," she said, "because I mastered all Lawbending branches. Do you still think you can get away from me?"

Kayden glanced to the side and grinned.

"Not alone."

The moon was high enough in the sky for it to light up their faces. The dust from when they slammed onto the ground was settling. And, as Lauren unsheathed her blade, he vanished.

It took several seconds for Kayden to understand as he suddenly popped up atop the dragon, but he grabbed onto whatever scales he could and wished for the best. Behind him, Tham and Merdilen were holding on too, and the Mimicker was safely sheathed on Kayden's back.

Behind them, Lauren burst into action, soaring through the sky toward them with a shrill scream.

Kayden had never felt such overwhelming speed as the dragon shot away. He couldn't say a word, but he heard Tham shout.

"Turn left! We need to save the girl!"

"Too dangerous!" the dragon's deep and resounding voice called back. "The Everbender's catching up!"

Kayden hesitated for a moment. But he trusted Tham.

"Do it!" Kayden said.

The dragon lurched to the left, toward one of the few remaining watchtowers, where a dark-skinned girl with green eyes was standing on its highest platform, looking with fear but determination down at the climbing hordes of imperial soldiers.

“She’s too high up!” Merdilen said.

“Just go!” Tham exclaimed.

They approached the watchtower.

You can do it, Tham, Kayden thought, clutching the dragon’s scales hard.

As the girl jumped from the top of the watchtower with her eyes shut tight in an utter leap of faith, Tham disappeared for a second, reappearing a moment later with her in front of him in the dragon. The wingless dragon didn’t for a moment stop his run.

“You all good back there?” Kayden shouted.

“I think so!” Tham gasped.

The Everbender –Lauren– was almost to the dragon’s tail. So the dragon spun around, spewing a long and sustained column of fire at her. When he resumed his race, she was nowhere to be seen.

“Heh,” Merdilen said. “He killed her.”

“No,” Kayden replied. “She can heal by Timebending. But she won’t be able to reach us anymore –her air is limited too.”

His heart was beating fast. Why, he wondered.

And then, Tham shouted.

“Mom!”

His voice got lost among the chaos. But the girl grabbed his shoulder, and his next words erupted like a volcano throughout the city of slaves.

“I know you’re somewhere in Unbadda, mom. I can feel you!” Tham declared. “We didn’t manage to save you this time. But, no matter how long it takes... I promise we will! I, your son, will rescue you, we’ll finish the Grinnin’ Inn together, and then we’ll party for a week! So don’t...” His voice caught in his throat. “*Don’t lose hope*, mom! Just *hold on*! This is a promise, so don’t forget!”

Kayden smiled to himself. Yes. They would save *everyone*.

“Let’s get out of here,” the dragon then said, seemingly as much to the others as to himself, as he smashed through Unbadda’s outer wall and ran into the wilderness. “...Aoyume Knights.”

* * *

“You failed.”

Harkatronic struggled to steady his breathing as the Everbender approached him among the debris. He paused from ripping his hair out. Never before had he faced an enemy so deseperating as the feeling that the rock was fusing with his scalp.

He glared at her.

“So did you. And even a fool could’ve realized you didn’t give it your all.”

“It isn’t time yet. Kayden Almerth may still be of use to awaken the King in Blue. And watch your mouth; I’m still your Empress.”

“Then how’d I fail?” Harkatronic shouted. “Did you want to kill them or not?”

“Kayden Almerth must live for now. The others should have died.”

Harkatronic was furious. Not only had he lost another warhammer, but his hair had been ruined forever. What for? The Everbender’s nonchalant attitude was pissing him off. He forced himself to breathe in and out several times. He couldn’t afford to lose his position in the Empire. After all, he needed to become Emperor one day. He had to prove his father right. So he had to keep his cool.

“Your father would’ve succeeded,” the Everbender added.

Harkatronic felt a chill run down his spine. “What... did you say?”

“Lord Harka always gets the job done.”

He had trouble keeping his breath steady. “You know my dad?”

She shrugged. “Maybe. Do I?”

“Stop playing with me.”

“Or what?”

He hesitated.

“Good,” the Everbender said. “Stand down. Don’t forget you’re my dog. Just like your father.”

Something inside Harkatronic snapped. He Gravitybent toward his hand a long and thin metallic pillar from the wreckage left behind by the dragon. He grabbed it without taking his bloodshot eyes off from the ruler of the world.

“Don’t you *dare* badmouth my dad,” he growled.

“The moment you strike that weapon against me,” she told him. “I’ll be forced to act in self-defense. Even if you survive, you’ll be labeled an enemy of the empire forever. Attempted regicide. Are you strong enough for that?”

Harkatronic paused. He was trembling with rage.

“Come on,” she added. “I’m sure you are.” Her voice lowered to a conspirational whisper. “Truth is, I want to fight you too. I got the urge. But, if I am to keep my reputation, I can’t attack first.”

Harkatronic gritted his teeth.

She wants to kill me, he thought. She’s looking for an excuse to destroy me. I can’t succumb to her tricks!

The Everbender raised a finger to her lips. “Let’s see... What can I say that will tick you off?”

I should leave, Harkatronic thought. He should get away. This was getting dangerous.

“You’re a Harkasonne, right?” she then said. “Your codename riffs off your last name.”

He didn’t reply. What was she getting to?

“Well, do you remember the kid who tried to face off against your soldiers in Stumpborn Village? The one who was with Kayden when I captured him here in Unbadda? The kid who helped him *escape*?”

Harkatronic’s heart sped up.

“His name is Thamlar Harkasonne,” she said. “And you’re going to kill him.”

Lauren dipped her brush in Harkatronic's dead body.

A shame he'd lasted so little against her. She was really looking for a challenge. At least it had for now satisfied her urge.

Urge...

She forced the word out of her head as she got back to painting the mural of red flowers with Harkatronic's blood. She was working on the side of a wall that had fallen onto some imperial soldiers during the dragon escape, as if the flowers had bloomed from the soldiers' bodies. It looked pretty.

Her brush flew along the rock canvas with such precision and expertise she might as well be a professional painter instead. Her Timebending helped for when she messed it up, as did her Gravitybending for reaching the taller bits of the wall. She smiled as she polished the final thorns of the farthestmost flower.

Now what?, she then thought.

The emptiness of fleeting clarity made Lauren's smile crack and fade away.

This art means nothing.

She took a step backward.

Shut up, she told herself. *Please don't do this again.*

She couldn't stop the void.

Why... am I doing this? All of it. What's even the point anymore?

...I gotta keep my condition at bay. My... addiction. Avoiding it would kill me.

So is my life worth more than that of others?

No. I'm not thinking clearly. It's late; my thoughts are muddled.

What is my life worth?

Nothing. Your life's worth nothing, Lauren. You're no more than pain and suffering. For yourself and others. You don't even understand your own mind. No one will come to save you, you know. You killed that chance.

Then why... am I still alive?

Why?

Why?

Lauren didn't know how long passed as she stared on her knees at the mural of blood flowers. No one came looking for her. No one tapped her shoulder to see if she was okay. She didn't cry. Her eyes were empty.

Eventually, slowly, she got to her feet.

"I..." she whispered, "will one day appear in history books as the world's greatest artist to ever live. For that... I must stay alive."

The Aoyume Knights, One More Time

“Okay, I’ll start. My name is Kayden Almerth, and I’m, uh... about 233 years old.”

Kayden stood in the midst of the circle as if presenting himself at a new school, with Tham, the Mimicker, the new guy, the new dragon, and the new girl settled around him. This forest clearing, far from Unbadda and into the countryside, was actually a pretty nice stop, to catch their breath and plan their next move.

“I don’t really remember my life because I lost my memories due to my constant time regression on myself to keep myself alive through an eternal imprisonment,” he continued. “...Therefore my age. But what I *do* know is that I was part of the Aoyume Knights of old. I’m the Timeless. I’m currently on a quest with Tham and the Mimicker here to save his –um, our– village from the Empire of the Shattered Sky. Oh, and topple it as well. The Empire, I mean.” He winced. “...That’s the plan, at least. I’m a Timebender, by the way. I will find the Megalo Sky, whatever it is. I have a hunch that it’s the key to saving the future from the evil of the Empire.”

Silence. He sat back down.

Apart from Tham and the expresionless Mimicker, the new guy, lying on the grass, seemed interested but not impressed and the new dragon, his long serpentine body struggling to find a comfortable spot among the trees, just nodded slowly, but the new girl’s emerald eyes showed a curiosity and wonder Kayden admired.

Tham got to his feet, clearing his throat.

“Cool. I’m Thamlar, but everyone calls me Tham,” he started. “I’m fifteen years old, and I was a carpenter’s apprentice until Kayden fell from the sky near our village and turned everything upside down.” Tham let out a slight smile. “It’s kinda strange. I know my whole village will... suffer... if we don’t succeed, but it’s like I’m sorta enjoying some aspects of all this. This big adventure. I’ve been to strange places, I’ve met new people, and I’ve done stuff I would’ve never thought possible. I *will* get my village back, safe and sound, and I *will* get them home, but after that’s done...” he looked over at Kayden. “I think I could actually get used to this adventuring thing. Oh, and I’m a Spacebender now. I will reach a Skyland and tell my story in verse.”

Kayden smiled. He made a thumbs-up gesture to Tham as he sat back down and the blond guy with black coat whose name Kayden didn’t remember got up and stepped to the center.

“All right,” the guy said, grinning. “The name’s Merdilen. Merdilen Arthenmon. I’d actually been thinking about how to tell you guys my story. Spoiler: it’s great.” Kayden wasn’t impressed. “You will all know it to the full at the proper time. I’m twenty-two years old, and I’m honestly pretty confused as to what this world is. I’ve still got the working theory that I died and it’s an afterlife, but... I don’t know. You guys seem real. I... am a Shardbender. I can deconstruct and reconstruct solid matter to my liking, as long as it keeps its mass.” A short pause. It did seem to serve its dramatic effect on Tham and Hassah. “I vowed to one day see my friends from the living-actual-whatever-other-world again. I won’t stop fighting until I’m back with them.”

The dragon spoke with its massively deep voice. “We’ve got some big shots here, it seems.”

“This is so cool,” the girl said as if in a daze. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

Tham smiled, looking at her. “You haven’t heard the half of it.”

She smiled back.

“Haroken, at your service,” the dragon then said from his spot. “I’m thousands of years old, I believe. I used to be great. But,

since the empire of sky pirates that killed my people took my wings, I've been forced to live in hiding. I inhabited the Valley of Broken Statues in shame until Kayden, Tham, and the Mimicker saved me from my self-exile. For that I'll be eternally grateful. I'll help them in whatever quest they may have. And if the Tunisie Storm strikes again, I'll fight back."

"Hey, I'm about that old too!" the Mimicker, in sword form, said.

The girl flinched. "You can talk?! I thought you were a sword."

"I'm a Sword," the Mimicker corrected. "Capital 'S.' A Capital Sword, as we're called. I'm the Mimicker, and I've been through a *lot*. I've had hundreds of owners –even though I don't like the word– and was kept for centuries in a secret vault under the prison where Kayden was. He saved me, and even before I went mad! I couldn't believe it. He's actually a pretty cool guy! Even though he didn't really care about me in the beginning. He's gotta be one of the Top 10 adventurers that have ever owned me, that's for sure."

Kayden grinned. "Let's make it up to Number 1."

"...Wow," the girl said.

"What about you?" Tham asked her.

She stood up. Only now did Tham notice how ragged her clothing was, how malnourished and poor she looked. His heart sank. Even so, she looked happy.

"My name is Hassah, and I'm sixteen," she said with a smile. "I'm a Soundbender and historian-in-progress. I will one day become a musician and play the melodies of the Humans of Old. Before I helped you with the distraction, though, I hadn't used my powers in years. It was too risky. But I now regret not fighting back. My home, the village of Madron, was ransacked by a marching Imperial army about a year ago now. They were short of slaves for their Airtronic mines, so they took us." She winced at the memories. "...The past year, I managed to sneak a single Airtronic vial out into the camps, wishing to one day use it to save my family. Half I gave to Tham, and the other half I used on myself for

the distraction. And I don't regret it." She looked around at the group. "Because you all will save everyone, right? The whole Unbadda slave site will be set free. I believe in you."

Kayden got to his feet. "That's right. We're gonna save *everyone*." He believed that too. "But for that, we need a plan."

The next hour or so they spent compiling everything they knew that could help, keeping themselves busy. Kayden couldn't help but notice how willing everyone was to trust in each other –who knew how long had passed since each of them had last been able to believe?

They were all exhausted –most of them hadn't slept at all last night. But their discussion didn't for one moment mention any sort of rest, instead focusing on what to do next. They weren't ones to give up anymore. They were the Aoyume Knights now.

"...All right," Kayden finally said, pointing with a stick at the labyrinth of drawings and words on the dirt. "So, to summarize. As of now, we have no external help." He looked up at the rest of them. "It's us against the world. But that won't be enough for what we need to do. So there are two possible paths we may take. One; we head south, for the land of Anthal. We get as much information as possible –about how the Airtronic mines actually work, about the mentioned Megalo Sky, and with what we learn, strike back. Two; we head north, in the search for the rebel cell we've all heard of: the Libertatum Brotherhood. We get their help to attack the Airtronic mines, and then somehow work with them to keep everyone safe and do whatever we need to do next."

"So, I think it's pretty obvious," Merdilen shrugged. "There's no way we'll be able to achieve *anything* without–"

"Help," Hassah said.

"–information," Merdilen finished.

Awkward silence.

"We need information," Merdilen explained, "to know what we're fighting and what help we need. We need details, not ideas."

"But we need help," Hassah replied, "because we can't do any of this alone. We need all we can get on our side."

“...Okay,” Kayden said. “Maybe the best move would be to split the party, and—”

“No,” Tham shook his head. “We’re not splitting up.”

Kayden looked at him with curiosity.

“We just barely joined up,” Tham continued. “We need to be strong together. We need to build our trust as much as we can before we split up. We need to do this together, because we need each other.”

“The kid’s got a point,” Haroken the dragon said.

“We need to do both!” the Mimicker then called out. “We need the information to get the Libertatum Brotherhood to help us.”

Everyone looked at it, now in the shape of a sword half-buried in the ground.

“Haroken,” Kayden then said. “How fast do you think it would take you to reach Anthalopus, the capital of Anthal?”

Haroken grinned with a full display of his draconic teeth. “How fast can you stand?”

“...Well,” Kayden said, “there we are. We’ll leave for Anthalopus in the morning. Today, we get supplies, plan ahead, and rest. Get ready, you all.” He grinned too. “We didn’t succeed in saving the Airtronic mine slaves on our first try. But there’s no stopping us now.”