

THE LEGEND OF
ZELDA
The **Minish Cap**

The logo is a monochromatic, stylized design. At the top, the words 'THE LEGEND OF' are written in a small, simple font. Below this, the word 'ZELDA' is rendered in a large, bold, serif font with a thick outline and a drop shadow. A sword is positioned behind the letters 'L' and 'D'. Below 'ZELDA', the words 'The Minish Cap' are written in a smaller, rounded, sans-serif font. A Minish cap is placed over the letter 'h'. A sword is also positioned behind the word 'Cap'. The entire logo is set against a background that looks like a piece of paper with a torn bottom edge.

BY LINCOLN REIGN

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PROLOGUE **LEGEND OF THE PICORI**

A long, long time ago...

when the world was on the verge of being swallowed by shadow...

the tiny Picori appeared from the sky, bringing the hero of men a sword and a golden light.

With wisdom and courage, the hero drove out the darkness.

When peace had been restored, the people enshrined that blade with care.

Though without a hero to wield it...

they used it as a key to seal away the darkness once more.



CHAPTER 1

THE PICORI FESTIVAL

The home of the Smith was a small wooden hut just to the south of Hyrule Castle Town. It was a simple place, but one which got many visitors.

Visitors such as Hyrule's very own, Princess Zelda.

As she walked up the dusty cobblestone path she could hear the sounds of the Smith forging yet another master piece. The clashing of hammer against sword rang even as far as the castle town's drawbridge, if you listened close enough.

The closer you got to the house however, the louder it got, so Zelda doubted the Smith would even hear her knocking. Yet she tried anyway, and to her surprise the hammering stopped.

"It's open!" the Smith yelled from inside. A moment later, she could hear him getting back to work.

Zelda entered the little house, peeking her head around the corner into the side room. "Good morning, Master Smith!" she said cheerfully.

The Smith looked up from his sword, not expecting to be greeted by Zelda this early in the morning. "Goodness me!" he exclaimed. "Princess Zelda! Did you sneak out of the castle and come all this way alone? The minister is sure to be worried about you! You know how he gets!"

"Oh, don't worry about him," Zelda told him, fully stepping into the room. "He'll be fine. Where's Link? The whole town is bustling for the annual Picori Festival! I thought he and I might go together. Would you mind terribly?"

The Smith sat his sword down and looked at her directly. "Oh, is *that* what you're here for?" he asked suspiciously. "Well, Link was up late helping me last night, and he's still asleep... But I do have an errand at the castle... Yes, that should be fine."

He looked up at the ceiling. "Link, time to get up!"

...

Link snored, sound asleep and dreaming of golden octorocks.

"*Link!*" the Smith yelled from downstairs. "*Get up!*"

Link startled awake, hitting his head on the board above him. He blinked away the dreariness, not ready to be awake yet as he stumbled out of bed. His foot caught in the blankets, Link quickly grabbed a tunic out of the open dresser nearby and rushed downstairs.

Still buckling his tunic, Link burst through the door into the living area. "I overslept I'm sorry!" he exclaimed, tripping as he made his way towards the side room. "What's wrong!?"

Link froze in the doorway as he saw Zelda standing by the anvil. "Oh, hi Zelda!" he smiled, waving.

Zelda waved back. "Hey!"

"She'd like to know if you'd join her at the festival," the Smith explained.

"Yeah Link," Zelda beamed. "Come on! Master Smith already gave me permission to take you!"

The Smith sighed. "Yes," he nodded. "After all, the festival only comes once a year. Go on, have fun! And while you're there, you can do me a favor.

"Of course," Link bowed. "What is it?"

The Smith turned back to the anvil, picking up the sword he'd been crafting. "I just finished making this sword for the minister at Hyrule Castle," he said, looking at the blade. "I'd like you to deliver it to him."

He handed the sword to Link, who held it gently.

"That's the blade that will be presented to the winner of the competition, right?" Zelda asked.

The Smith nodded. "Yes, don't lose it," he added, pointing to Link. He moved to sit down in a chair, resting his tired back. "And watch over her, Zelda is still the princess of Hyrule. Don't let anything bad happen to her."

"Master Smith, quit worrying!" Zelda pouted. "We'll be perfectly safe." She grabbed Link by the arm, a bright smile on her face. "Come on Link! Let's go check out the festival!"

Before the Smith could say anything else, Zelda was pulling Link out the door.

Link and Zelda stepped off the drawbridge, and into Hyrule Castle Town. The festival music echoed through the streets as children ran around celebrating the Picori's arrival. It was an event that happened so long ago, but even the youngest of them still understood the meaning of

today.

If it weren't for the Picori, evil would be reigning over Hyrule. Thanks to the Picori, there was peace.

But for those that didn't understand what today meant, there was always the story teller who sat in the center of town. Various other vendors surrounded them as they taught children about the Picori.

"They are *small* creatures," the story teller said. "And they only appear to *good* children!"

It was interesting, but not what Link and Zelda wanted to see.

They made their way through the busy streets, bumping passed the hordes of people in their way, and at last they arrived at a fenced off area. The fence was low, just enough to let you know the area was off limits, since that was where the sword fighting tournament took place.

They were just in time to see the first round-- two knights stepping onto the dirt arena-- but Link and Zelda were soon pushed back by other people.

Link was a little annoyed that he didn't get to see the fight, but Zelda didn't seem to mind. Instead, she just led Link back through the little shops and games that were spread through the town. Eventually they stopped at a random drawing.

There were a couple of items to win so Zelda entered, drawing a numbered slip from a box.

Of course, she won automatically. Link doubted it was the right number, but when the Princess of your country enters the contest you don't exactly hand the prize to someone else.

If Zelda realized this though, she didn't show it. She just smiled and laughed as the vendor pointed out the prizes to her. A rupee, a heart shaped gem, and a small shield.

Of all of them, she picked the shield, handing it to Link. Link held it in the air victoriously, laughing with Zelda.

Then suddenly she stopped. "Oh! I almost forgot!" she exclaimed. "You have to take that sword to the Minister!"

"Oh right!" Link nodded, clipping the shield to his back and looking over his shoulder at the sword. It was just light enough that he'd forgotten about it in all the excitement.

Thanking the vendor that gave them the shield, Link and Zelda walked through the festival streets to the castle steps. The music slowly faded behind them as they entered the courtyards outside the castle doors. Tall bushes and statues rose around them, showing ancient knights and the passed King's family.

On the other side of the courtyard, they found the Minister, Potho, talking with some knights. The knights dispersed when the children arrived with the sword.

"Oh! Link!" Potho smiled, looking at the expertly crafted blade. "You brought the sword, did you?"

Link nodded. "Yes, fresh off the iron this morning!"

"Then, as minister to the Kingdom of Hyrule, I, Potho, accept this blade." He took the blade from Link and took a closer look at it before holding it at his side. "You came just in time. The award ceremony will begin soon."

Zelda bowed to Link as she stepped away. "I'm sorry, I'd better go," she told him. "I have to prepare for the ceremony. But I had a good time at the festival. Thanks for coming with me!"

"Any time!" Link waved as Zelda hurried up the steps into the castle.

"Since you're here, Link," Potho added. "Why don't you join us for the award ceremony?"

"No problem," Link bowed.



It took a little less than an hour for everyone from the town to file into the courtyard for the ceremony. Bright music started playing-- a sort of victory tune-- as the castle doors opened and the people cheered. A set of knights stepped into the light followed by a troop of fellow soldiers. The four in front carried between them, a box, with a sword embedded in it's lid. They walked to the center of the courtyard and held the box.

"Ah... the Picori Blade," Potho began. "It locks much evil away in that chest. The legend has it that, long ago, the Picori gave us this blade. Whoever wins the competition earns the honor of touching it."

The last of the knights exited the castle, and behind them came King Daltus of Hyrule, and Zelda now in a more elegant dress.

King Daltus raised his hands. "Let the award ceremony commence!"

"Vaati, champion of the competition," Zelda stated. "You may approach the blade!"

A young man stepped out of the crowd. He had silver hair and wore a blue cloak, a strange hat upon his head. As he came closer to the knights holding the sword... he laughed.

"To think things would go this well!" he said, his voice low. "The

Picori Blade and the Bound Chest spoken of in Hylian lore... The chest must hold that which I seek!" He looked directly at the knights, his eyes dark. "I'll relieve you of its contents now."

Before the knights could react, or even knew what to think, Vaati repelled them with some sort of dark magic. The crowd around him gasped in shock, some left altogether, and music came to a screeching halt, but Vaati only stepped closer to the Picori Blade. The rest of the knights stood their ground, protecting King Daltus and Princess, but they didn't know what to do against that kind of magic.

"Mmmm ah hah hahhah!" Vaati cheered. "Do not interfere with me... As victor, I've earned the right to approach the Picori Blade... I've been waiting for this moment!"

Vaati blasted a ball of dark energy at the sword, shattering the blade and opening the chest. The knights darted forward, even if they couldn't do anything, but the evil in the chest was expelled and threw everyone backwards, even knocking King Daltus away.

"Who are you?" Zelda exclaimed, stepping forward. "Why are you doing this?"

"Zelda," Link muttered, realizing he had to do something. He tried to step towards her, but Potho held him back.

"It's too dangerous," he told Link.

"The princess with the mystic aura..." Vaati growled, watching her. "... The power that was gifted to the people of Hyrule still flows within the veins of the ladies of its royal family? Interesting... If I leave you now, you'll only cause me trouble later. That will never do. To stone with you!"

Shoving Potho out of the way, Link jumped in front of Zelda, throwing up his shield as Vaati fired another ball of energy. It easily threw Link to the side, and struck Zelda.

Zelda turned to stone, as Vaati had said, face frozen in horror.

Link couldn't move either, the blast having been too strong. He lay limp on the ground, helpless as Vaati stood over the broken blade and the open chest.

"Heh hehheh heh..." Vaati laughed. "All who stand in my way shall share this fate! Now to find out what power awaits me in this chest!"

Link's eyes closed against his will, slipping into unconsciousness.

Chapter 1: The Picori Festival



CHAPTER 2

BY THE KING'S ORDER

Link blinked away the dreariness of sleep, rubbing his eyes.

Then he remembered what happened, and was on his feet before it even registered where he was.

"Oh, thank goodness!" a startled maid huffed. "You've awakened! Master Smith is here as well. He's come to see King Daltus."

Link rubbed his head, looking around at the large castle chamber. Apparently he'd been taken in after...

"Do you know what happened?" Link asked.

"We all do..." the maid said sadly. "It was sudden, but... The champion, he broke the blade and opened the chest, releasing the monsters within. After that, he seemed angry that there was nothing else, and he just... left."

Zelda turned to stone, as Vaati had said, face frozen in horror.

"And, and what of Zelda?" Link asked, feeling numb. "Is she okay?" He sat back down on the bed, looking at the shield Zelda won for him. It was sitting beside the bed, laying against the wall.

"... She...is with King Daltus," the maid answered. "They should be out in the throne hall as we speak."

Link nodded. "Thank you," he said, picking up the shield. He looked at the Pegasus design on it before strapping it to his back. He got to his feet again, bowed to the maid, and started for the throne hall.

The castle wasn't necessarily a maze, but it was a long walk from the resting chamber to the throne hall. Luckily King Daltus had such a loud voice that it was easy enough just to follow that. When Link arrived, King Daltus and the Master Smith were in mid conversation, but the Smith stopped abruptly when he noticed Link had entered.

"Oh, Link," the Smith said worriedly. "You're awake. Are you feeling alright?"

Link's face paled as he saw Zelda standing beside King Daltus. She was still trapped in stone, paralyzed, her scared expression carved permanently on her face. "Zelda... what happened?"

"Stand at my side," the Smith told him. "King Daltus is about to

answer that."

Link hesitantly stepped up beside the Smith and faced King Daltus who looked down at them from his throne.

"It is as you have heard, I'm sure," Daltus began. "A sorcerer named Vaati has cursed my fair Zelda and turned her to stone. If we had the sacred Picori Blade, we likely could have broken the curse." He looked passed them, a sad look in his eyes. "But Vaati..." He shook his head, forcing himself to stay composed. "However, I have not given up hope. What do you know about the Picori?"

"The Picori?" the Smith repeated. "Not much, beyond what the fairy tales say... They're supposed to be very tiny, if I'm remembering correctly."

"Yes, the ones from the fairy tales," King Daltus answered. "But the Picori are no mere legend. They most certainly exist. No one outside of the royal family knows the truth about them. The Picori, who forged the sacred blade, live deep within Minish Woods. They should be able to repair the broken blade and re-forged the sword."

"What!?" Potho exclaimed. "Then we must dispatch the soldiers there at once!"

King Daltus shook his head. "No, soldiers will not do," he explained. "The Picori do not show themselves to anyone but children. Our soldiers could search for days and still find no sign of them."

"I see," the Smith nodded. He looked at Link out of the corner of his eye.

Link caught his glance and stepped forward. "If that's the case, then why not send me?" he asked. "I should still be young enough to see them... right?"

King Daltus looked down at him, eyes narrowed. "If you have recovered," he said slowly. "Then yes, I would like to ask this of you."

Link bowed. "Then I accept."

King Daltus looked away from them for a moment. When he looked back at them, he leaned forward in his seat and lowered his voice. "Please, turn my precious Zelda back to normal," he said. "The Picori should know how to create a new sacred blade. It will be a dangerous journey, now that those monsters have been freed."

He motioned for Potho to step forward and the Minister handed King Daltus the sword the Master Smith had forged. Then King Daltus held the sword before him.

"Please, take this sword with you," King Daltus said. "Along with the broken Picori Blade."

Link knelt, taking the sword. As he stood he strapped it to his back under the shield, and stepped back to stand beside the Smith again.

King Daltus sat back in his throne, lacing his fingers. "Very well, then," he said. "I'll send the soldiers to search for Vaati at once."

Potho stepped forward, pulling out a map. "Deep within the Minish Woods, you will find a place called Deepwood Shrine. Once, Humans and Picori shared that shrine as a meeting place. I think it would be best if you started your search there."

He handed the map to Link and stepped back.

"I am counting on you Link," King Daltus added. "Only you can break Vaati's curse and free Princess Zelda."

Link took a step backwards, looking one more time at Zelda before turning to leave.

Chapter 2: By The King's Order



CHAPTER 3

THE WONDER HAT

Link followed the Minister's map out through the east exit of Hyrule Castle Town, but most of the path was blocked off by construction. It seemed Vaati had torn up part of the town on his way out, and they were trying to repair the damage.

It wasn't much of an inconvenience, but it was another reason for Link to hurry and repair the blade. Who knew what else Vaati would do if he wasn't stopped?

But he wasn't there yet. Step one was getting the sword fixed, and that meant finding that Deepwood Shrine first.

"And that is..." Link looked up from the map, staring at the trees that surrounded him. He'd followed the path the Minister drew, but the last discernible landmark was the bridge he just crossed. Now there were just trees, and no obvious path through.

Luckily, he didn't have to choose a vague direction and just walking. Unluckily however, was because he suddenly heard screaming coming from inside the forest.

"Helllllp!!!!" the voice screamed. "Help meeee!!!"

Link followed the yelling, pocketing the map and drawing his sword.

"Ouch!" the voice yelped. "Won't somebody stop them!? Ow! Ow! Help... Somebody! Can't anybody hear me?"

Link jumped out of the trees into a cramped clearing, several octorocks right in front of him. He skid to a stop, throwing up his shield as one of them spit a stone at him.

There were only three of them, so it shouldn't have been too hard, but he wasn't used to fighting this close to trees. He kept second guessing his moves, worried he'd get his sword stuck in the wood. Because of that, he took more damage than he should have before finally kicking away the last of them.

Sheathing his sword, sitting down, and catching his breath, he looked around for whoever was screaming for help. Yet... there was no one, just a hat lying on the ground.

Poor guy, Link thought sadly. I was too slow... again.

Suddenly the hat perked up and Link jumped to his feet.

"Hey! Kid! You there!"

Link held up his shield, eyes wide. The hat had eyes, two large round eyes, and a long beak that look like a cross between a duck's bill, and a pair of scissors.

"Well done!" the hat said. "That was close. Not that I couldn't handle them myself. But that's beside the point! What in the world is a lone child doing so deep in the woods?"

"I could ask the same of you!" Link muttered. "Weird... talking... hat."

The hat hopped a little and Link took an involuntary step away. "Relax kid," it told him. "I'm not gonna hurt you. Why are you here?"

"I'm looking for the Picori," Link answered. "At a place called the Deepwood Shrine."

"Ho ho! I see," the hat laughed. "And what for?"

"Er, a sorcerer, Vaati, turned the princess to stone."

"Vaati, you say?" the hat exclaimed.

"Yes," Link nodded. "Do you know where I could find them? The Picori? I need their help reforging the sacred blade."

The hat growled, focused on his own thoughts. "Vaati's cursed the princess, *and he's broken the sacred blade?!?*" he spat. "Is that so? I see, I see..." He looked up at Link. "You know, you and I have quite a lot in common. You see, I too, am on a quest to break a curse of Vaati's. And if you're reforging that blade, then maybe you can help me."

"Um, I guess-"

"Well, then you have yourself a companion, my boy!" the hat hopped a bit closer. "My name is Ezlo. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Link bowed awkwardly. "Link, uh, my name. Which way do we go then?"

"Just through that passage!" Ezlo pointed his beak towards a path just beyond the closed trees.

Link started for the path, squeezing between the trees.

"Wait!" Ezlo called. "Wait, I say!"

Ezlo slowly hobbled towards the trees. he used a great deal of effort to climb through those trees.

"You walk so quickly!" Ezlo complained, breathless. "Too quickly, in fact! Can't you go any slower? Surely you've noticed that I have no legs..."

"I'm not sure going as slow as possible will help anybody at this rate," Link said, staring down at Ezlo who was trying to pick a leaf off the brim of his hat body.

"You know what, you're right," Ezlo agreed. "In which case, I have an idea! Pick me up!"

Link cautiously picked up Ezlo, and the hat jumped onto his head.

"There!" Ezlo chuckled. "Now you can't possibly leave me behind. And a nice view too. Now, onward! The Shrine is that way!"

Link sighed, trekking through the woods as Ezlo pointed him in the right direction. He supposed he shouldn't complain now that he had someone helping him where to go, but Ezlo could've been a *bit* nicer with how he gave Link help.

When they reached a fork in the path, Ezlo bonked Link in the head to get him to stop. Accident or not, it kinda hurt.

"Hold on a moment, my boy!" Ezlo told him. "We've stumbled across something important!"

"I, what?" Link mumbled, rubbing his forehead. The only thing in this area he could see was an ancient tree stump with a crack in the center of it. "The stump?"

"Yes yes, the stump!" Ezlo said excitedly. "The world of the Minish is very small. You're far too big to meet them now."

"I thought you were going to take me to see the Picori," Link grumbled.

"Ah, yes! Allow me to explain..." Ezlo started. "You Humans call them 'Picori,' but they refer to themselves as the Minish! It's why this forest is called the Minish Woods! Anyhow, the village they built here is where we are headed. But if we're to enter the village, we'll have to make you a touch smaller first."

"Make me smaller?" Link asked, moving closer to the tree stump. "... I don't think I like the sound of that."

"Relax!" Ezlo order. "With my help, you can use that stump to shrink down to Minish size with ease! Just stand on top of it."

Link hesitated, but not wanting to get bonked in the head again, he stood on the stump, staring at the crack beneath him. Before he could ask how it worked, Ezlo started talking in some other language.

In an instant, brightly shining runes were spinning around them, floating through the air and Link felt himself hovering in the air with them. He was going to tell Ezlo to stop, but it was too late. Suddenly Link was tiny, barely bigger than an ant, and falling through the air. He screamed as he tumbled down into the crack in the stump.

It was so dark he didn't even see the giant mushrooms until he landed safely on top of them.

Well, he supposed they weren't exactly giant, he was just small enough that a normal mushroom was the size of a house.

He dropped down, falling from mushroom to mushroom until he was back on solid ground. And as soon as he had dirt beneath his feet again, he hurried out of the stump. Then he stopped dead as he saw the trees rising around him.

It was like being an ant in a world made for titans. The trees rose so high, he couldn't even see the tops of them anymore. Most of the grass was matted down, so he could at least work with that, and it wasn't too tall to see over in places it stood up, but seeing just how much ground he had to cover now was... discouraging.

"Welcome to the world through the eyes of the Minish!" Ezlo said proudly, startling Link out of his thoughts. "Now aren't you glad you saved me? No need to thank me though."

"I have a bad feeling about this," Link muttered.

"Come on!" Ezlo exclaimed. "We're almost there! Through that log and we'll be right in front of the village!"

Link followed where Ezlo was looking and saw an enormous log, half buried in dirt and roots. Mushrooms grew around it, and Link noticed that at this size it almost looked like some kind of grand entrance.

Maybe this won't be so bad, Link thought as he continued his journey across the Minish Woods.

Chapter 3: The Wonder Hat



CHAPTER 4

THE PICORI VILLAGE

Link stepped out of the log and onto a grassy path, the blades of grass stretching upward at rounded angles, creating a sort of tunnel. Along the path were thin vines wrapped around twigs, forming archways for you to follow as you made your way into the village.

It was made of simple things, like lost items they've claimed as homes, and carved wooden planks that to the people above would be nothing more than toothpicks.

Before Link could get a good look however, he found himself surrounded by strange creatures. They circled around him, looking up at him in excitement.

"Hmmm," Ezlo said thoughtfully. "It appears we have found the Minish Village."

Adorable, Link thought, laughing a little. *In an odd sort of way.*

"Pico Picori!" one said.

"Uh, er, hi?" Link chuckled.

The Minish stepped closer, jumping up and down like little kids. Perhaps they were, but Link couldn't tell. They spoke a few more words of their strange language, and ran away into the blades of grass.

"I gather it's been quite some time since they last saw a Human."

"Yeah," Link agreed. "And I gues we Humans only remembered them for what they could say."

"You mean to tell me you didn't understand what they were saying just now?" Ezlo scoffed, clearly offended.

"Well, no," Link answered. "Could you?"

"Ah, yes," Ezlo said sheepishly. "That was the language of the Minish. It's a little different from the dialect I am most familiar with. I'm afraid I didn't catch most of what they said myself."

"Maybe someone here understands *my* language," Link said, entering the village.

"Perhaps," Ezlo agreed. "We should look around."

Link nodded and started following the winding paths of the village. It was all hidden under the tall grass, and if anyone of normal size saw it

they'd think it was just a pile of discarded trash, but up close Link saw what interesting things the Minish could do with a Human's trash.

There were houses made of smashed barrels, broken pots, and tattered shoes. Some houses were even carved into mushrooms, or built in tiny dirt mounds. There were plenty of Minish just running around too, enjoying the tiny world they lived in.

They seemed to avoid Link though, regarding him as something strange and becoming weary as he came closer. To be fair, he looked nothing like them, and they had probably never seen a Human before. But Link felt they could be a *bit* more accepting, considering they looked nothing like him and it was the first time he'd seen any Minish.

Regardless, through wondering around the amazing mini village of the Minish, Link eventually found a crystal formation with a door carved into it. Perhaps it might have been a glass ornament to the Humans, or maybe rupees that the Minish formed and reshaped.

He stepped inside, his footsteps squeaking on the smooth floor. As the door shut behind him, Link noticed a slight figure standing on the other side of the chamber.

The scholar turned to Link, adjusting his makeshift glasses and taking a step closer to Link, investigating. "Hm," he said quietly. "I've never seen an outfit like that before. Are you a... Human?"

"Yes," Link nodded. "I am. My name is Link... You speak my language?"

"Oh my!" the Minish scholar grinned, seeming to disregard Link's question. "It's been quite some time since any Humans came here. My name is Festari. I watch the abby, as well as the shrine to the north."

"The Deepwood Shrine?" Link asked. "That's where I need to go. I need to repair the sacred sword."

"Sorry, but I know little about swords," Festari admitted. "I'm sure the elder can help you. He lives west of here if you would like to speak to him."

"Thank you," Link bowed, backing out the door as Festari turned away, already focusing on something else.

Link followed a narrow trail west, arriving quickly at a yellow mushroom home on a wooden ledge. He pulled aside the curtain door and peeked inside, seeing an old Minish sitting on the other side of the room, resting.

"Ah, it's been quite a while since we've heard outsiders set foot within our village," the elder Minish said softly. His eyes were still closed, and he looked to be sleeping, but he regarded Link as though he knew

where he was. "My name is Gentari. We have little to offer you in these woods, but please, enjoy your stay."

"Thank you for the offer," Ezlo said. "But we have no time to relax. My name is Ezlo, and this boy is Link."

"We need to break a curse that has been cast on the princess of Hyrule," Link added. "I need your help. We have to reforge the broken Picori Blade."

Gentari, stroked his beard, beady eyes opening slightly under his bushy eyebrows. "Hm... Well, if that's what you're after, you'll need four mystic elements," he explained, picking up a staff that lay beside him. He used it to help him sit up straighter, but he didn't stand. "These elements are the crystalline forms of the energies of the world. Only by infusing the blade with these energies can a new blade be forged."

"And where are they?" Link asked.

"The first is here, in the forest," Gentari answered. "Within the Shrine. The others are in similar shrines, hidden from the darkness, and protected. One is atop a mountain; another encased in ice; and the third amid the murky swamps. It is the Earth Element that rests here. Speak with Festari. He will show you the path to the shrine's entrance."

"Thank you," Link nodded. "I will."

"Go with caution," Gentari warned. "Evil creatures have lately made their home in our shrine. Then return to me at once after you have found the Earth Element."

Gentari waved as they left, resting once more.

Link closed the curtain to the mushroom and started back towards the abby.

"Well that was disappointing," Ezlo muttered.

"What do you mean?" Link asked.

"Now we're even further from the end!" Ezlo complained. "I was *hoping* we'd be able to reforge the sword, simple as that. But now we have to go around hunting the elements? My boy, we're in for a long and unhappy road."

"It's not so bad," Link assured him, coming up on the abby. "Could be worse."

"Oh?" Ezlo scoffed. "And how's that?"

"Could have a curse and no sword at all!" Link answered. "Then there'd be no fixing this."

Ezlo thought about it for a moment, but decided to stay quiet as they entered the crystal chamber.

"You have returned!" Festari smiled, seeing them. "Has the Elder

told you what you need to know?"

"Well he confirmed it anyway," Link nodded. "We need access to the shrine."

Festari narrowed his eyes, giving Link a skeptical look. "And the Elder allows this?"

Link nodded.

"... Very well," Festari said, stepping out of Link's way, deciding to trust that Link spoke the truth. "This way..."

Festari motioned to another door that was carved into the opposite wall from the entrance. The outline of it shone for a moment, and creaked open.

"Be careful," Festari warned. "It is quite dangerous."

"That's what they keep telling me," Link said, drawing his sword as he stepped into the light of the door. "Let's see if they're right."

Chapter 4: The Picori Village



CHAPTER 5

DEEPWOOD SHRINE

Link looked up at the large stone structure. It was a simple stone brick with slanted sides, and moss growing on and around it. He probably walked right passed it on his way here, and didn't even see it, but now he could see all the little carvings and details the Minish put into it. It was clear the Minish took great care of this shrine.

"So this is would be the Deepwood Shrine," Ezlo said, staring in wonder at the temple.

"Yeah," Link nodded. "And considering it's so small, I have a feeling those monsters that settled in are going to be huge!"

"He-hey now!" Ezlo chuckled nervously. "No reason to be afraid or anything... I'll be waiting right here." he jumped down from Link's head, keeping an eye on the shrine.

"You really want to be left alone out here?" Link asked.

"Yes!" Ezlo answered. Then he actually thought about it. "No, wait!"

Link put Ezlo back on his head.

"Just, be careful," Ezlo muttered. "And don't move around so much."

Link gripped his sword and shield, and entered the temple, and immediately stood corrected. The Minish took great care of the *outside* of the shrine, the *inside* was in complete ruins.

It might have been due to the monsters though, but still. Webs covered the ceilings, and walls were smashed in, and the tiles in the ground were almost all cracked or chipped. This place was old, *really* old.

And then he entered the next room.

Link stepped through a broken wall and stopped dead at the large barrel that was sitting broken in the middle of the room. It had smashed through the ceiling, but judging by the moss covering it, this had happened *years* ago.

Maybe it wasn't the monsters that did this, Link thought, stepping closer to the barrel. "Look at the size of that!"

"It's not that big," Ezlo reminded him. "We're just small,

remember?"

"... Right," Link mumbled. "I forgot for a second."

The barrel was blocking their way, but luckily the wooden planks were broken just enough for them to squeeze through. As they stepped inside though, it shook.

"What was that?" Link asked. "Is the barrel moving?"

"Sounded like something above us!" Ezlo answered.

"A monster?" Link hissed.

"I say it's the wind," Ezlo told him. "Er... let's keep going."

Link pressed on, exiting the barrel and moving into another chamber, the door broken off its hinges. And that's as far as he could go, considering the wide river that ran through the room.

"Now what?" Ezlo huffed. "I don't suppose you have a way to walk on water, do you?"

"Nope."

"Great."

Then they heard a scurrying noise behind them. Link gripped his sword and looked back out the door he came through.

"What was that?" Link asked.

"I don't know but I don't like the sound of it."

Link stood at the edge of the river, looking around the chamber. He didn't see any monsters, but... in the distance he thought he saw *something*.

He didn't move towards it, but it looked to be... a caterpillar. "Oh, it's just a caterpillar," Link sighed. "Harmless, right?"

"Not at this size," Ezlo hissed.

The caterpillar watched them, sitting in the barrel. It stood, tilting its head. Then it charged.

Link jumped out of the way as it sped towards him. He threw up his shield as it rolled passed them, spinning around to face him. It charged again, snapping and biting at him, coiling around the area.

Link tried stabbing it in the face, but that only managed to anger it. The caterpillar lashed out, it's tail slamming Link into a wall.

Staggering, barely keeping upright, Link was panicking.

"Link kill this thing already!"

"I don't know what to do!"

The caterpillar bit at him again, and Link almost got caught this time. He circled around it, ducking under it and slashing with his sword, but found himself nearly tipping over the edge into the water.

Then he had an idea.

Link threw a rock at it's head, even though it was already looking

at him.

"I said kill it!" Ezlo exclaimed. "Not anger it!"

Link jumped out of the way as the caterpillar charged again, stabbing it in the side of the head. It wasn't enough to kill it, but it was enough to offset it. He kicked the caterpillar, and it toppled into the water, drowning.

"There," Link huffed, plopping onto the ground and staring at the dead caterpillar blocking the flow of water. "Bridge."

"Interesting," Ezlo nodded.

—

After a few moments of rest, Link started looking through the rest of the shrine. Finally he arrived at what he figured was the chamber where the element was held. Considering it was one of the only doors still intact, and it was also carved more intricately than anything else.

"I think it's in there," Link said.

"Most likely," Ezlo agreed. "Though I doubt our troubles are over."

Link drew his sword again. "Probably not."

He opened the door, and saw the enormous Chuchu staring back at him.

Link slammed the door shut. "Nope!" he said. "Nope! Nope!"

"Was that... a Chuchu?" Ezlo asked. "Those things look *evil* at this size!"

"And I thought the caterpillar was big," Link muttered. "But even at normal size those oversized blobs of sentient goo always got on my nerves."

"Any ideas?" Ezlo asked.

"... It's got big eyes," Link decided.

"... Yes, yes it does," Ezlo agreed.

Link took a deep breath, and threw open the door. He darted forward, slashing at the waist of the Chuchu. The bulbous head of the monster fell over, but Link only managed to get one good hit in before it was back up again. Then Link had to roll away to keep from getting smashed as it brought its own head down on him.

"So much for that idea," Ezlo muttered.

"I got this," Link swore, trying again. He didn't get a chance to strike before he was hit and thrown back against a wall.

"Wait, I know these vines," Ezlo said, staring up at the vines that ran up the wall. The ceiling was cracked open, and the wall was broken

low, so it wouldn't be too hard to climb out through there. "Link, I have an idea!"

The Chuchu smashed his head into the wall as Link dodged again.

"I'm listening!"

"Those vines are bombplant vines!" Ezlo explained. "If you could find a bud small enough, you could grab it and-"

"Blow him up!" Link finished rolling away from the Chuchu as it crashed into the wall again. "Got it!"

Link led the Chuchu away from the vines before flipping back and slashing through its waist again. That gave him just enough time to make it back across the room and jump up the vines. By the time the Chuchu made it to the wall, Link was already out of reach.

He looked around for a small enough bud, but most of them were twice his size.

"That'll do," Ezlo told him. "If we could lead him up here."

"That would destroy the whole temple!" Link argued. "No, finding a small one is better."

He kept looking around, the Chuchu still bashing its head into the stone beneath him, causing the ground to shake. There weren't many bombs to choose from, but finally he settled for one just a little smaller than he was.

Link used his sword to cut it loose, and started rolling it back. Once he made it to the edge he looked down at the Chuchu. Part of him figured if he just let the monster continue attacking the wall it'd probably defeat itself, but when the Chuchu looked up at Link he realized that bashing its head probably didn't do all that much.

So, Link sparked his sword on the ground, lighting the vine fuse to the plant, and shoved it over the edge. It fell right onto the Chuchu, and sunk into its head.

It sat there for a moment, then suddenly the flame cut straight through the fuse and the whole thing exploded. Link barely had time to throw up his shield to defend himself before gooey guts were flung at him, but the blast also cracked the wall and caused Link to topple back down into the chamber.

He rolled onto his back, setting down his shield and groaning in pain. "That... could've gone better," he muttered.

"Look!" Ezlo exclaimed, flopping upright after having fallen off Link's head. "A door opened on the other side of the room!"

"Was it there before?" Link grunted, sitting up.

"Perhaps it was sealed with magic," Ezlo answered. "And the door

only shows itself when there's no danger."

"Well, alright then," Link said, putting Ezlo back on his head. "Let's check it out."

He passed through the door, and started down the steps that followed. It led him into a dimly lit, well crafted altar. In the center of the chamber was a curved pedestal, and sitting on top of it, was the Earth Element, the large window in the ceiling casting a bright light on it, causing it to glow.

Link picked it up and held it in the light.

One down... Three to go.

Chapter 5: Deepwood Shrine



CHAPTER 6 **SWIFTBLADE**

"So, you have found the Earth Element," Gentari mused, stroking his beard. "You are blessed with much courage and strength for one so young. If your conviction holds strong, head to Mt. Crenel. There you will find a man named Melari. Among the Minish, there is no one more able to repair your sword."

"He can reforge the Picori Blade?" Link asked.

"If you ask him," Gentari assured. "I have sent word to him in advance while you were away." He sat back in his seat, resting his staff beside him. "Travel safely. You are brave, but there are many evils now in the world."

"Thank you elder, we are in your debt."

Link stood at the end of the drawbridge, looking into Hyrule Castle Town. The celebrations were over, most of the citizens wanting to forget the attack that had happened that day. No more decorations hung from houses, and the people in the streets simply went about their day, trying to move on from seeing their kingdom's soldiers stricken down and their princess turned to stone.

He passed through silently, keeping his head down as he made his way to the western exit. That was the shortest path to Mt. Crenel... or at least it would've been if it weren't for the guard blocking the way.

"I'm sorry kid," the knight said. "I can't let you pass."

"But I need to go this way," Link explained. "Please, it's important."

"You're still a kid, so maybe you don't understand," the knight folded his arms, frowning. "When that sorcerer, Vaati, attacked the castle, a whole lot of monsters were released."

"Yeah, I know," Link said. "I was there."

The knight grimaced. "Yeesh, that must've been tough." He waved his hand dismissively. "Still, that doesn't make you capable of surviving out there."

"I've lasted this long!" Link corrected. "I've already gone through the forest, and I have orders from King Daltus to complete this quest. You

must let me pass!"

"Oh! King Daltus sent you?"

"Yes," Link nodded.

The Knight looked away from Link, rubbing his neck. "... Er, well then... I guess..." He shook his head, keeping his decision unchanged. "No. I'm sorry, I can't in good conscience send a kid out there; not without training."

"Training?"

The knight pointed down the road. "A few streets down there's a building," he explained. "All the knights are trained by him, or by his teachings. If you really think you can handle it, talk to him, then I'll see about letting you pass."

Link thought about how hard it was to fight that caterpillar, and the Chuchu... To be fair, he figured he needed training as well. "... Fine," he agreed. "Alright, but I'll be back."

As he hurried down the road the Knight called after him. "Good luck!" he shouted, but Link was already too far to hear.

It was an old wooden home that Link found belonged to the master swordsman. A few knights patrolling the streets pointed him in the right direction, but this wasn't what Link had expected.

Still, he cracked the door open, and entered the building.

"Hello?" Link called.

"This is a waste of our time!" Ezlo complained. "We should be heading for that mountain!"

"The only way through is that knight," Link reminded him. "If we don't train we don't pass."

"Only way my beak!"

"Who goes there?" a voice asked from inside.

There were small flames lit around the single roomed hut, a large carpet taking up most of the floor. As soon as the door shut behind Link, almost all light disappeared, and it took a bit for Link's eyes to adjust.

When he could see again, he saw the man standing at the far side of the room. It was clear he had been training by himself before Link entered, but he didn't seem tired in the least. How Link could tell the man had been training were the broken dummies still slowly rolling across the floor.

"What does one so young need of this place?" the man asked

harshly, glaring at Link.

"I am on a quest for King Daltus to break the curse put on Zelda," Link answered. "But in order to get to where I need to go, I need training."

The man walked towards him, taking long strides until he stood right in front of him, staring him down. "And why send a child in place of an already trained knight?"

And I thought the Chuchu was scary? Link thought, annoyed with himself. *Maybe I'm not cut out for this.*

And then he remembered why he was chosen.

"Knights can't see the Minish," Link answered.

The man glared at Link, then after a moment... smiled. He stepped back. "So you really have spoken to King Daltus," he hissed. "My name is Swiftblade."

He readied himself into a fighting stance. "Prepare yourself! If this quest is that important, I will not waste time with the basics! You will be trained like no knight ever was!"

"Starting to regret this," Ezlo muttered.

"Starting to agree," Link mumbled back, arms shaking as he held his weapon.

In the Deepwood Shrine, the only movement was the flicker of shadows as leaves passed over the window shining light into the chamber of the Element.

That is, until a figure appeared before the pedestal.

Vaati eyed the empty slate in front of him, his expression turning sour. It was gone. All his work in finding it... and it was *gone!*

"RAH! No! It should be here!" Vaati blasted the pedestal, sending shards of stone in all directions. "It took far too long to find this place... But there are still three others... And if someone else is collecting them, then..."

He turned away from this disappointment, and teleported back to where he came from.

"Again!"

Link threw his shield up right as Swiftblade's sword came down.

"Again!"

Link did the same maneuver again, exactly as instructed.

"Again!!!"

Swiftblade struck again, but this time when Link threw up his shield the sword slid over the shield's surface and Link was able to push the sword out of Swiftblade's hand.

"Incredible!" Swiftblade huffed, staring at his sword as it clattered to the ground. "... Such power... Tell me boy, where did you receive your training before this week?"

"My grandfather is a blacksmith," Link panted, sheathing his own sword. "I train with him from time to time... test the strength of the swords."

"Ah, I see," Swiftblade nodded, not even winded. "That blade, did your grandfather craft it?"

"Yes," Link answered.

"It is a strong blade," Swiftblade said. "Worthy of being wielded by a brave heart such as yourself."

"Thank you," Link bowed.

"Through these past few days I have taught you more than most knights know nowadays," Swiftblade continued. "Though you have courage to face this task that has befallen you, I still do not know if you will ever be truly ready."

He placed a hand on Link's shoulder. "However, you are still one of my most impressive students yet," he bowed. "It was an honor to be your mentor."

"It was an honor to be your student," Link said, bowing in response.

"Now come," Swiftblade said, walking to the door. "Let us set you on your way so that you may finish this journey."

They walked back through the town, making their way to the west exit. The guard that stood there bowed to Swiftblade, but was shocked to see Link standing beside him. Swiftblade explained how he'd trained Link, and has given his approval for Link to pass.

To this, the knight finally stepped aside. "Very well," he said. "In which case you may pass. I wish you good luck on your quest."

Link stepped passed him and through the gate, waving to them as he left.

Next stop, Mt. Crenel.

Chapter 6: Swiftblade



CHAPTER 7

MT. CRENEL

Link stood at the base of Mt. Crenel, looking up at the top so very far, far... *far* away.

"Long way up huh?" Link sighed.

"It makes me tired just looking at it," Ezlo agreed.

"Hey! How much walking have *you* done this whole time!?"

"Easy kid!" Ezlo warned. "Regardless, that Minish we have to talk to is up there, Melari. So there's no point in arguing, it'll only waste time!"

"I guess you're right," Link grumbled. "But still..." He looked around for a way up, a path or something, but there wasn't much but dead ends and steep cliffs.

"Now, the way up," Ezlo wondered. "Is, where? Exactly?"

There were thin vines draped over the rocky surface, growing out of pools of green water, but they didn't look particularly strong. Link tested them, tugging on them a little. It didn't snap, and he didn't really have many other options...

"They might not lead all the way to the top," he said. "But it's a start."

Link stepped over the water, pulling himself up the vines and told himself not to look down. The rocks crumbled a bit, and the thinner vines snapped easily, but eventually he was able to pull himself over the edge at the top.

After wiping the blood off his hands, he took another look around for a path again. There wasn't one, but there was a sign at least.

"Dangerous-- No Climbing," Link read. He shook his head. "... Well now you tell me."

"Link we have bigger problems!"

Link spun around just in time to dodge a tektite that jumped at him. It scratched his arm, but a quick slice of his sword cut the thing in half. Part of it rolled passed Link and fell over the side of the cliff.

"Watch your back!" Ezlo warned.

Realizing how close *he* was to falling off the cliff, he looked down to see the piece of tektite fall into the green waters below. It melted

instantly.

"I knew it was hot," Link muttered. "But... wow."

"It's scolding hot," Ezlo said. "But other than it's just regular mineral water."

"Still," Link added. "Don't fall in."

"Don't fall in," Ezlo agreed.

—

The hours passed and as Link continued to scale the mountain the sky grew darker and his arms grew tired. He was almost two thirds of the way up, and there were only more cliffs to climb, no paths. Once or twice he got to walk through a cave only to come out just a little higher than he was before, but he finally arrived at the first stretch of flat ground enough to sit on in a while.

And there, sitting at the base of yet another cliff, was a second sign.

"Up, is... Crenel Wall," Link gasped. "To, the right... Crenel, mines..."

"Take a breath kid," Ezlo told him. "You'll do no good to either of us half dead."

Link looked up at where the sign was pointing, then back down at the steep drops below. "Up... Crenel wall?" he muttered. "But, it's all walls..." He teetered in place for a moment, leaning on the rock wall for support.

"Sheesh kid!" Ezlo exclaimed. "If you're tired say something! That's a lot of cliffs you've climbed, and the day is growing shorter. I'd recommend finding a place to rest for a while!"

"Yeah," Link agreed, slumping to the ground. "Here's good."

He looked out at Hyrule as the sun set behind him, blocked by the mountain. He could see almost all of it from here; the castle, the town, the forests, the rivers, and the swamps. It all looked so close together from above, but walking through it on foot took nearly forever.

Eventually, as the night came, Link fell asleep.

Before Ezlo followed suit however, he thought he heard something. Looking around, there was nothing there, but hopping off Link's head and looking around the rocky corners...

Ezlo narrowed his eyes, looking at the small hole he thought he saw something crawl into. "Hmm..." Upon further investigation, he discovered exactly what he was looking for; a rock with a crack in it.

Link woke with a sore back and bandages wrapped around his hands.

He was in a cave, the warm heat from the rocks glowing a faint red. It was dim, but enough to see by. Other than the bed he was sitting on though, there was nothing else in the small cave room.

"Ezlo?" Link called, getting to his feet. His sword and shield were sitting beside the bed, so he didn't think they were in any immediate danger, but he still moved quickly as he picked them up and pushed open the stone door.

Stepping out into a much larger chamber, he saw a forge that would make his grandfather proud. There were Minish running around all over, making weapons or tools or anything at all, and in the center of the room, by a great anvil, was the Minish Elder. Beside him was Ezlo, sitting on a Minish's head.

"And there he is!" the Minish elder exclaimed. "Link, the boy that Gentari told me so much about!"

Link stepped down and walked over to them, dodging past the Mining Minish as they went about their business.

"I am Melari," the elder bowed. "Master Smith."

Grandpa might actually agree, Link thought, still looking at everything.

"I hear you want me to reforge the sacred sword and help break a curse," Melari said.

"Yes, if that's not too much to ask," Link nodded.

"My boy, it is nothing!" Melari laughed. "My apprentices and I craft such weapons every day. I love all this adventure, what with the rescuing of princesses and such. However, this is a special blade. I'll be needin' the old sword, which holds the power of the elements, first."

Link instinctively reached for the blade that was supposed to be at his side, but found it wasn't there. Ezlo laughed as Link panicked for a moment, wondering if he'd dropped it off the cliff on accident.

"Don't worry," Ezlo chuckled. "I already gave it to him. There's just the problem of... you know."

"I'd be happy to reforge this thing into a brand-new sacred blade for you," Melari nodded, stepping aside to show the Picori Blade resting in pieces on a small table. "However the project will never be quite complete without the rest of the gems."

"Of course," Link nodded.

"It'll take me a while to rework your sword," Melari continued. "So in the meantime, you should track down the missing elements."

"Do you know where the next one is?" Link asked. "Supposedly it's here on the mountain, but that's a lot of ground to cover."

"The one I protect is in the mine the Humans dug," Melari answered. "It's not far from here. But, are you sure you are rested enough to continue?"

"I trained for this," Link said determinedly. "... Sort of. It was just the climbing that took it out of me, but I should be fine now."

"Whatever training you had does not change the fact that you have a very little body," Melari grumbled, not at all helpfully. "That may not mean much coming from us Minish, but still, you shouldn't push yourself too hard!"

"I know," Link agreed. "I won't."

Melari pointed behind himself, towards a stone door set into the wall on the other side of the cavern. "If you're up for it," he said. "Head through there, and you'll reach the mines."

Ezlo jumped back on Link's head and the Minish apprentice hobbled off. "Come on!" Ezlo exclaimed. "Let's leave them to it and go find the next element!"

Chapter 7: Mt. Crenel



CHAPTER 8

THE MINES

"Boy what I wouldn't give for a nice cold bath right about now," Ezlo muttered as Link hoisted himself up another short ledge. "It keeps getting hotter!"

"Yeah, I should send you to the cleaners," Link huffed. "You're making my head sweaty!"

"What makes you think you can treat me like common laundry, huh?"

Link would've answered, but as he turned the corner around a cliff, he saw the entrance to the mine. It was a simple carved tunnel, wooden beams keeping it up.

"We're here," Link said, stepping inside.

"Wow..." Ezlo looked around, tucking his head down as if the ceiling were about to eat him. "It's hot in here! Come on! Let's not stand around wasting time! Find that element, so we can get out of here!"

"I'm sorry, which one of us is standing?" Link jabbed, walking deeper into the cave.

"Which one of us is made of flammable material?"

Link laughed, turning a corner and exiting the tunnel. The chamber he stepped into was vast; the ceiling was too high to see, and there were large pits of lava eating away at the ground. Long wooden walkways ran through the chamber, and rock paths were carved into the walls leading down into deeper pits. There was plenty of room to walk, and the room seemed stable, but there was so much lava nearby and spread out that there wasn't a single torch placed as the chamber was light enough already.

The worst thing he saw however, were the little walking bombs that seemed to stop and stare at him as he entered. "Do they see us?" Link asked.

"Oh, I know what these are!" Ezlo laughed. "Bob-Ombs! They came from somewhere else I think, but the Humans used 'em for mining here."

"Are they dangerous?"

Ezlo tilted his head to either side. "Very..." he muttered, looking

around the room. "But, not seeing a way forward, they might also be useful."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we're in a cave; there are bombs; we need to move quickly," Ezlo looked down at Link. "You *picking* any of this *up* yet?"

"Right," Link sighed. "Got it."

He started walking around the chamber, searching for where an old door might've been but avoiding the lava. Clearly the mines were old, considering the broken wood planks and all the signs of cave-ins. Eventually he found what used to be a tunnel entrance, and there didn't seem to be that much blockage in the way.

After deciding where to go, Link started moving cautiously towards one of the Bob-Ombs. "Please do not explode in my hands," he whispered.

As soon as he picked it up the fuse on it's head lit.

"Bad!" Link shouted, turning and throwing the bomb towards the blocked tunnel. He ducked for cover as it made impact.

—

Melari studied the broken blade, putting the pieces back together like a puzzle. He knew he'd have to replace most of it, or at least fill in a few gaps, but he wanted to keep it as similar to the original product as he-
BOOOOM!!

He heard the muffled explosion in the distance, but did little more than laugh. *Kid's in over his head*, he thought, getting back to work.

—

Link groaned as he shoved pieces of rock away. After a moment, the smoke cleared and Link noticed that most of the other Bob-Ombs seemed to have scattered, but at least the way forward was open.

"Come on," he grunted, hurrying into the next room.

He stopped dead at the sheer drop in front of him. There was lava far below, and no real path... but there was a mine cart on a rail. It seemed... *mostly* stable.

"This must be what the Humans who built this mine used to get around in here," Ezlo said. "Maybe we should hop in."

"How about, no?" Link said sarcastically, stepping towards it to get a better look. "I don't trust it."

"What?" Ezlo exclaimed. "After all this, you don't expect me to believe you're scared! There's nothing to be afraid of here! Come on, let's go!"

"I'm not scared!" Link argued. "I'm just smarter than a talking hat!"

"Hey this talking hat has seen plenty of things in his day," Ezlo countered. "And I say it's perfectly safe!"

Link sighed, stepping into the cart. "Fine," he muttered. "But don't say I didn't warn ya."

He reached out, and pulled the lever beside the cart. Suddenly they were sent speeding down the track.

Link and Ezlo screamed as they went flying. Link kept one hand on the cart and one hand on Ezlo to keep him from getting caught in the drift.

At least it was stable though. It took sharp turns like they were nothing, even if they gave Link whiplash. And that lasted... right until the end... when the track came to a sudden stop. The rail broke, but their destination was right on the other side.

"Hold on!" Link shouted, gripping Ezlo's hem.

"Hold on to what!?" Ezlo exclaimed.

As they came to the end of the track, Link jumped.

The cart plummeted into the lava below, burning instantly. Link and Ezlo however, hovered for a moment in the air, the wind currents from the heat lifting Ezlo like a balloon. Like a parachute, Ezlo carried Link safely across to the other side, where they landed roughly in a pile of dirt.

"Sweet *jumping* jellyfish!" Ezlo barked. "That was awful!"

Link laughed, rolling onto his back.

"Hey, kid, what are you smiling about?" Ezlo spat. "I knew it was madness to risk our lives in that rickety Human contraption!"

"What do you mean!?" Link complained. "It was *your* idea!"

"Let's not dwell on things, and just agree to stick to our feet!"

"Right," Link muttered, still laughing as he put Ezlo on his head. "You mean *my* feet."

"Well at least we're going the right way!" Ezlo said, nodding towards a crack in the wall to their right. "Look! The Shrine!"

"How do you know?" Link asked, walking to the crack. There was a faint glow, but it could've just been more lava.

"Just trust me on this, boy!" Ezlo told him.

Link sighed, squeezing through the crack and ducking as he entered the incredibly small chamber. But Ezlo was right; pretty much the

only thing there was a tiny stone structure. It was a portal stone, and the Minish Shrine entrance was right behind it.

"How interesting!" Ezlo said, as sarcastically as he could. "So there was a portal hidden away in here, hm? I guess that's our only way forward."

"Fine, you know where you're going!" Link moaned, stepping onto the portal.

Ezlo worked his magic, and once again Link found himself shrinking as he fell through the air. He tumbled through the hole in the stone, landing softly on magical crystals that kept him from falling too fast. Then it was a short walk to the Minish door carved into the wall that was the shrine of the Fire element.

Link took a deep breath, knowing there would be *some* kind of challenge on the other side, and opened the door.

He entered a large chamber with a shallow pool of lava in the center, an intricately carved stone lying in it. It was far too big to be the element he was looking for, and it definitely wasn't a gem. It almost looked like a shell that had been carved into for decoration.

Link circled it, looking for another door, but he found nothing.

"Link," Ezlo said quietly.

"Do you see a door?" Link asked.

"No," Ezlo said, more worried now. "But... I don't like the way that shell is watching us."

"Watching... us?" Link turned around, and saw through a hole in the shell two points of light. He slowly raised his shield. "Um..."

Before he could say a word, a jet of fire blasted out from the shell.

Link rolled to the side, keeping his shield up. "I think we woke it up!" Ezlo exclaimed.

"But why is it here!?" Link exclaimed. "I've never seen anything like it!"

"I've heard legends of guardians protecting ancient shrines," Ezlo said hurriedly. "I guess not every monster is placed by accident!?"

Suddenly the fire stopped as quickly as it started, and out from the hole a head emerged. It had a long neck, and four flat limbs came out from the sides. It almost looked like a turtle, just, mixed with a dragon, and made of fire and stone.

"I don't know how to beat this thing!" Link shouted, running around the monster as it slammed its head down and spewed fire.

"I don't know either!" Ezlo cried. "Just keep running!"

The ground cracked and lava seeped through. Fires crept up at his

feet, blocking his way. With a slice of his sword he could blow them out, but he kept just barely making it out of the way of the monster's next attack.

"Alright," Link muttered, still running in circles. "Here's the plan. I'll-"

Crack!

Both Link and the monster froze, and then they heard the gurgling sound. Link noticed the lava was slowly draining... and the ground was splintering.

The monster looked up at Link for a split second, before falling through the ground. Link looked over the edge, watching it fall.

"I... don't think it's getting back up," Ezlo said as Link sat down.

"Yeah..." Link stared at the room, still not seeing any other doors.

"But... what now?"

Ezlo was laying flat on the ground, and Link could barely breathe from the heat. They'd been sitting there for a while, still not sure what to do.

"Any ideas?" Ezlo muttered, slightly delirious.

"Still no," Link answered again.

If there had been a Bob-Omb somewhere, he could blast something open again... or possibly cause the whole cave to collapse.

"Any ideas?" Ezlo whined.

"Still no," Link answered again, quieter and quieter each time.

Maybe they missed it? Maybe they have to go back? Or maybe the gem was *in* the guardian? Or... something? Link hung his head in annoyance.

"Any ideaaaaaas?" Ezlo whimpered.

"Still... wait..."

Link stood, looking over the edge.

"Any i-what?" Ezlo's head sat bolt upright, watching Link. "Liiiink? What'cha thinking?"

"Look!" Link said, pointing over the cliff. "That guardian landed on a ledge! I thought I was hearing things, but it survived!"

"And how do you plan to make it down there?" Ezlo asked.

"Like this!" Link snatched up Ezlo from the ground, and jumped over the edge.

Like with the cart, Ezlo acted like the perfect parachute, slowly

lowering Link towards the platform below.

"The heat has driven you absolutely mad!" Ezlo growled.

When they finally landed, Ezlo was furious. "Never do that again!" he shouted. "I dare you to try!"

"Shut up," Link laughed, setting him back on his head. "Look!"

There was a direct path to another chamber, a beam of light striking a pedestal. The Fire element sat safely on top of it, shining in the light.

"The Fire element," Ezlo mused. "You actually got us there."

Link hurried through the tunnel, stepping up to the pedestal. He retrieved the gem, holding it in the light. Finally... they were done here.

"Well that's all well and good, but..." Ezlo looked around.

"Yes?" Link asked.

"How do we get out?"

Link stared blankly at the element. "I... don't... know..."

Ezlo sighed. "Great."

Suddenly there was a loud blast above them. Link raised his shield to block the rocks that fell towards him, but stepped back under cover of the tunnel as the blasting continued.

"Hey kid!" shouted the voice of Melari. "Mine's falling apart up here! What'cha do to it!?"

"Bob-Ombs!" Link shouted.

"What!?" Melari shouted back.

"Bob-Ombs!!!" Link and Ezlo shouted.

Melari sighed, dropping a rope down to them.

Chapter 8: The Mines



CHAPTER 9

ELEMENTAL SANCTUARY

Link, Ezlo, and Melari walked into the forge as Link finished telling what had happened in the mines.

"Oh! You made it back safely!" one of the Forge Minish came running up to them, a few others hurrying quickly behind it. "Fantastic! We were all starting to get worried."

"Your sword is ready!" another said cheerfully. "The boss was just putting the finishing touches on it before he went to find you."

Melari led Link to the table where the newly reforged Picori Blade sat. It was pure white with a copper green hilt, the light of the fires caught in it's reflection.

"Wow," Link mused. "And I thought my grandfather was an impressive blacksmith."

"Aye, but an impressive blacksmith he is to craft a sword as well as he has," Melari said proudly. He patted Link's shoulder. "If you wouldn't mind making a trade, I'd like to keep your blade in my collection."

"Collection?" Link asked.

"Years ago, I started collecting the old swords wielded by the heroes before they were heroes!" he laughed, pointing to an ancient training sword hung on the cave wall. Link had thought it was just a sword and didn't pay it much mind before, but, was it really a hero's blade? "Though, at the moment I only have one," Melari continued. "But yours would make a great addition for all the Minish to see!"

"My grandfather's sword, on display for all the Minish to see?" Link unsheathed his sword, looking at the chips in the steel.

"Besides," Melari added. "You can't very well go carrying around two swords *and* a shield. It'd just weigh ya down!"

"Fair point," Link agreed. "Besides, I don't think gramps would mind calling this an 'ancient hero's sword'."

He unhooked the sheath from his belt, and carefully sat the sword down on the table. Then he replaced it with the new White Sword's sheath, and held that blade in his hands.

"Good!" Melari exclaimed. "Now, on to more pressing matters." He handed Link's old sword to one of his apprentices and pulled up a stool. "Once you infuse this new sword with the power of the elements, it will become a sacred blade."

"So it isn't right now?" Ezlo asked.

"The forest elder no doubt told you this part, but... If you want to infuse the sword, you must go to the elemental sanctuary. It's a strange realm, trapped between two worlds. It is the bridge between the Minish world and the Human world. The doorway to the sanctuary opens only once every hundred years.

"And where is the entrance?" Link asked. "The doorway?"

"You'll find that door hidden within Hyrule Castle," Melari answered. "Once the blade has been filled with the power of the four elements, you should be able to break the curse on your princess."

"Sounds simple enough!" Ezlo nodded. "We already have two of the four elements at our side! We'll be done in no time!"

"I know you can do it," Melari said proudly. "After all, you made short work of that Human mine. Perhaps there is great strength in that little body of yours after all."

Link sheathed his new sword, looking to the exit. "Any suggestions on getting down from here?"

"There is a shortcut you can use," Melari answered. "You'll find it right in front of the entrance of the mines you just explored. Just follow that, and you'll be down in no time. Good luck!" He clapped Link on the shoulder and let him pass.

As Link left Melari picked up the Smith's Sword and brought it to the wall, hanging it beside the other. "Ha!" he laughed. "Very good!"

Link followed the path back to the mines as the sun set on the horizon. He arrived to find the mine entrance caved in, but at least he found the short cut.

"This is it," Link said, staring down at the steep slope that led all the way down the mountain side. "... I think."

"That seems like a worse idea than the minecart!" Ezlo cried.

"Then it'll work just as well!" Link took out his shield and before Ezlo could argue, jumped on and pushed off.

The air rushed up at them and Ezlo's screams were silenced by the wind.

After a day of walking, they finally made it back to Hyrule castle. After stopping for a quick meal, they continued onward for the castle, walking through the gardens.

"Are you sure I look alright?" Ezlo asked, stopping Link just outside the castle doors. "I never know what to wear to formal occasions."

"Considering you *are* an accessory at this point," Link joked. "You shouldn't have much to worry about."

"Learn to bite your tongue boy!"

Link laughed, and entered the castle, making his way to the throne room. King Daltus took notice as he entered.

"Oh! Link!" King Daltus exclaimed. "You have returned! Welcome. Did you find the elements?"

"I have found two of the four," Link answered, bowing to King Daltus. "I need to fuse them to the sword before I can continue. Supposedly there is a sanctuary here that only opens every hundred years, do you know where I can find it?"

"What?" King Daltus huffed. "A sanctuary, you say? Why, I've heard of no such thing in my castle."

"Hmmm... A sanctuary..." Potho nodded to himself, stepping forward. "You know, your majesty, I do recall a story my grandmother once told me long ago."

"Oh?" King Daltus muttered, it clearly being the first he'd heard of it as well.

"She said she saw a doorway appear in the palace courtyard as a child," Potho explained. "If this doorway indeed opens only once a century, it may open even now! But as with the Picori themselves, the door is visible only to the eyes of a child."

"You mean we might have walked past it recently and never even known it was there?" King Daltus asked.

"Yes, I will show you," Potho moved passed Link, leading them to the castle's inner courtyard.

It was a short walk, but as soon as they arrived, Link saw it clear as day. It looked to have been there the entire time, built into the far wall across from the courtyard entrance.

"... You can already see it?" Potho noticed.

"You mean you can't see the door here?" Link asked, pointing to the obvious door.

Potho shook his head. "To my knowledge, there is no door there."

Link stepped closer. "Link, see how it glows?" Ezlo asked quietly. "It must be the sanctuary."

"We're the only ones who can see it," Link muttered. "So it must be."

"Go, quickly," Potho told him. "That sanctuary is not meant for my eyes, I will remain here."

Link could tell Potho wanted nothing more than to enter the sanctuary himself, but he restrained himself. A moment later, Potho left altogether, and Link opened the door, stepping into a long crystal hall.

At the other end, it opened up into a great chamber. Statues of knights stood around the altar in the center of the room, and the walls were lined with glowing stained-glass windows depicting some other hero's journey.

In the center of the altar, was a sword pedestal. Link stood in front of it, and took out the White Sword.

"So this is the elemental sanctuary, then," Ezlo mumbled, taking it all in. "This is where we fuse your blade with the power of the elements..."

Link nodded, and took the elemental gems out of his pocket. There were markers at the base of the four stands that told where each gem would be placed, so he sat the gems in their respective stands. Then he returned to the sword's pedestal, and placed it in the slot.

A sudden flash of light beamed from the gems to the sword, burning the hilt a slight red color. In an instant it was over, and Link retrieved the sword, but as he held it, his vision blurred.

He staggered, the room warping for a moment, like he was seeing it from two places at the same time. Then he noticed, just for a moment, he was staring back at himself!

Then it was over, and Link found himself sitting on the floor, staring at the blade.

"You just split in two!" Ezlo exclaimed, stunned. "So this is the power of the White Sword!"

"In two?" Link mumbled. "I guess that explains... the splitting headache."

"This is no time for bad puns!" Ezlo fumed. "This is an incredible power! Go ahead, try and focus. I want to know if it wasn't just my eyes playing tricks on me."

Link nodded and held out his sword with both hands, focusing on splitting himself. Both feet planted firmly on the ground, he opened his eyes to see the blade glowing, and in front of it, was another Link.

Link laughed. "Guess you could say, I'm really beside my self with this new power!"

"Oy!" Ezlo scolded.

"But you're right, this is amazing!" Link poked the copy, and it disappeared. "But I need to practice that, see if I can't perfect this ability."
"It would be quite useful indeed," Ezlo agreed.
Link sheathed his sword. "Then let's get going."

Chapter 9: Elemental Sanctuary



CHAPTER 10

VAATI

Link entered the southern plains of Hyrule Field, stepping off the city's drawbridge. The great doors closed in the city's wall, and as soon as the Hyrule Guards were out of earshot...

"Interesting."

Link froze.

"You're the last person I expected to find here. And just as I was wondering who could be behind this, I find my old master..."

Link remembered that voice from the attack during the festival. He whipped out his sword and spun in place, searching for the man the voice belonged to.

Right in front of him, a cloud of darkness formed, and Vaati stepped out of it.

"Vaati!" Elzo growled.

"And, as always, you are dressed in..." Vaati gave a sharp laugh. "The *shabbiest* of rags."

"You're one to talk!" Link hissed. "What kind of curse turns someone into a hat anyway?"

"My curses are not to be mocked," Vaati hissed. "The one I cast on you is most powerful. No matter what power you wield, you will never break it."

"You haven't changed in the slightest," Elzo barked. "I should never have created that cap. It only fueled your insane desires!"

"Fool!" Vaati shouted, dark energy gathering in his hands. "A hat that grants the wishes of its wearer is a spectacular creation! Thanks to you, I have gone from being a meek, minuscule nothing to... The greatest sorcerer alive!"

His body erupted into pure darkness, but only for a moment. He forced himself not to allow his anger to get the better of him, and instead stared down at Link and Elzo once more.

"You cannot stop me now," Vaati continued. "And I have you to thank for it! Accept this small gesture of gratitude from me."

Link darted forward, but in an instant, Vaati was gone.

"Wait!" Ezlo screamed. "Vaati, wait!!!"

Suddenly, Link was knocked off his feet, and standing over him were two brutish monsters. Moblins, each twice the size of the strongest knight in Hyrule.

Link rolled out of the way as one smashed their club where he was. The other Moblin held a sword however, and Link had to jump quickly back onto his feet to avoid it. He tried to get some distance between himself and the monsters, allowing him to pull out his shield, but they were quick. He barely got his shield out at all, but they still knocked him off his feet again.

The first Moblin brought its club down again, but this time Link threw up his shield to protect himself, doing all he could to push it away. But the Moblin was stronger, and instead of pushing it away, Link used that force against itself. The club slid across the surface of the shield and the Moblin was caught off balance.

As it fell, Link jabbed his sword upward, stabbing through its chest.

He jumped out from under it as it slammed into the ground, and immediately rolled away from the other Moblin's attack. Now that the first was out of the way, the second seemed less hesitant to swing its sword.

And yet Link was still able to use its momentum against it. He used his shield to slide the sword away from him, then spun and stabbed backwards into the gut of the Moblin. With a quick upward slice, the battle was over.

Link panted, taking a few steps away from the stinking monsters, and sitting back on the edge of the drawbridge.

"That foul Vaati!" Ezlo hissed. "What could he be scheming now?"

"Care to explain what happened exactly?" Link asked, wanting to rest and get answers rather than more walking at the moment.

"Well... you see," Ezlo started. "Vaati and I are both Minish."

"... Yeah, I guess that makes sense," Link nodded.

"I was once a famous sage and a renowned Minish craftsman," Ezlo explained. "Vaati was only a boy when I took him on as my apprentice. But... he became enchanted by the wickedness in the hearts of men."

"... What did he do?" Link asked after Ezlo fell silent.

"One day," Ezlo sighed. "Vaati took a hat I made for the Humans-- my pride and joy. It granted the wishes of its wearer. He put it on without permission..."

—

Vaati stared at the hat sitting on the table. Without a moment's hesitation, he picked it up, and put it on his head.

"Vaati! What are you doing there?" Ezlo asked, leaning on his staff as he entered the room.

Vaati looked at himself, seeing how even his hands changed as his appearance became more Human... and more evil. Dark clouds swarmed at his feet as he slowly turned to face his master.

"Oh, what a vile form you've taken," Ezlo whispered, disappointed in his apprentice.

"Vile?" Vaati hissed. "I am a sorcerer now, and my power is beyond compare!" The dark clouds curled up to reach his hands, and he smiled. "No longer will I tire away as your apprentice! Now, all shall call ME master!"

"Why, Vaati?" Ezlo asked softly. "What are you plotting?"

"This year, on the day that comes but once a century, the portal opens. And when it does, I shall claim the Light Force as my own." Vaati took a few steps towards Ezlo, staring him down. "I will be transformed, perfect, and there will be none who can stop me..."

He blasted Ezlo with his dark energy. Ezlo screamed as he fell to his knees, and the energy ate at him. When the black smoke cleared, he was nothing more than a simple green hat.

Vaati laughed. "Tell me, how does it feel, my sorcerer's curse?" he asked. "Do you see, Ezlo? I am truly your master now, and you cannot stop me." He stepped back again, the darkness swirling at his feet. "And with that, I must be leaving."

Then he was gone.

—

Ezlo stared at his reflection in the water running beneath the drawbridge. "You know the legends, of course," he said quietly. "The gifts the Picori gave the Humans... What you call the Picori Blade was the first of those gifts. The second... Well, you call it Light Force, but it is a source of limitless magical power. If Vaati were to get it now, it would be devastating..."

Ezlo looked away from the water, and up to the west, towards their next destination. "I came to the world of men hoping to stop Vaati," he said. "And I met you in the woods. But it seems we won't be breaking the

curse on me anytime soon. However, with the sacred blade, we can certainly restore Princess Zelda."

He looked up at Link, having been sitting beside him through most of the conversation. "I'm sorry," he continued. "All that has happened has been due to my own pride. My folly. I must rely on you, on your power, until we've put an end to Vaati."

Link nodded and Ezlo jumped back on his head.

"Don't worry," Link promised. "It's not over yet. We can still pull through, right?"

Ezlo nodded in agreement. "Well, Link," he finished. "Enough fairy tales! We must search for the next element!"

"Right." Link got to his feet, and started west, towards the Castor Wilds.

Chapter 10: Vaati



CHAPTER 11 **CASTOR WILDS**

It was a long way to go before they reached the Castor Wilds. Nothing but open fields, clumps of trees, and plenty of monsters between them and their destination.

As soon as they got a break from fighting however, Ezlo twitched.

"Eh?" Ezlo looked around, but there didn't seem to be any immediate danger. Then he focused his attention back the way they came. "What a strange feeling. I sensed something from the castle's direction. Or... was it just me?"

"I didn't sense anything," Link said, looking back over his shoulder. "Not that I can technically sense anything anyway, but..."

"Hmm..." Ezlo turned around again to face west. "Carry on, it's probably nothing."

Link nodded and started forward through the marshy grass.

—

What do I do? King Daltus thought to himself, sitting alone in the throne room. He had his knights both protecting the city, and out searching for Vaati... but he felt helpless. He looked at his daughter, still frozen in stone as she stood beside his throne.

Then he heard steps walking towards him.

"Hm? Who's there?" King Daltus asked. He turned to face the man who had entered... no, appeared. The door didn't open. "What? Vaati! How did you get in here!?"

Vaati teleported, standing right in front of and startling the King. Vaati raised his hand, and dark clouds of magic surrounded King Daltus' head.

"Uhn... what are you doing?" King Daltus mumbled, suddenly dizzy.

Vaati laughed, disappearing in an instant.

Just then, Potho came back into the throne room. "What has happened!?" he exclaimed, seeing the King on his knees in front of the

throne. Potho hurried to his side.

"Ehr... Gather the knights," King Daltus hissed.

"But milord!"

"Gather them!" King Daltus barked.

"... Right away milord," Potho nodded.

King Daltus sat in his throne, dark eyes glaring down at the knights that knelt before him. "You all know of the power the Picori gave to mankind, do you not? The golden light force of limitless power..."

There were grumblings of acknowledgment from the knights, but the King slammed his fist down to silence them.

"I want it!!!" King Daltus exclaimed. "It is somewhere here in Hyrule! Go now, and bring me this power! Waste no time! Go forth at once, and bring me the light force!"

The knights hesitated.

"Fling anyone who refuses into the dungeon!" the King threatened. "Him and his family too! I will tolerate no disobedience! Search high and low throughout the lands of Hyrule!"

Startled, a little afraid, but ever loyal, the knights marched out on the King's command. King Daltus sat back in his chair, glaring at the door across the hall as Potho sat quietly, unsure what to make of this outburst.

"There it is again!" Ezlo exclaimed, shaking his head furiously like there was a fly buzzing around him. "Gah, maybe it's just the wind... But I do hope nothing bad has happened."

"I'm sure everything is fine," Link said, not at all convincingly.

"You don't sound so sure yourself," Ezlo noted.

"... Anyway, we need to look for the next element," Link said. He could see the Castor Wilds in the distance. It wouldn't be too long now.

The vast, swampy lands of the Castor Wilds spread out as far as the eye could see. Link's boots stuck to the sinking mud as he made his way forward. "My grandfather told me about this place," Link said as he walked. "It's too dangerous to go near, and the statues always seem to be

watching."

He looked up at one of the short rocky cliffs that were scattered through the Wilds, a statue sitting on top of it.

"You think you Humans have it rough!" Ezlo scoffed. "We Minish fear this place for a great many reasons; one being that if we got caught in the muck, we'd *never* get out!"

"And the other reasons?" Link asked.

"Meh, Minish problems," Ezlo shrugged. "You don't need to worry about them, just focus on getting across."

Link sighed, stopping as he looked up at yet another cliff. He turned and turned, seeing only flat marshes and short rises with a few scattered statues. It all looked the same.

He sat down on a log. "This is useless," he muttered. "I've been going in circles for hours!"

"Maybe longer," Ezlo sighed.

"Not helping," Link growled. He watched the horizon, the sun at least telling him which direction he faced. "How far does it go?"

"Pretty far, I think, though I feel our path may end soon."

"How do you mean?" Link asked.

"Look, near those cliffs!" Ezlo said, pointing his beak southwest. "I think I see stone!"

"...Stone?"

"Yes, yes!" Ezlo nodded. "Like bricks! Maybe there's a structure or something there!"

"Better than nothing," Link decided, getting up and following Ezlo's directions.

The closer they got, Link noticed he could see the stone structure as well. It looked like a fallen pillar from here, but it was something at least. He moved faster and made it to the other side of the low rise. Turning the corner, he saw a rather large temple that seemed to have sunken into the ground and mud. Moss and vines covered the dirty tan stone, most of it cracked or broken.

"Hm," Ezlo nodded smugly. "To think the ruins were hidden within this cliff the whole time! I knew I led us in the right direction."

Whack!

Link landed face first in the mud, wincing in pain. Whatever hit him and struck him from behind, so most of the attack was taken by the shield, but when he rolled over to see what hit him, all he saw was one of the statues behind him.

For a second Link thought he'd imagined getting hit at all, but as

soon as that second passed the statue struck again.

Link was able to dodge easily this time, considering how slow the statue moved, but the carved lifeless face of it was frightening.

"An Armos," Ezlo hissed. "That's what we Minish call them. Go for the head!"

Link nodded and jumped at it, then rolled sideways to dodge its attack. He came up behind it, and bashed his shield into its head. The statue shattered, falling over into the mud.

Link huffed, sheathing his sword.

"That was quite the blow!" Ezlo said. "Are you going to be alright?"

"Yeah," Link nodded. "I'll be fine." He started down the steps into the temple. "Look, the door's still intact."

"Which is a step up from last time," Ezlo agreed.

"Technically a step down," Link joked, going through the below ground-level door.

"You're not allowed to talk anymore," Ezlo decided.

There was a torch on the wall by the door they came in through, and a torch on the far wall... but that wall was definitely far, and there was a wide pit between that wall and Link.

"Well that's unfortunate," Ezlo grunted.

There didn't appear to be a ledge on the other side of the room, just the wide gap and the doorway carved into the far wall. But there *did* seem to be something under the door, a thin slit.

"It looks like there's something under the door," Link said. "Think that means something?"

"Ah! There!" Ezlo exclaimed, pointing to a lever in the wall beside them.

Link grabbed the lever and tried to turn it, but it did nothing. Then he pulled, it and it still did nothing. "Uh..." He turned and pulled it, hearing a clicking noise. "There we- nope." He tried again, holding it this time instead of letting go.

Behind him, under the door in the far wall, a bridge started to extend towards them. As soon as it reached them Link let go of the lever again.

"There! Now we- what!?" As soon as he let go the bridge had snapped back at an alarming rate. He quickly grabbed the lever again and the bridge returned.

"It seems someone must remain to hold it," Ezlo told him.

Link looked back and forth between the handle and the bridge

which had already begun to recede again since he let go. "... I have an idea."

He drew his sword and held it in front of him. As he shut his eyes the blade began to glow.

"Ahh... but will it be strong enough?" Ezlo mumbled.

Link opened his eyes and his vision blurred. As in the sanctuary, another him was staring back at him. "Hold the handle for me," Link told the copy, feeling a little drained.

The copy Link moved to the lever, but disappeared as it touched it.

Link groaned in annoyance.

"Seems you need more work," Ezlo noted.

"I don't have time for that though!" Link growled. "I've wasted enough time now, and need to just finish this so I can save Zelda!"

"Easy, Link," Ezlo warned. "The only waste of time right now is worrying about wasting time. Nothing else you can do, so focus."

"... What if it's permanent?" Link asked, staring at his sword.

"What?" Ezlo scoffed.

"The curse... what if I'm too late, and something happens, and I can't bring her back?"

"What makes you think that?"

"... When we were back at the castle, I felt something off too," Link explained. "I don't know what it was, but it's not good. And Vaati, he showed up again... that means *something*, right?"

"... Focus on your sword," Ezlo instructed.

"But-"

"Focus on your sword."

Link hesitated, but held his sword out once more, and focused on copying himself. The blade glowed, a little brighter this time.

"It just has to be enough to get us across the bridge," Ezlo told him. "Nothing more."

Link gripped the sword tighter, and the gem on it's hilt began to glow as well. Link opened his eyes and watched as his copy materialized in front of him. Link took an unsteady breath and lowered his sword. "Hold the lever for me."

The copy Link moved towards the lever, vapor trailing off of it like a ghost. "Okay," it said, it's voice echoing like it was talking from farther away. It grabbed the lever and the bridge extended towards them again.

"Well done Link!" Ezlo nodded. "Now, quickly!"

Link jumped onto the bridge as it arrived, and the copy disappeared. As the bridge quickly receded Link hurried to run to the door,

ramming through it as the speed of the bridge launched him through. He hit the ground, tumbling forward as he tried to stop himself.

"Wow," Ezlo mumbled, dizzy. "I'm surprised you made it! For a second I thought we were going to fall in."

Link hobbled to his feet, shaking himself off. "Woah," he huffed.

"I wonder what was at the bottom though," Ezlo said. "Probably just ground, or some jagged rocks..."

"Ezlo, look."

"Could've also been water- wait what?"

Link stepped out of the walkway and into a large, dimly lit room, torches lining the walls. On the other side of the room, was an enormous golden statue. Its eyes flashed, reflecting the torch light.

"It looks like its mouth is big enough to enter," Ezlo said. "And there are steps. Only way?"

Link took a second to look around. "Only way," he agreed.

He started walking towards the statue, expecting it to move... It was nothing more than a giant head, two large hands in fists beside it. It wore a crown though, like some kind of ancient tribal deity-

Crunch

Link lifted his foot, and immediately took a step back in shock. Scattered across the ground, were hundreds of tiny bones.

"... Minish..." Ezlo gasped.

"There were Minish here," Link mumbled.

"It's an old shrine," Ezlo said quietly. "I wonder if they died protecting this element."

"Do you think it's still here?" Link asked.

"Only one way to find out."

Link moved more cautiously this time, taking care to try not to step on any more bones. He made his way into the statue, and up to the chamber above. Then he stopped at the pedestal, an empty socket.

"... But... where is it?" Ezlo asked.

Link took a single step forward, and the ground shook. Behind the pedestal, a stone tablet appeared. Getting a closer look, it was in a language Link couldn't read, but Ezlo seemed to understand it.

"We are the Tribe of the Winds," Ezlo read. "Long have we lived with the winds. We have mastered them. Now, we join them. Together, with the great winds at our backs, we head for the skies. Those who come seeking our power must play the notes Zeffa teaches. May they lead you onward to the power that you seek."

"What does that mean?" Link asked.

"I think it means..." Ezlo tilted his head, thinking. "They've left for the heavens, and taken their element with them."

The chamber rumbled again, and beside the pedestal and tablet, a doorway appeared, leading to a long staircase with day light at its peak. Link took one last look at the pedestal, and headed outside.

Now back above ground level, Link faced a stone arch, built into the side of the cliff. It looked like he was in some kind of courtyard, but most of it was in just as bad of shape as the rest of the temple. It was overgrown with vines and moss, covered in mud, and most of it was broken. Pillars lay in pieces and the ground was uneven.

But under that arch, was another pedestal. On this one however, sat a simple blue ocarina, an inscription underneath it.

"Ocarina of Winds," Ezlo read. "North, south, east, and west are all just a breath away." He looked up at the clouds. "It looks like the wind element is beyond our reach for the time being. We have no choice but to press on. Let's get out of here."

Link picked up the ocarina, pocketing it as he made his way to the edge of the cliff.

"The element was not here," Ezlo said. "But at least we now have a clue to its whereabouts. Somehow, you must use the Ocarina of Winds to open a new path. Though we need help from someone named Zeffa first, so I recommend finding the last element next."

Link stared off to the east, back towards Hyrule. "Any idea where to go?"

"I believe it's at Lake Hylia," Ezlo answered.

Link nodded. "Then we'll start there."

Chapter 11: Castor Wilds



CHAPTER 12

LIBRARI'S LIBRARY

After a long trek there, and a long trek back, Link returned to Hyrule Castle Town from the Castor Wilds. He rested, he ate, he argued with himself over what to do next, and figured he'd just jump into heading to Lake Hylia without wasting any more time.

He took two steps out of the inn.

"Ah, Link!" Swiftblade called from across the street as he came to greet Link. "You have returned."

"Master Swiftblade," Link bowed.

"It's been a while, about a week, I'd say," Swiftblade said. "How fares your quest?"

"It's slow," Link said glumly.

"Well, I'd advise you to hurry," Swiftblade said, his voice low.

"I know," Link nodded. "I'm moving as fast-"

"No, that is not what I mean," Swiftblade shook his head, leading Link behind the inn.

"Wha-?"

"The King has been acting suspicious lately," Swiftblade said quietly, keeping an eye out for anyone who might be watching. "I fear something dark has taken hold of him."

"... Vaati," Link realized. He remembered when Vaati appeared in front of Hyrule. He'd thought he was just messing with him, but he was there for a reason. "That's what..."

"I think so," Swiftblade said, keeping watch over his shoulder and trying not to look too suspicious himself. "Do not speak to the King, do not go near him. I would be weary of the knights as well, they report you if you act suspicious."

"Do they know the King is not himself?" Link asked.

"They suspect something is amiss," Swiftblade answered. "But they are loyal to a fault. Do not blame their actions, but try to avoid them nonetheless." He straightened up, leaning against the outer wall of the inn. "I have also been researching these... Minish, as you call them."

"What did you find?"

"Apparently, children see them in the library from time to time, though the adults dismiss it as idle rumors. The imaginings of children, they say. But I feel there is truth to their words."

"Okay," Link nodded. "I'll see what I can find."

"Be careful," Swiftblade hissed as Link headed to the library.

The library.

It was located in the northern corner of the city, and wasn't used much. Mostly it was where some of the younger kids hung out, since adults rarely seemed to use it. This of course meant it was the messiest place in the city. Books were tucked in the wrong places, or just laying in the middle of the floor; blankets were hidden in corners, and food crumbs littered the shelves. It always felt less like a public area, and more like a child's secret hide out whenever Link came here.

He walked between the bookcases, looking for any sign of the Minish that supposedly lived here. Half way through the room however, he was interrupted by a group of kids as they ran passed. Link managed to stop one of them at least before they made their way outside again.

"Hey!" he called. "I heard there were Minish- er, Picori here, do you know where to find them?"

"No," the kid answered, shaking his head. "I haven't seen them myself, but *Zill* says they live in the *books*." The kid ran back to their friends, leaving Link stumped.

"I think it would be easier if we were Minish sized," Ezlo suggested.

"Any portals around here?" Link asked.

"The Human world is surprisingly full of them! They're just ordinary objects really, just so long as they've been imbued with Minish magic."

"And how do you do that?"

"What do you think I've been saying every time we step into a portal!?" Ezlo exclaimed. "Gibberish!? No!"

"Well then what do I find?"

Ezlo looked around. "... Hmmm... roll that pot over."

Link saw the oversized the pot that was sitting in the corner. "Like..." he pushed it onto it's side. "... this?"

"No!" Ezlo fumed. "Upside down! Pay attention!"

"Sheesh, be clearer," Link muttered, flipping the pot upside down.

He studied it, not seeing anything out of the ordinary.

"Perfect!" Ezlo said. "Now stand on top."

"Eh what!?" Link exclaimed. "But it'll break!"

"You'll be a Minish before then!" Ezlo promised. "Trust me!"

Cautiously, Link climbed on top of the pot, hearing it creak under his weight. As he stood he could both hear, and *feel* it crack. He muttered his regrets as Ezlo started speaking his magic. The crack widened, forming a hole, and just as it was about to shatter, suddenly Link was falling through the air, the size of a Minish.

As he fell through the crack, the pot split apart, falling to pieces. Keeping his shield above him as he dodged the broken glass, he hurried to the safety of the next aisle.

"See?" Ezlo said shakily. "Perfectly fine."

"Perfect would involve a lot less glass," Link sighed. He looked around. "... Where to now?"

"Hmm..." Ezlo looked up at the now incredibly tall bookcases. "Maybe... there?" He pointed his beak at a set of books that looked to be nearly shredded. The spines of them were nothing more than strings and flimsy leather... but at Minish size...

"Could be used as a ladder," Link nodded, climbing up the books. It led up to holes in the wood of the shelves, almost like a cleverly designed Minish apartment building. The only problem was, there didn't appear to be any actual Minish, or places they could hide.

At least, not until they got high enough anyway.

Once they reached the highest shelf, where the children and even some adults couldn't reach, they were greeted by the Minish at last.

"Hello newcomer!" one of them smiled.

"Hi!" Link waved. "I'm looking for the Elder here."

"Librari!" another one nodded. "We'll take you there!"

"I'm already there," Link said. "I need to find the elder."

"The elder is Librari!" the first said.

"Boy, Librari is the *name* of the elder here," Ezlo told him.

"Ooohhh," Link shook his head. "Of course, lead the way."

Soon, Link was brought to the thickest book on the shelf; a novel called *The Legend of Groose*. At the base of it, the leather had been torn open, and inside the book seemed to have been hollowed out, the pages pushed to the side or simply ripped away.

"Wohohoho!" the old man laughed, seeing Link enter. "Oh? A visitor after many long weeks! Even Jotari has been away so long, I've grown almost... lonely... But what is it? What do you need?" He hobbled

forward on his feather staff, looking up at Link.

"I'm searching for the sacred elements to infuse within my blade," Link explained. "I have found both the Earth and Fire elements, however, the Wind element has disappeared."

"Hm...?" Librari raised an eyebrow. "In which case, you would want to visit the Temple of Droplets in Lake Hylia, yes?"

"Yes," Link nodded.

"Very well," Librari took a step back, sitting down. "You are the first such brave person in a long while! Stand on the clover in front of me!"

Link tilted his head, but stepped on the large clover that was the imprint on a bookmark, sitting in the middle of the room.

"Good, just stand there like I told you," Librari laughed. "Wohoho! Now... OPEN, secret mystery panel!!"

"... What?"

Librari cackled as the clover opened like a trap door and Link was sent plummeting downward. "Wohoho!" he sighed, absent mindedly. "Wasn't that fun? Now then..." He looked down into the pit. "It's up to you to pass the trial safely and recover the item you require. Oh, what fun! I do so love the real nitty-gritty of adventuring!"

—

"Urk..." Ezlo groaned, flopping sideways on the wet ground. "Owowow! I just smacked my hip on something!" He sat up. "Well, not my hip... My... whatever it is I have now... My brim? Whatever! That old fool must just love sending people on dangerous missions! And how did that Librari get into the Temple of Droplets anyway?"

"Ssshhh!" Link hissed, sitting up. "Do you hear that?"

Ezlo shut up and listened. They were in what seemed like a sewer, or at least some kind of underground aqueduct, with rounded stone walls and a river of clear water running beneath their feet. Behind them was a dead end, but in front of them there was a faint rattling noise, echoing through.

"That better not be another Caterpillar," Ezlo grunted.

Link drew his sword, picking up Ezlo and putting him on his head. He moved quietly and low to the ground as he entered the next chamber. There was a waterfall running through it, and two very large deadly Scissor Beetles standing right next to him.

Link jumped back into the tunnel as they lunged. "Whoa!" he

shouted.

"Why couldn't it have been a Caterpillar!?" Ezlo screamed.

The Beetles fought to get into the tunnel, snapping at Link. One of them made it in, swinging its horns like battering rams, but Link sliced up at it, knocking it back into the other. Using his shield and staying low, he could keep them from doing much damage, but they started to climb on top of him.

"Fine," Link hissed, stabbing upward and slicing through its body. "If you're just gonna open yourself up like that."

"Puns!?" Ezlo screeched. "Now!?"

Link slammed his shield into the head of the other Beetle, pulling back as it tried to bite him. Now disoriented, Link finished the battle by stabbing through its head.

"You're too confident for your own good," Ezlo muttered as Link stepped over the dead bugs. "But you've certainly come a long way."

Link grinned, dropping down into the waterfall chamber. There was a pool of water in the center of the room, and on the other side was a chest. He crossed the water, and cracked open the seal. Inside, he found a pair of golden bracelets.

"Hmm!" Ezlo nodded. "Yes, yes, yes! Why, it all makes sense now, doesn't it boy?"

"Nope," Link sighed.

"Librari used these bracelets... somehow... to open the entrance to the Temple of Droplets," Ezlo narrowed his eyes, unsure of where his own thoughts were leading him. "So if you put them on... I'm sure something will happen!"

"Somehow?" Link asked.

"Well, he wouldn't have sent us down here to get them for nothing!"

Link stood, slipping the bracelets onto his wrists. They emitted a strange glow, but they didn't seem to *do* anything.

"Well?" Ezlo nudged.

"It's... strange," Link mumbled.

"Hopefully Librari can explain what it all means," Ezlo decided.

Link nodded, turning to try and figure a way out.

"Well done, indeed!" Librari laughed. "Why, you're almost as spry as I was at that age!"

"Thank you, but," Link held out his wrists. "I'd really like to know what they're for."

Librari gave him a quizzical look. "... You mean, you didn't know when you came here?"

"No, not at all," Link admitted.

"But you said you needed access to the Temple of Droplets," Librari remembered.

"Well I do," Link agreed. "But in truth I hadn't even gone there yet. I'm still unsure whether or not I should continue looking for the Wind Element instead."

"Oh there's no need at the moment," Librari told him. "But I suppose I should explain. I've heard much about you from the other elders, so I knew about your quest. Though I thought you had heard of these bracelets and their necessity to your journey."

Librari leaned forward on his feather staff. "You see, they are magical items. With them worn around your wrists, you can move heavy objects a grown man would have trouble with! And even then, you could do so as a Minish as well! Wohohoho! Such an ingenious creation if I do say so myself!"

"And they will allow me to enter the next Temple?" Link asked.

"Yes," Librari smiled. "Because, you see, before your strength shrank with you when you became our size. But now, you can lift and even break the seals necessary to enter. Of course, you can only reach the seals as a Minish, so these bracelets are important as they allow you to keep your strength."

Link stared down at the bracelets, silent for a few moments. "I have one more question," he said softly.

"Ask away."

Link looked up at Librari. "If I don't find these next two elements soon... Will I be too late to break the curse? Will the dark energy that now surrounds the King, win?"

Librari shook his head. "I cannot say for certain," he said sadly. "But I know for a fact that you are a strong boy for someone your age, and you have great courage within your heart. I would never doubt you have what it takes to finish this, save Zelda, and defeat Vaati, all in one fell swoop!"

"Then in that case," Link grunted, getting to his feet. "I should hurry."

Librari nodded. "Farewell, young hero," he smiled. "And good luck."



CHAPTER 13

TEMPLE OF DROPLETS

"You have been a thorn in my side for too long..."

Vaati watched as Link made his way to Lake Hylia. He wondered through the woods, with that coward Ezlo.

"Those Moblins should have killed you, yet you've lasted this long..."

Vaati looked over his shoulder to Hyrule Castle in the distance, then back to Link.

"... But I know where you are going, and you will not survive this encounter."

Vaati disappeared in a shroud of darkness.

Link arrived at Lake Hylia, the water stretching to the edge of the horizon. Beyond that was the land outside Hyrule.

For a moment, Link wondered what that land was called, but his thoughts were interrupted by Ezlo.

"There it is," Ezlo told him. "The Temple of Droplets."

Link followed Ezlo's gaze, and found a wide ice patch. It looked pretty flat, with no real indications of anything under it. Only defining characteristics were the thin cracks that ran along its surface.

"Are you sure?" Link asked. "Just looks like ice."

"Of course!" Ezlo scoffed. "And the last Temple was hidden away in a swamp, the one before that deep in a mine, and the first was a tiny shrine in a forest. You didn't expect a sign that just said "Welcome, here lies the element!" did you?"

Link sighed. "Okay, so how do we get there?" Walking along the beach he didn't see any kind of pier or dock that lead out that far.

"Looks like you'll have to swim," Ezlo said.

"But it's ice!" Link said. "Isn't the water cold?"

"It'll be quick!" Ezlo promised. "Don't worry!"

"I could just float you down the water instead," Link decided.

"No way! It's too co--" Ezlo stopped. "I see your point. Fair enough! Try using a log and riding that out there."

"Hey you *can* have good ideas!"

"Why thank you--hey!"

Link laughed, turning back to the forest behind him. There didn't appear to be any smaller logs nearby, but he figured now would be as good a time as any to test the bracelets.

Walking to the nearest fallen tree, Link punched it. The bark snapped, and the thick wood in the center cracked as well.

"Didn't even hurt," Link grinned. He hit the tree again, snapping it in half, then he brought the broken half to the water.

He got on top, pushed off, made it half way... and fell sideways.

Shaking horribly, Link climbed onto the patch of ice. "I-I-I-It's never easy is it?" he spat, teeth chattering.

"N-N-N-No, n-no it's n-not," Ezlo agreed.

Link basically crawled to the center of the ice, seeing a hole cracked through it. "Elder Librari said we had to be Minish to enter, right?"

"I can feel the energy here," Ezlo nodded. "The whole temple is a portal!"

"Really?"

Link stood and Ezlo began his incantation. A moment later Link fell through the ice, landing on a large platform in the Minish Temple below.

"I'm freezing in here!!" Ezlo exclaimed, shaking. "If you don't find that element quickly, I'm going to turn into a hatsicle!!"

"The entire floor is made of ice," Link said flatly.

"What did you expect?" Ezlo muttered. "Be careful not to fall and freeze your backside to the floor Link!"

His feet kept slipping from underneath him as he slowly made his way through the ice cavern. Light filtered in from above, making the ice shine more like crystal. It would have been an amazing place to be if he could enjoy it.

Then he arrived at the far side of the room, and was stopped from continuing by two very large boulders.

"What are you waiting for?" Ezlo asked.

Link shoved the first boulder out of the way, moving it like it was nothing. "I guess this rock in normal size would be pretty light," he said. "Librari wasn't kidding when he said these would make me as strong as a normal Human in Minish size."

He moved the second boulder. "That was easy!"

"Don't get full of yourself just yet kid!" Ezlo warned. "I sense darkness on the other side of that door."

Link nodded, pressing open the door. Right on the other side, was the final element.

...

... frozen in a giant block of ice.

"Hey!" Ezlo exclaimed. "Well done Link! This looks to be the element all right. But what will we do? We can't even touch it while it's trapped in that ice... We'll need to melt it off somehow..."

"I could just break it," Link suggested, stepping up to the ice.

"You could try," Ezlo chuckled.

Link punched the ice, but magic prohibited it from shattering. His attack bounced right off.

"Still not going to be easy," Link sighed. "Well okay, just so long as we know it's here, I can find a way to get it, right?"

"Look! Up there!" Ezlo pointed his beak up to what looked like a hatch in the ceiling. It looked like it was supposed to open.

"I have to open that," Link nodded.

"Yup."

Link looked around, and headed for a flight of stairs nearby.

—

Pulling his sword out of it's head, Link kicked the Scissor Beetle into the frozen water at the bottom of the cliff. He sheathed his weapons, and stepped back into the first chamber, now above the frozen block that held the element. On the other side of the platform was a large switch.

"This should do it," Link huffed, watching the hatch above him as he walked to the switch. He pushed it, but it didn't budge. "Seriously?"

"Perhaps there are some things that even a strong man can't do alone?" Ezlo suggested.

Link nodded, drawing his sword again. "I just need it to be strong enough to push the switch," he told himself.

The blade glowed, his vision blurred, and a mostly solid copy of himself appeared. He sheathed his sword, and grabbed the switch.

"Push," Link said.

The copy joined Link in pushing the switch. Finally it moved, and above them the hatch opened up. Light spilled through, hitting the ice encasing the element.

"We did it Link!" Ezlo said cheerfully. "Now we can take the element!"

Link high-fived the copy, letting it disappear.

"That was a lot of trouble," Ezlo continued. "But we finally did it, and... What in blazes!?"

"What?" Link asked, not seeing anything wrong.

"Hey, something's not right here!!" Ezlo complained.

Then Link saw it; the octorock that had been frozen behind the element. The light hit it, and it had started to thaw as well.

"No wait!" Link leaned over the stone rail on the edge of the platform, watching as the giant octorock sucked up the element.

The octorock receded back into another chamber further back, ignoring Link.

"What!?" Ezlo hissed. "What's this!? That stupid octorock stole our element! Don't just stand there! We've got to go get it! Link! Now!"

"Right!" Link jumped over the edge, rolling across the ice as he landed. Fighting for his footing, he slid towards the hole the octorock escaped through.

But Ezlo stopped him before he could continue. "The Temple of Droplets holds the last of the elements, like the Minish Elder said," he explained. "So let's brace ourselves and do this! Are you ready, Link!?"

Link sighed, shaking his head.

"... .. What!? What's that face for?" Ezlo exclaimed. "You don't want to brace yourself!? All right, fine! No bracing! Let's just go!"

Link slid into the next chamber, the octorock mindlessly walking in circles. He drew his sword, and darted forward.

And right then, the octorock turned around and spit a rock the size of a boulder at him.

A trap!? Link thought, trying to dodge. Ducking at least, he managed to avoid it, but the momentum of the ice sent him right into the monster. It bashed it's head at him, spitting another boulder.

He was close enough to avoid it this time as well, but he was too close. Kicking off of the octorock, he pushed himself away, back towards the wall.

Link held up his shield, the octorock watching him.

He risked taking a step forward, but immediately the octorock fired a boulder again. Instinctively however, Link swung his sword at it, and managed to hit the boulder right back at it!

"Whoa!" Link said, looking at his sword. "Can't tell if that's the sword's power, the bracelet's or a mix of both, but it works!" He smiled at

the octorock. "Come on!"

The octorock looked very clearly angry, and it fired another boulder, not understanding how big a mistake that was. The last time Link deflected it, it got sent flying back into a wall. But this time, he aimed right for the octorock. It struck the monster in the face, pushing it back.

Disoriented, it never saw the final strike coming.

Link launched off the ground, and slammed the blade of his sword into the monster's skull. He hit the ground hard, but he didn't care. The octorock fell dead, going up in a puff of smoke. All that was left, was the water element floating in the center of the room.

Link sheathed his sword, and took hold of the element, the light spilling in through the ice reflecting off of it.



Back on the surface, Link took a deep breath of relief. Three down, only one more to go.

"Brrrrrrrr..." Ezlo shook the ice chips off his head. "I almost froze my beak off in there!"

Link laughed, and reached for the log to swim back to shore... and then realized how dark it suddenly was.

"Wh-wh-what!?" Ezlo mumbled, staring at the sky.

Link looked up as well, expecting to see Vaati, but instead... the King of Hyrule, Daltus, appeared as in apparition.

He looked down at Link and Ezlo in silence, but not an angry silence. It seemed to take great strength to appear like this. "O young one," he said, his voice seemingly everywhere at once. "Child who seeks to help the princess of Hyrule... My name is Gustaf."

"Gustaf," Link mumbled. *Not Daltus... meaning... this is the past King! This isn't some apparition, it's a ghost!*

"I was King of Hyrule, countless ages ago," Gustaf explained. "Stand before me... Only then will the path open to you."

And then suddenly he was gone, and the darkness faded.

"Hmph!" Ezlo scoffed. "Was that... just a dream? He said he was a King of Hyrule. Wait! What's that!?"

It took a second for Link to realize what Ezlo was talking about. His pocket was glowing, the one that held his map. He pulled it out and looked at it.

"Look at your map, Link. There's some kind of mark on it," Ezlo huffed.

There was a sort of check mark painted over a spot just between Hyrule Castle and Mt. Crenel. It was the Royal Valley... a graveyard...

"Hm. I guess that means it wasn't a dream! We should head there once we infuse your sword with that element."

"Right," Link nodded.

"To the elemental sanctuary!"

Chapter 13: Temple of Droplets



CHAPTER 14

THE POWER OF THREE

Hyrule was quieter now, Link noticed as he walked through the nearly empty streets. There was no sign of the festival that had been held here not too long ago. In fact, it felt like the spirit of Hyrule had all but died.

People still walked through the streets, but they spoke in hushed tones, and were always weary of the knights. The knights themselves guarded every exit, and stood in front of the doors to the castle.

If Link wanted in, he'd have to find another way.

Climbing over the outer walls would be suicide. He'd need an army to defend himself considering how obvious his break in would be. The castle guards would be on him in seconds. Not that it mattered though, since he couldn't even attempt it without a grappling hook.

But luckily he didn't really have to think that hard. He and Zelda grew up together after all, and she'd shown him a secret entrance in the courtyards that her father didn't know about. All he had to do was make it passed the guards standing in his way, and he was in.

"You need into the castle," Swiftblade said, startling Link.

"... Yes," Link sighed, getting over his minor heart attack.

"I will distract them for you," Swiftblade nodded. "Hurry." He walked up to the guards, and even though Link couldn't hear what he said to them, they left their post.

Good, Link thought, running through the archway to the castle's outer courtyards. Deciding to worry about what Swiftblade told them later, Link ducked behind a row of bushes as another set of guards made their rounds. They passed right by him, and Link snuck by.

Now that he was out of sight, he bolted for the secret entrance.

"Hey you!" a guard shouted.

Okay so I wasn't out of sight, Link grumbled, running faster.

"Stop!" the guard ordered.

Almost there, Link turned and slid, catching a glimpse of the guard before ducking behind another bush. But when the guard arrived, Link was gone.

"What!?" the guard gasped, spinning in place. "Gho-ghost! Ghost child!"

Link chuckled quietly to himself, hidden safely below ground. The dirt and grass was loose under a certain bush, so you could drop through, but it was stiff enough that once you were gone it would go back into place, and appear as if you were never there.

"And *now* I'm out of sight," Link grinned, stepping down the ancient ladder into the dungeons of Hyrule Castle.

"Well who would've thought?" Ezlo mumbled, staring up at the secret entrance. "Where to now?"

"The elemental sanctuary," Link answered, staring down the long dark tunnels. "... If we can find it."

"Do you know the way?" Ezlo asked.

"Zelda usually had a torch," Link admitted, walking slowly. "But I think I remember where to go."

Ezlo popped his head out of a trap door in a back room of the castle.

"Is it clear?" Link asked.

"Yes," Ezlo said.

Link climbed out, brushing himself off. "Okay, the sanctuary should be this way." He cracked open another door and entered the halls, which were a lot emptier than he remembered them being. They were emptier than the streets outside even, which made Link wonder; where did everyone go?

"These halls are rather empty," Ezlo said, voicing Link's thoughts. "Everyone's probably all out looking for Vaati."

"Hopefully," Link agreed.

The empty halls at least made it easier to get to the sanctuary. There weren't even guards in here to stop him from walking in. He hurried through the inner courtyard, and opened the door to the elemental sanctuary, the crystal walls shining around him.

As he entered the sword chamber, he quickly took the water element out of his pocket and stepped up to its pedestal. Placing it in its spot, he drew his sword, taking a step back to the stone slot.

He held it up, and placed it in the slot.

The elements glowed, and as before their power flashed in a bolt of electricity towards the hilt of the sword still in Link's hands. It burned the

reddened wings of the hilt a blue color, making it now resemble the Picori Blade it was originally crafted from.

As Link held it up, the blade glowed, and his vision blurred again. But it was worse this time, not just seeing double, but triple! He could see two more of himself standing beside himself, each holding their own sword. But this time seemed different.

They felt solid.

"Three Links!?" Ezlo exclaimed. "Wasn't two enough!?"

The copies disappeared, and Link was left staring at the sword. "This... is the strangest power I've ever seen."

"But useful," Ezlo added. "In the Temple of Droplets, it seemed like the copy kept the same strength you received with those bracelets. With three of you, you could do some *serious* damage!"

"Yeah," Link mumbled, staring at the blade. It was like a puzzle; with all the pieces in a pile, you know it's incomplete, but you also think every piece is there. When it's done, all the pieces are there, and the puzzle is complete... This was like looking at a puzzle that you knew had a missing piece.

For some reason, it just felt broken.

"Link!" Ezlo snapped.

Link shook his head, sheathing the blade. "Right," he nodded. "Next stop, the Royal Valley. Maybe the old King can tell us how to get the last element."

"That's the spirit!" Ezlo huffed. "Onward, m'boy!"

Link headed back out the way he came.

—

It took a long time getting back out of the courtyard. After getting spotted the first time, the guards were now freaking out over the ghost child that disappeared. Or at least, that one guard was, everyone else was laughing.

As soon as the coast was clear, Link darted out of the courtyard, making his way towards the western exit. It was the same path he walked to get to Mt. Crenel, but this time instead of continuing west, he took a path that turned north.

It brought him into a thick forest, trees so tall they started blocking out the sun.

"What I wouldn't give for a torch," Link muttered, swatting away a branch that thwacked him in the face. He could barely see two feet in front

of him.

"Hehehe!" Ezlo laughed. "So, what do you think, Link? Pretty dark and spooky, isn't it? Makes you wanna cry, doesn't it?"

"Pff, coward," Link huffed, deciding to just slice through the branches.

"What? You're... not scared?" Ezlo looked back, probably expecting something to jump out at him, but when he faced forward again he had a more determined look. "Well, good! Neither am I!... So, come on... let's go..."

Link laughed, looking up at Ezlo. "Scaredy hat."

"I was only asking because you are a child!" Ezlo argued. "These woods are said to be haunted you know!"

"Well then I'll tell you when I see a ghost," Link grinned.

"Please do," Ezlo nodded.

Link looked back up at him.

"I meant so that I could see the look on your face when you realize how scared you should have been!"

"Haha! Right," Link sliced through a few more tree branches. "BWAH! GHOST!"

"What!?" Ezlo squawked. "Back fiend! I have scissors for a beak I know how to use 'em!" He looked down at Link. "Stop laughing," he said blankly. "Link, that's not funny."

"Actually it's hilarious," Link corrected. "The way you jumped-uh..."

"I didn't jump!" Ezlo argued. "And if I did it was because I was jumping into action!"

"... Ezlo, shut up," Link hissed. "Look."

"What now, boy?" Ezlo growled. He stared at where Link was pointing, and saw a horrible sight.

There was a man, pale as a ghost, and horrifyingly disproportionate, like a man made from monster parts.

"G-g-ghost!" Ezlo shrieked.

Link jumped out from the trees, gripping his sword and preparing to fight.

"What are you doing boy!?" Ezlo squeaked.

"Hello!" the man beast waved, ignoring the sword being pointed at him. "My name's Dampé, I'm the gravedigger here."

"... Not a ghost?" Ezlo mumbled

"... In hindsight, we've already seen a ghost," Link remembered. "That's why we're here anyway."

"... Oh right," Ezlo nodded. "The ghost of the past King."

"What's that?" Dampé asked. "You were called here by the ghost of a king? That'd be the ancient King of Hyrule who rests here. I've seen him myself."

"Really?" Link asked, sheathing his sword. "Can you take us to him?"

"Well, if the King has called you, I can't see any reason not to let you in," he turned his back to them. "Here, follow me."

"I suddenly have a bad feeling about this," Ezlo hissed.

"It'll be fine," Link assured him. "Probably."

Dampé led them through the forest, and soon they reached a gate. "I'll open it for you," he said unlocking it and standing aside. "Be careful in there."

Link nodded, and stepped through the gates. Spread before him, were rows and rows of graves. They looked to be well taken care of, but the setting was so dark Link expected half of them to open on their own.

Walking through them felt strange as well, like he wasn't supposed to be there. As he passed by them, he started picturing the bodies underground, each turning their heads to look at him through the dirt.

He started moving faster, tripping over himself as he tried not to move too quickly. He'd never hear the end of it if Ezlo thought he really *was* scared.

But doing his best to push thoughts of the dead aside, he forced himself to make his way passed...

Link stopped, staring at one of the graves.

"What is it boy?" Ezlo asked. "I'd like to get out of here as quick-"

"It says Link," Link said, pointing to one of the graves.

"Ah... uh," Ezlo narrowed his eyes. "I don't... well, it can't be *that* uncommon of a name, yes?"

Link stared at the grave with his name on it. "**Here lies Link,**" he read. "**Hero of Men.**"

Ezlo was stunned. "Was... Well perhaps..." He shook his head, trying to look anywhere else, maybe expecting it to change if he looked back at it. "Um... well, I think it's best to move on."

"What was the other hero's name?" Link asked. "The one from the legends? The one whose sword hangs on the wall of Melari's forge?"

"... I... don't remember," Ezlo admitted. "I... I suppose it *could* have been... Link."

Link looked at himself. The green tunic he'd thrown on that day Zelda took him to the festival, it meant nothing then... but he remembered

seeing those stained glass windows in the sanctuary... and that hero wore a green tunic as well. Was it just a coincidence? Was it supposed to be this way?

... Did Link have a choice in being the hero?

He tried to think about why he was on this mission.

Zelda was his friend, so of course he wasn't going to sit quietly when she needed help. He was the son of the Smith, so of course he knew the King as well. And that also meant he was good with a sword...

Twice was a coincidence... but everything just kept adding up. The fact that he was also young enough to see the Minish was pretty convenient as well...

He realized his hands were shaking and dropped them by his sides, staring at the grave again.

"Link...?" Ezlo mumbled. "Are you alright?"

"... Yeah," Link hissed. "Just..." He forced himself to look away from the grave. "I kept telling myself this wasn't meant to happen... that it was just unfortunate that Vaati got ahold of that power... but..." He looked up to the hill at the end of the graveyard, where the old King rested. "I think I understand now."

"Understand?" Ezlo asked.

Link continued walking. "Yeah, this was no accident," he growled. "And when this is over... I'm getting answers as to why that is."

Ezlo was quiet for the rest of the walk.

Chapter 14: The Power of Three



CHAPTER 15

AN ANCIENT SEAL

Link opened the seal to the tomb of the old King. Through it was a long staircase leading down, and through that an empty chamber with faded murals painted on the walls. It looked like they told the story of the King that was buried here, and the story of the King before that, but not much else.

How long ago was the first King? Link wondered. Has Hyrule always been around? Or, is it's history really this short?

He continued through, opening a door on the other side marked with the Royal Symbol; the Triforce. Link wondered if that had meant something once as well, or if it was just some marker.

On the other side of the door, was a chamber that appeared similar to the Elemental Sanctuary's sword altar, but only half of it. In the sanctuary, there was a large raised platform in the center, with statues in each corner. Here, it was the same, but a wall ran halfway through it, and instead of there being a sword pedestal, there was a massive gravestone with the Royal Symbol carved into it as well.

Link stood in front of it, and the old King appeared.

"... .. O young one," the King said. "Child who seeks to rescue my descendant, Zelda... Welcome... My name is Gustaf. I was King of Hyrule countless ages ago... I grant you this Kinstone... Seek the source of the flow in Hyrule... Only then will your path open... Save Zelda... All of Hyrule is counting on you..."

King Gustaf faded, and at his feet, a slot opened up in the gravestone. It slid out a stone plate, and sitting on it was half of a golden Kinstone. There was a picture of a crown on one side, and the Triforce on the other. It was also about the size of a rupee, so it fit in his pocket.

"Hmm... Fascinating!" Ezlo mused. "And strange... And the source of the flow? What do you suppose that could mean?"

Link's first thought was Lake Hylia, but there were a lot of rivers in Hyrule, it could be literally anywhere. "I don't know," he admitted. "But we should get out of here."

—

"Source of the flow in Hyrule," Swiftblade murmured. "I think it's obvious that it refers to water."

"Of course," Link agreed. "I was thinking Lake Hylia—"

"Even the great lake gets its water from somewhere," Swiftblade told him. "According to legend, there is a place high in the mountains east of Hyrule where all rivers derive. There are many waterfalls there, but no one's ever made it to the top."

"... Do I want to know why?" Link asked.

"Most say there's simply no good way to climb it," Swiftblade answered. "Others say there are too many monsters, and others say there is a giant rock monster sitting at the top, throwing down climbers who get too close."

"... Giant... rock monster?" Link asked, skeptical.

"There are only rumors," Swiftblade assured him. "But if you seek the 'source of the flow in Hyrule,' it would be there."

"Good," Link nodded. "I'll see what I can find."

"Oh, and Link," Swiftblade added before Link could leave. He looked over his shoulder. "Do not come back here again until it is absolutely necessary. The King grows angrier by the minute."

"Don't worry," Link said. "I probably won't be back until I get that last element anyway."

"In that case, hurry."

"I will," Link waved goodbye, and started east.

—

For every person not on the streets of Hyrule Castle Town, there seemed to be two more monsters roaming the fields outside. Octorocks, Keatons, Chuchus, and Tektites seemed to be everywhere. Once or twice Link thought he saw a Moblin lurking in the trees, but he didn't want to waste time with unnecessary confrontation. It wasn't like he got anything from defeating them.

And eventually, he made it to the east front of the northern mountain range. There were waterfalls rolling over every cliff, but those cliffs were both too steep to climb and too slick to bother.

"I don't see another way up," Link mumbled to himself. "Swiftblade was right."

"Giving up already?" Ezlo scoffed.

"No!" Link argued. "Just, need to find another option." He started walking the base of the mountain, eventually going through the edge of the nearby forest.

Twice he thought he went too far, but every time he looked back there was still no other way to go.

"Look at your feet boy!" Ezlo said suddenly.

"What? Why?" Link asked, picking up his feet, thinking he stepped in something.

"Sorry, not what I meant," Ezlo corrected. "I meant, look what you're standing on!"

Link looked at the ground, and through the dirt, scattered leaves, and loose rocks, he saw he was standing on stone slabs. There was a structure here, at one point.

"So I'm getting closer," Link said, looking around. He faced the mountains that towered above him. "But, I still don't see a way up..." He pulled out the Kinstone Gustaf had given him, hoping for a clue, but it's surface remained unchanged and incomplete.

"Do you see that?" Ezlo asked.

"Stop being vague," Link told him.

"Sorry again," Ezlo apologized. "But look, behind the overgrown vines and branches that cling to the cliff face! Right under the massive waterfall!"

Link looked where he was pointing, and saw a small flicker of light. Running to the branches he pushed them aside, and discovered a shaped boulder set into the cliff. On the front of it, was an indent, half filled by a small broken coin.

Link set the Kinstone in the slot, completing the coin, and the boulder split. Each half of the boulder moved aside.

"A stone door!" Ezlo huffed. "According to King Gustaf, the final element lies somewhere behind the falls. We've dawdled long enough, Link! Let's go find that element! We're just one step away from being able to lift Princess Zelda's curse!"

"Right," Link stepped into the cave.

"... .. Hey," Ezlo said, poking Link's head. "I just realized something. I'm starting to think... and talk... a lot like you lately! What's with that? I need to get my head straight!"

"Why are you telling me?" Link asked, rubbing his forehead.

"Just thought you should know," Ezlo answered.

"Well you don't have to whack me for it!" Link complained.

"Haha!" Ezlo chuckled. "Consider it payback for the ghost scare."

"I hate you so much," Link sighed.

The stone door led to a series of tunnels, each seeming to lead in different directions. There weren't any signs, but Link thought they all probably went to all kinds of places in Hyrule, like secret passages that made it easier to get around. Of course, you'd still have to walk the whole way, but it was safer? Maybe?

Realizing how pointless those tunnels were, Link figured that was probably why they weren't in use anymore.

But, following the tunnels that led *up* the mountain, it finally exited looking over a cliff. It was taller than Mt. Crenel, and he could actually see the top of Hyrule Castle from here.

"No time for sightseeing," he told himself, starting up the rock wall behind him. Just above him was the top of the mountain. The air felt thin, but he knew that at last it was almost over.

And then he made it to the top, and he saw something just beyond the northern cliffs in front of him. It looked like a large rounded spire, but it was made of rock. Looking over the edge, his face paled as he saw the giant sleeping rock monster below.

As quietly as possible he moved away. "Okay," he hissed. "Giant rock monster is real, got it."

"What have we here?" Ezlo said, pointing to a circle of carved stone embedded in the ground. "Well, we seem to have hit a dead end... What shall we do from here?"

"No look," Link said, crouching by the stone circle. Imprinted beside it was a line of notes, the name Zeffa signed beneath them. He pulled out the ocarina and played a few notes.

"... You're not very good at this," Ezlo noticed.

"Just hold on!" Link argued. He played in a higher key, slowly at first until he got the pattern down. "Okay, here goes." He stood in the center of the stone circle and played the notes as instructed.

Beneath him, the stones cracked.

Link was thrown off his feet by a sudden gust of wind, but he didn't hit ground. Instead, the winds carried him upward. He screamed as the ground got farther and farther away, and then the clouds were below him too.

I'm dead, Link thought.



CHAPTER 16

CASTLE IN THE SKY

"... ... Am I still alive?" Ezlo muttered, laying flat on his belly.

Link rolled over onto his back, staring up at the clear blue sky.

"Link!! What were you thinking, child!?" Ezlo complained. "You just reaped the whirlwind, as they say! We could be dead right now!"

Link lolled his head to the side, seeing the clouds that he was resting on. "We very well might be."

"... But I must admit, it did the trick," Ezlo said, also looking around. Nothing but clouds, just fields of them. They didn't appear solid, wisping away in the wind, yet Link and Ezlo seemed to have no problem sitting on top of them. "Are we... in the land above the clouds? There must be something here that can lead us to the final element! Let's go find it!"

Link groaned, cracking his back as he stood. He put Ezlo on his head and tried to find any sign of where to go. And of course, the answer was right in front of him.

He didn't see it at first, since it was far away, but he could make out the very clear shape... of a castle, sitting on top of a cloud. The closer he got, the brighter it shined, like the most reflective gold he'd ever seen. The stairs leading up to it seemed daunting from farther away, but even though they seemed taller up close, Link swore he felt lighter up here. After climbing the inside of a mountain, he'd felt tired, but walking these stairs was next to nothing.

And now they stood at the door of the castle.

"Now how do you build something like this on top of a cloud?" Ezlo wondered.

"Maybe someone lives inside," Link suggested.

"If so, maybe we could ask for the element?" Ezlo asked, watching each of the windows high above them. "It's worth a shot, Link!"

Link pushed open the giant doors, throwing up a hand to block the sudden light. Even the inside seemed to be entirely of gold, reflecting the crystal chandeliers that hung above him. This... this was a castle that would make the King of Hyrule jealous beyond belief.

"Hello!" said one of the residents, shaking Link's hand as the doors

shut. "What can we do for you today?"

"Awfully cheery," Ezlo muttered.

"We were hoping you could tell us about the Wind Element," Link said. "I traveled to the ancient Wind Ruins, but-"

"But we'd already left a long time ago," said another resident, several others flocking around him. "You should speak with the elderly woman a few floors up! The wind tells her a lot of useful things!"

Before he could even argue, Link was ushered through the room and towards a staircase. After that, they went back to standing around and talking amongst themselves. Floor by floor he walked on his own, wandering the blocky halls of the castle in the sky, feeling completely lost when at last he was standing in the center of room facing their leader; a woman clad in red. She sat on a large blue rug, her staff resting beside her.

"Welcome, welcome," she smiled.

"Hello," Link bowed, sitting on the floor just out of the rug's reach. "I was wondering if you could help me..."

The old woman held up her hand. "Long, long ago, and than an age before that... Our tribe abandoned the place you call the Wind Ruins. With our magic, we moved our palace up into the skies. We are the Wind Tribe. We have been watching, and we know all that happens on your surface world."

"So you knew I was coming," Link nodded. "That's why they told me to see you, they knew you expected me."

"We know a small boy collects elements to lift the curse from a princess." the woman continued. "We know of Vaati and his evil acts... The winds tell us these things."

"Then you know I have no time to lose," Link said. "I need to know where I can find the Wind Element."

"The Wind Element that you seek lies deep in the Palace of Winds above me," she explained. "*When the blade has been infused with the four elements, the way to the Light Force shall open.* So it is told in the legends of the Wind Tribe. Vaati himself may already know this. Surface dwellers are not permitted to enter our palace, but you are special. You may continue to the roof."

Behind him, a door opened up, revealing another staircase. The elderly woman seemed to have already fallen asleep, so he took the stairs to the top of the castle.

Or at least he thought it was the top of the castle.

The Palace of Winds was massive, and the 'roof' he stood on was more of a front porch. The castle he'd just walked through was tiny

compared to the structure that towered above him. Clouds had blocked it from his vision before, and because of how big it was clouds still blocked most of it from sight.

But it wasn't like the door was right in front of him either, sadly, there were a lot more stairs to climb before he got even that far.

"There's a strong gale blowing here," Ezlo warned. "Try not to get swept away!"

"Noted," Link nodded, making sure Ezlo stayed on his head as he continued his journey.



The long, curved tunnels seemed to wrap around the inside of the palace, leading in circles. Occasionally he reached a point that lead up a floor, but the place was so massive sometimes it felt like he wasn't moving at all.

But it was clear Vaati's dark magic had reached this far as well. It seemed the whole building was cursed; ancient jars would fly at him, shattering against the walls, or floors would crack open revealing the open air beneath him, and doors seemed to lead him away from where he was trying to go.

Maybe that was just the palace itself, with magic tricks meant to keep people away. It wasn't until he came across a room with a locked door that he was sure it was Vaati's magic.

Meaning to turn and try to find another way, he looked back to see a knight in rusted golden armor blocking the door he'd come through. But as if that weren't menacing enough, he had a large spiked ball on the end of a long silver chain, and he looked plenty strong enough to throw it around.

"He's a lot bigger than those monsters you've fought on the surface," Ezlo noticed.

Link drew his sword and shield as the knight slowly started swinging the ball and chain. "Any suggestions?"

"Wear him out?" Ezlo offered. "Beat him quickly? *Jump!*"

Link jumped to the side as the ball came hurtling at him.

"That was too fast!" Link screamed, rolling back towards the far side of the room to get as far from the knight as he could. "He'll wear *me* out before he even breaks a sweat!"

"Then beat him quickly it is then," Ezlo nodded.

"Easy for you to say," Link muttered, watching the knight pull the

chain back.

The spiked ball ripped the floor beneath it as it was drug across. Yet the knight didn't seem to think it was any trouble, nor did he have trouble lifting it over his head and spinning it at an alarming rate. It created almost a shield all the way around him, and he was walking closer.

"It's fast," Ezlo warned. "But it can't be everywhere at once!"

"Right!" Link watched it as it got closer, gripping his sword tighter and tighter, waiting to get the timing just right. He'd only have a small window before it was back around again, but it had to be enough.

He took a deep breath, and leaped forward, pushing off the locked door behind him.

Then the spiked ball slammed right into him.

It hadn't come back around, but instead the knight had thrown it at him. Link managed to get his shield up in time, but it did little to block the blow. His ribs took most of the damage, and judging by the pain there was no doubt they were broken.

And it only got worse. With the force of the throw, Link was flung backwards, but the spiked ball flew faster. It crashed right through the door, shattering it. Link skid toppling through the now open doorway, only to find there was a sheer drop back to the world below on the other side.

He tried to stop, but it was futile.

In one last desperate attempt, as the tips of his boots teetered on the edge of the doorway, he held his sword firm. It glowed, and he fell back. The air rushed up at him, only to come to a screeching halt a moment later.

Link looked up to see two faded copies of himself holding onto him, trying to pull him by his arms.

And then suddenly they were gone, the knight crushing them beneath the ball and chain.

Link stared in horror as he tumbled through the air, the knight in golden armor slowly disappearing in the tiny doorway as the clouds swallowed his view.

...

His eyes burned, and he felt nauseous, but he forced himself to stay conscious, even as his ribs threatened to burst his empty lungs. If he'd had air, he'd have screamed, but as he spun and spun and spun, as much as he fought he couldn't hold on anymore.

His eyes shut from the pain, and Link lost his grip.

Link was flying.

Not on his own... Zelda was there too. She was flying on a large blue feathered bird. Link's bird was red.

For the first time in a long time, at least for a moment, he let himself enjoy the peace.

"Link!" Zelda smiled, flying beside him.

"Yeah?" Link replied.

"Today was amazing," Zelda told him. "Watching you win the race and performing the ritual together..." She looked away, staring in front of her. "I'll always remember this. It really was wonderful."

Link smiled, enjoying the wind in his face.

And then the wind sped up, and as if it were some twisted dream, the air itself swallowed Zelda whole. Suddenly Link was falling again, his bird nowhere to be seen, but one thought clear in his mind.

"I have to save Zelda!" Link exclaimed, waking up.

He was still falling, but he couldn't give up yet. Somehow, inexplicably, he'd always ended up *exactly* where he needed to be. That door opened up to a drop like this, and he didn't remember seeing any other way to go, so this where he was supposed to be.

That's fine, Link told himself. That means there's a way out of this.

His sword was back in the sheath, but Ezlo was unconscious. He figured Ezlo grabbed the sword from him before passing out, but regardless at least it was safe.

He scanned the world below him as it rushed towards him. He could barely see through the clouds, but he thought he saw something. At first it looked like his shadow, but it moved differently, not with him, but alongside him. Then it got bigger.

Not a building, Link thought. But some kind of creature.

He aimed his descent towards it, and broke through the clouds.

Link's face paled as he saw the monster he was up against; an enormous manta ray with eight eyes. It had a long sharp tail, and flew the air as if it were swimming in water.

Link landed on the creature's back. "I don't know what you are," he growled as he fought to keep his footing. "But I think you're gonna take me to the final element!"

As if responding, the manta ray swooped back upwards, taking Link towards the castle once more. The red scales of the manta glistened, and for a moment he remembered the bird he was flying on in his dream.

"Link! We're not dead!" Ezlo suddenly exclaimed.

Link nodded. "Yeah, but I'm getting there."

"That was quite a hit you took," Ezlo remembered. "You sure you're okay?"

"I just need to get to the last element," Link told himself. "Then we can save Zelda, and stop Vaati once and for all. I can worry about rest... after we get that element."

"Well don't push yourself too hard!" Ezlo scolded. "You keep going when you shouldn't and you'd just be doing Vaati's job for him!"

Link nodded, then broke a smile. "Look," he said as they came out of the clouds. "The top of the Palace of Winds."

"And the altar of the element," Ezlo mumbled. "Take us down boy! Let's get that element!"

The manta slowed, passing by the top of the palace. Link jumped off, rolling to a stop as the manta squawked behind him. It disappeared into the clouds, gone.

Link turned to the altar, stepping up to the pedestal. He picked up the element of wind sitting on top of it, and held it in the light of the setting sun.

The last of the four elements, found.

Now, Link huffed. Now, we can end this.

Chapter 16: Castle in the Sky



CHAPTER 17

THE LIGHT FORCE

Link slipped his tunic over the bandages. The Wind Tribe had done all they could to heal his wounds, but his movements felt constrained now. Still, it meant he'd live. "Thank you," he said, picking up his sheath.

"Take it slow," the tribe doctor warned. "Our magics and potions will work, but only if you rest for a while."

"I'm sorry," Link huffed, slinging his gear over his shoulder. "I don't have time to rest. I need to get this element to the sanctuary."

"Of course," the tribe doctor agreed. "But no unnecessary fighting, walk instead of run, and rest *every* chance you get, or even if you just feel tired!"

"I will," Link promised.

"Good luck," the doctor said, stepping aside for Link to pass.

Link stopped in the doorway. "Hey, how do I get down from here?"

"The same way you got up," the doctor smiled. "The winds will carry you down safely."

"Thanks," Link waved.

He walked through the quiet halls of the Wind Tribe's castle, forcing himself to move slowly. He wanted to pick up his feet and run, get down and back to Hyrule as soon as possible, but thinking about it just made it worse. It felt like ages before he finally made it out of the castle, and then he was faced with the long stairs.

Every step felt like he was getting heavier and heavier. Going up them before had been the opposite, like he was lighter, but he'd since gotten used to that. Now it felt like someone was piling rocks on top of him, grabbing at his legs. He felt sluggish.

"I feel like I'm going to sink right through those clouds," Link muttered, standing at the bottom step.

"I thought it was just me who felt like I put on a few pounds," Ezlo agreed. "But it should be fine! This castle weighs more than us, and it floats up here! We'll be fine... right?"

Link took a step onto the cloud, and was relieved to find he could

walk on them just fine. Forcing his legs to move, he made his way through the clouds that wisped around him. Finally he found the place where he'd arrived; a small break in the clouds that looked down at the mountains far below.

"Well," Link sighed. "I survived a fall like that before." He held Ezlo on his head, and jumped.

The winds grabbed him before he could fall more than a foot. They swirled around him, carrying him down safely, just as the doctor had said.

Next stop, Hyrule.



Link made his way back down the mountain, then trekked through the forest, walked through Hyrule field, and finally came back to the drawbridge of Hyrule Castle Town. It took a lot longer than he would have liked, but he promised to take it slow. But after too many breaks, doing everything he could to avoid the monsters in his way, and forcing himself not to just keep running, he tried to convince himself he wasn't too late. He told himself it wasn't wasted time, since, if Vaati had found what he was looking for, the world would have been destroyed a long time ago. So as long as there was ground beneath his feet, he could still make it.

At least, that's what he told himself to believe as he entered Hyrule.

There were almost no people in the streets anymore, just knights and guards blocking every corner. Link made sure to avoid them as well, taking the back ways and the long ways, hiding in the shadows and around corners. He kept up this pattern until he'd arrived in the courtyards, then he did what he'd done before and crept just out of sight behind the bushes, making his way to the secret entrance. Luckily he didn't get spotted this time, and he managed to sneak through unnoticed.

Again he wandered through the sewers, staying close to the walls until he finally made it to the exit. Ezlo checked to see if the coast was clear, and then they hurried to the sanctuary.

The halls of the castle were still empty, as was the courtyard, so Link finally allowed himself to move a little faster. He was nearly there, and he felt the magics and potions of the Wind Tribe had done their job.

The crystal hall to the sanctuary glowed brighter than usual as he passed through, reacting to the final element. He pulled it out of his pocket as he entered the main chamber, not stopping for a second before stepping up to the altar.

Link placed the element carefully on its pedestal, and stepped back to the sword slot in the center of the four. He unsheathed his sword, and placed it in the slot.

The elements glowed; the fire element glowed red, the water element glowed blue, the earth element glowed purple, and the wind element glowed green. In turn, each of them fired a bolt of electricity at the sword. It was a more powerful blast than the other times, seemingly pulling the sword towards each of them.

Then the bolts receded and the elements continued glowing, but the sword had changed. The blade was pure white, reflective like a mirror, and curved to a point at the end. The hilt was shining gold, rigid wings pointed upward, and the gem in the center glowed green.

"With the power of the four elements," Ezlo said softly. "Your blade has been forged anew. I've never felt energy like that before, I wouldn't be surprised if it had a few new tricks up its sleeve. What I *am* sure of however, is that you can use it to break Vaati's curse on Zelda, and save the people of Hyrule."

Link stared at his reflection in the blade. With the other elements he'd gained the ability to clone himself twice, now he wondered if he could make a third copy.

He focused, and in an instant he faced three more of himself. But they weren't just copies, they were completely solid, and it didn't even take that much concentration. He would be able to do this any time he needed to.

Link sheathed his sword, and the clones disappeared.

Then suddenly, behind him, he heard a faint humming. He turned to see part of the wall glowing. A path had appeared, leading to the wall. It wasn't there before, but the glowing part seemed to look like the sword he now held.

Link stepped up to it and drew his sword again. The blade glowed for a moment, and as if on its own, pointed itself at the wall, and fired a bolt of energy. The part of the wall opened, revealing a secret door.

"Hmm-hmm..." Ezlo wondered. "It seems that the sacred blade somehow opened the doorway! It must lead to the room that holds the secret of the Light Force! Link, we must go inside!"

"Don't have to tell me twice," Link agreed, stepping into the darkness beyond the door.

It opened into yet another chamber like the one the sword was kept in. This one however, had no great altar in the center. The room was smaller, lined with different statues of old soldiers, making a path to

another stained glass window. A few pictures looked like ones in the sword chamber... but the one in the center...

"Zelda," Link mumbled. There was an inscription written beneath them. *"A long, long time ago... when the world was on the verge of being swallowed by shadow... The tiny Picori appeared from the sky, bringing the hero of men a sword and a golden light. With wisdom and courage the hero drove out the darkness. When peace had been restored, the people enshrined that blade with care. And the force of the golden light, embodied in Hyrule's princess, shone forth upon the lands."*

Link took a step back. "So the Light Force... is-"

"Heh hehheh... So that's what it means..."

Link whipped around, hearing Vaati's voice, yet, the man who stood before him... was the King of Hyrule. "H-how did you get in here!?"

"Ah ha hahaaaa..." the King chuckled softly, Vaati's voice speaking through him. "Ezlo, you really are too kind. First, you give me my magic cap, and then you lead me here! You've been far too generous, but now, I no longer have any use for you."

The King went up in smoke, darkness swirling around the room. Link took a step back as Vaati showed himself, but he didn't get his shield up in time to block Vaati's attack. A ball of lightning threw Link back, sending him spiraling into the stairs.

"Ha hahaha ha..." Vaati crossed his arms behind his back, grinning down at Link. "At last, I finally know the location of the Light Force!"

Link watched Vaati disappear as his vision faded.

Am I still... not strong enough? Link thought. *Or... was I just too slow?*

"Link! Wake up! Can't you wake up, Link!?"

Link woke with a start, holding his sword in front of him as he struggled to sit up. Vaati was already gone though, but that didn't mean he could just sit there. He got to his feet.

"Vaati disguised himself as the King to search for the Light Force," Ezlo sighed. "When he learned of this place, he waited for us to reforge the blade. If that stained glass is accurate, Zelda holds the Light Force! Vaati will do whatever he can to steal that power from her! If he succeeds, we may never be able to return the Princess to normal! We've wasted too much time, Link! We must stop Vaati!"

"Right!" Link was already back up the stairs, headed through the sword chamber. He raced through the crystal hall and ducked through the

door to the courtyard.

Then he immediately froze.

The courtyards were dead, the grass burned away... but there were soldiers, turned to stone by Vaati's magic. The minister was with them, standing in the center.

"What?... What is this?" Ezlo gasped. "What's happened here!? They've been turned to stone! All of them! The minister... and the guards! Everyone in the castle, all just like Princess Zelda... This can only be the work of that evil Vaati! What cruelty. Link! We must use the power of the sacred sword to undo this evil!"

Link pointed his sword at the guards, thinking of how the sword moved itself to open the door earlier. He felt it was *that* power that would do what he needed here. He focused energy into the blade, and fired at the line of guards.

Each in turn woke from their stone. Some stood frozen still, unsure what to do. A few ran, not wanting anything more to do with Vaati's dark magic. Link couldn't blame them, but once they were saved all that remained was the minister.

Link freed him like the others, and before all the stone had faded the Minister was already trying to move.

"Link! We need your help!" he shouted, grabbing Link and pulling him towards the door. "Vaati took our petrified princess to the roof of the castle... He must be planning something fiendish. You must stop him!"

"Don't worry," Link promised. "I will."

"The real King of Hyrule must be locked up somewhere in the castle," one of the knights said. "Please find him. As soon as we've recovered, we'll start looking too."

"I'll do what I can," Link said, hurrying out of the courtyard. As he reentered the castle however, he stopped dead in his tracks once more. "Vaati's done messing around."

The castle walls were cracked, the carpets were shredded, and the torches burned with eerie green flames. It felt like the castle itself had died.

"Whoa...!" Ezlo gasped, looking around. "Is this really Hyrule Castle? I can't believe it! What's happened here? Vaati's magic has grown more powerful than I'd imagined... But the King and Zelda are in danger, Link! Let's go!"

He knew this place well enough, having grown up with Zelda. If the King were anywhere, he'd be in the dungeons, which Link knew were close by. He'd save the King first, then hurry up to Zelda.

Yet as soon as he entered the side halls that lead down to the dungeons, he ran right into a moblin.

"I don't have time for this!" Link roared as the moblin struck downward with his spear. Link jumped on the tip of the spear, then up at the moblin's head, stabbing through it. As the monster fell, Link kept running.

There were more than one, as he soon realized, turning the corner. Luckily, the halls were cramped, and they were large. It was hard for such big monsters to move, but Link could jump from each of them with ease. Slashing through them, Link made his way into the dungeons, sliding down the stairs.

He used the body of a moblin to ram through the locked door, and started checking each of the cells. There, at the far end of the room, the King stood behind bars, turned to stone as his daughter and soldiers had.

"How... could he?" Ezlo huffed. "Vaati will pay for this! Link!"

Link broke the lock on the cell with his sword, then charged his blade. His power shattered the stone that encased the King.

The King looked at himself in shock.

"My liege!" Link exclaimed, trying to get his attention.

"Oh! Link!" King Daltus mumbled, shaking himself off. "Are you the one who broke the curse and returned me to normal? But, oh, how this castle has suffered while I was under Vaati's curse... Is this all the work of one man? As King of Hyrule, I must do something about this villain... But... Ah, I am old. I would only hold you back. Link, you have the sacred blade now. We must rely on you. Please! You must find a way to rescue my Zelda."

"Don't worry," Link bowed. "You can count on me."

He left the cell, running back the way he came.

This time, Vaati wouldn't stand a chance.

Chapter 17: The Light Force



CHAPTER 18

SHOWDOWN

Link fought his way through Hyrule Castle, the same dark magic that plagued the Palace of Winds now twisting its halls. The floors would crack and threaten to swallow him up, demon claws fell from nowhere, and the dead seemed to crawl out of the walls. Monster after monster blocked his path, but Link wasn't alone.

Using the power of the sacred blade, he summoned three clones to fight by his side. No longer were they faint copies, or unstable forms, but solid entities that fought separate from him. They followed Link as he made his way to the roof.

At last, they stood in front of the large iron door that was the entrance to the highest floor. Inside, Vaati waited, but the door was blocked by great golden chains.

These chains were no match for the Sacred Blade's power, not if all four were used at once. The power from the four swords disintegrated the lock, and Link and his clones entered the final floor.

They stepped onto a long bridge, a walkway that looked down on the chamber far below. Torches lit the way across the narrow hall.

"Ha haha!" Vaati's taunting laugh echoed. "You ARE persistent, aren't you? Heh hehhehhehheh... So, you've come to stop my little ceremony. Well, you're too late. A mere three more chimes of the bell will bring the ceremony to its end. And with the third toll of the bell, I will become like a god! And your precious Princess Zelda will be nothing more than cold, dead stone."

"There's no time!" Ezlo growled. "Quickly, Link, to the roof!"

Link was about to continue forward, when a golden armored knight stepped out of the shadows ahead. It was the same as the one in the Palace of Winds, or at least one similar. But it was no match for Link now.

Link and his clones fired bolts of energy at the golden knight, blasting it apart. They hurried through the bridge hall, kicking open the door on the other side. As they stepped through however, they heard the faint chime of a bell far away.

"Did you hear that, Link?" Ezlo gasped. "Hurry! There are only

two chimes left!"

They raced through the next room, slashing through the hordes of monsters that blocked their way. It was a small army of creatures, but they were also no match for him and his clones. They made it to the other side of the room with ease, but as they opened the next door, the second bell chimed.

"Another bell has tolled..." Ezlo hissed. "Just one more chime, and all our work will be for naught!"

Again Link tried to hurry to the next room, and again he was stopped with stronger enemies. This time, three large armored knights, each holding a sword and shield. This time they couldn't just skip ahead, as the knights blocked the way, but that didn't stop Link from trying.

Two of the clones ran ahead, drawing the enemy's attention, then Link and his other clone charged head on, slicing through the chinks in their armor while they were distracted. The other two clones circled around the dark knights, slicing through their backs. The last was finished off by the original Link, and then at last they pushed their way through the final door.

They stepped outside, onto a structure that Vaati seemed to have conjured himself. It was made of the same darkened brick stone that he had turned the rest of the castle into, but it looked newer, less broken. It jutted out from the top of the castle, overlooking the red lands to the north, the setting sun creating an evil atmosphere. And Link saw at the end of the platform... Vaati himself, with Princess Zelda standing on a stone altar, still petrified.

Vaati sensed them, and tore his attention away from Zelda to look at Link.

"Hmph!" Vaati huffed. "Just a few more moments, and the ceremony would have been complete. You really are obsessed with stopping me, aren't you? Ah, very well. I have not yet drained all of the Light Force housed in Zelda. But what I have should suffice... I will be transformed! Unstoppable! But let me first tend to the pesky worms who would trifle with me..."

He raised his arm, and a hole of darkness opened up beneath Link. He fell through, his clones disappearing as he hit the ground of a chamber below.

"I will have no more of you interfering with my plans!" Vaati roared, appearing in front of Link. "Let me show you true power!!"

Vaati's form shifted, warping. He became taller, leaner, more twisted. His cloak enveloped him, and a large eye opened where his body

should have been. Smaller eyes, emanating darkness, floated around him.

Done talking, done performing, Vaati charged forward, lashing out at Link. He couldn't get the time in to call his clones, he had to finish this on his own. Throwing up his shield, he held off Vaati's attacks as the small eyes blasted energy at him and Vaati slashed with pure darkness. The eye in his body blasted him with fire, but when it was open it was at it's weakest.

Link saw his chance and took it. Using his shield to block the fire, he got in close, and stabbed.

Vaati flew backwards, wrapping his cloak around himself. He teleported away, more tiny eyes blasting energy at Link. Vaati had learned to keep his distance, but that would be his new weakness. Summoning his clones once more, they automatically divided. One drew Vaati's fire, one circled behind him to surround him, and one focused on slicing the smaller eyes.

The main Link used the distractions to get in close once again, stabbing through the large eye in Vaati's body.

Vaati glared down at him, darkness swelling around them. Everything disappeared, and Link found himself standing alone, in a very strange place.

It looked like everything was made of pure energy, alchemic symbols floating and spinning slowly around through the air. This wasn't just another place in the castle, this was an entirely new dimension of Vaati's creation.

"Well, you seem to have some fight in you," Vaati growled from everywhere at once. "I commend your bravery. But you will not survive... THIS!!" Vaati appeared before him, dark wisps of smoke trailing off of him. It seemed all Link had done was make him angrier. He growled, his voice distorting as his body shimmered. "I am filled with a power that you cannot begin to understand! Do you think that puny sword will save you from ME!?"

Vaati's form changed again, this time into something that didn't resemble either Human or Minish. He was pure darkness, a single large eye floating in a ball of death and destruction, chaos swarming around him. An unbearable piercing scream rang in Link's ears. He had become what he wanted, he had gotten his wish.

Vaati, was power given physical form.

"You can do it Link," Ezlo assured him. "With the sacred blade, the power of the elements, Swiftblade's teachings, the power bracelets, and all the fighting you've done to get here... there isn't a doubt in my mind!"

Link held his shield firm and his sword at his side, its blade glowed and once again his clones stood beside him.

"I don't care how many times I have to beat you," Link growled, stepping forward. "Or how many forms you take... You don't get to win!"

Vaati's eye stared down at him, a massive orb in a sea of black clouds. The piercing scream sharpened, drowning out Link's voice. But it didn't matter if he could speak or not, with himself at his sides, they used all their energy, powering their swords, and sending one last blast of pure light at Vaati.

Vaati screamed, roared, shrieked, but Link's attack continued.

Even as they fought, as they used their powers, Link's clones began to fade. They were using every ounce of strength they had, even if it destroyed them.

One flickered blue, and disappeared, leaving only an image of his sword behind. Then another flickered red, and disappeared as well, only a sword left. And the left flickered purple, his sword all that remained.

Link screamed, the swords merging with his own as he pushed back Vaati's darkness, his dimension crumbling around them.

"What... what is this madness?" Vaati swore. "I have the power of a god! I have unstoppable might!!! How could I lose to a child?!?"

Vaati's final form disintegrated, and the world faded away.

This time, only light remained.

—

Link opened his eyes to find himself kneeling in the chamber Vaati had taken him from. He got to his feet, looking at the gem on his sword as-- just for a moment-- it flickered each color in turn.

"You did it!" Ezlo exclaimed. "Impressive! Now, quickly! We must break the curse on Zelda!"

This isn't over yet, Link agreed. He stepped through the door in front of him, to find that he hadn't fallen to the chamber below, but instead to the chamber back. He stood on the platform where Zelda rested on the stone altar, waiting.

Link held the sword in front of her, its blade glowing. The stone Zelda was encased in melted away. She stepped down from the altar, looking Link in the eye.

"Link," she smiled. "Thank you so much for saving me. When I was turned to stone, I saw visions of you, as if in a dream."

"It looks like the curse has been broken," Ezlo said proudly. "I'm

glad we made it in time."

"And now that it is-" Link started. He was interrupted however, by the castle suddenly rumbling beneath them.

"No!" Ezlo exclaimed. "The castle's collapsing! It's too dangerous here! Quickly! We must escape from the castle!"

Link nodded and grabbed Zelda's hand, pulling her away from the altar as parts of the towers mounted above them fell.

For some reason, as he pulled her along, he remembered that time so long ago when Zelda had taken him to the Picori festival. How she'd pulled him along just like this, except now, instead of her taking him to the castle, he was taking her away from it. As they worked their way through the crumbling building, he thought about how much had changed since that day, and wondered how long it had been for Zelda.

Did she sleep? Was she forced to sit through day after day of waiting for someone to rescue her?

I wish it hadn't taken so long, Link thought, looking over his shoulder at her. She had a worried look on her face, constantly looking up as they ran.

I'm sorry I was late.

"Hrmm..." Ezlo mumbled, snapping Link into focus. "The door is blocked! We have no choice... Head back to the sanctuary!"

"Right," Link said as he and Zelda turned back the other way.

The floors shook and the walls cracked as the ceilings above them fell apart, Link using his shield to keep debris from hitting Zelda. When at last they made it back to the inner courtyard, they felt they could take a breath. The grass was still dead, and the castle still fell apart, but this part of the castle was technically outside, so there wasn't a roof to fall on them. Stones lay scattered around them, but the door to the sanctuary was still unblocked.

They headed towards it, only to be stopped by a bolt of lightning striking in front of them.

"Heh heh heh..." Vaati wheezed, his voice a mere whisper in the wind. "You will not escape, boy. Now, you will see the true power of the Light Force... For I have become Vaati, master of this world!"

Zelda slipped away from his hand, and Link found himself falling. In the blink of an eye he was back in Vaati's twisted reality. It didn't seem capable of holding itself together however, as there was now a large chunk of the castle acting as a platform. The red void around them wavered, shaking as the castle itself had done.

Then Vaati appeared, still nothing more than a large red eye, but

this time encased in a sort of dark glass. There were similar glass orbs floating around him, like marbles filled with smoke. The orbs moved to form long arms, and claws of gold took shape at the ends of them, reaching out at Link.

Link grit his teeth. He'd used all his energy before, it had taken the strength off all his clones to take this thing down. He was too tired, too weak! If Vaati could just keep coming back then-

"Shut up," the red clone sighed. "You got this!"

Link tried to look at him, but he was barely there, just a reflection in his vision.

"We may be spent," the blue clone said firmly. "But we're not gone."

The sword moved on its own in his hand, pointing itself at Vaati. The gem in its hilt flickered each color.

"Just kick his butt!" the purple one laughed. "Like you said you would!"

"We're at your side," they said all at once, helping him lift his sword. The blade glowed. "No matter how many times it takes."

"Yeah," Link hissed, gripping the hilt of the sword. "No matter how many times it takes."

It seemed to have happened in an instant, as if that conversation had momentarily frozen everything else. And when it ended, Vaati was awoken again, but this time... *he* was the one too weak to fight.

He didn't stand a chance before, but this time, Vaati should have just stayed down.

In a blast of energy so powerful, Link blew Vaati apart. His darkness shattered, the ground splintered, and Vaati screamed. In rage, in pain, Vaati screamed, and Link screamed back, until Vaati's form had all but withered away.

A shriveled form of Vaati was all that remained, laying on the ground in front of him.

"Fool!" Vaati cried. "I... But the Light Force... My power... I had such power..." He fell apart, and the world he'd created, at last, fell apart with him.

Just his cap was left behind, sitting at Link's feet as he found himself back in the inner courtyard of Hyrule Castle. It was done falling apart now, and dust had nearly settled.

"Link," Zelda said, that same worried expression she always had watching him as he came to his senses. "Thank goodness you're safe... You defeated Vaati... But we've lost so much... The castle... all those

people..."

Link looked at the magic cap Vaati had worn, the one that turned him into the monster he'd become. Then he realized something.

"Ezlo?" he called, patting his head. He wasn't there. "Ezlo?"

Finally he found him laying a few feet away on the cobblestone path. His form shimmered, warped, as Vaati's had done. But his form didn't change into some demon, instead, he reverted back into the old man he used to be, robes draped around him and cane in hand.

Ezlo stood for the first time in a long time, leaning on his cane as he stretched his tired limbs. "What's this?" he mumbled, looking at his hands. "The curse... Defeating Vaati seems to have broken the curse he cast upon me!" He looked at Zelda, a sad smile on his face. "Allow me to introduce myself to you, Princess Zelda. My name is Ezlo, master of Minish lore and sorcery. The mage's cap was my creation. But it's limitless power has caused nothing but trouble for your kind. Is there any way you can forgive me?" He turned his gaze upward, staring at the fallen pieces of castle that tore apart the building. "I know many have fallen, and much of the castle has been destroyed... But it is too soon to give in to despair. The curse on me is broken, and Zelda still possesses some of the Light Force. Perhaps, together, we can do something to make this right."

Zelda began to answer, but Ezlo had already set to work. He waved his staff a little, and the cap Vaati once wore moved. It hovered for a moment, and sat itself on Zelda's head.

"If one with a just heart wears this cap," Ezlo explained. "Things can be made right again. Princess Zelda! Let your wishes be made real!"

Zelda looked at Link for a moment, and he nodded. She pressed her hands together and closed her eyes. Together, with Ezlo's returned magic, and Vaati's cap, she thought of the way things were. The castle, as it was the day of the festival; the people all walking around; the knights no longer turned to stone; the world, free of evil, free of the monsters Vaati had spread. When she'd closed her eyes, she'd seen Link, injured from his many battles, tired, and the courtyard they stood in completely destroyed and void of life.

Link found himself floating in light, and for a moment he thought that the flash of light Zelda's power created had blinded him. But then he realized it was quiet as well, and knew that once again he had been taken to a different plane of existence.

Then he heard footsteps behind him, and turned to see Zelda standing there.

But... not his Zelda.

He remembered that dream he had of flying on giant birds. *That* was the Zelda he saw before him. Yet, she was older, not quite the same person, but the same presence. Somehow, Link knew exactly who it was.

"Hylia," Link mumbled. "Not Zelda."

"Once, I was," Hylia nodded. "A long time ago." She watched him, hands folded in her lap. "You had something you wanted to ask; the Light Force has given you the chance to receive your answers."

For a moment Link was silent, wondering if he could ask more than just one question. Hoping for the best, he asked the one most pressing on his mind.

"Did I have a choice?" Link asked.

Hylia smiled kindly. "I believe you did," she answered. "But at the same time, I wouldn't have expected you to make any other decision. It's just who you are."

"You have the spirit of the hero," said another voice.

Link froze as someone who looked just like him walked passed, setting a hand on Link's shoulder for a moment. "But like me, your turn's up." He moved to stand beside Hylia.

It was a different person, it had to be, but he looked so similar to himself, that it couldn't have been anyone other than the past hero. This was Link, the Hero of Men.

"... How...?" Link didn't know what to say.

"It's a curse," Hylia explained. "Cast upon us by a great and terrible evil. My descendants will be forced to share in my fate, time and time again."

"But those with my spirit will always be able to stop it," past Link continued.

"... So it will continue," Link mumbled. "Won't it?"

Hylia nodded sadly. "Yes," she admitted. "I do not know when the cycle will break, but as bad as the state of the world may be, for now, rejoice. Your evil has been defeated, your people have been saved, and your world is at peace."

"But for now," past Link said. "We can finally move on." He looked at Hylia. "This is the end of our story, I think."

Hylia nodded. She looked at Link. "Time to say goodbye."

Past Link turned away, and with Zelda by his side, they walked off into the light, fading away at long last.

When Zelda opened her eyes, the grass was green, the walls stood tall, and Link was standing across from her, healed, and staring at the sky.

The air changed, no longer carrying the scent of evil, but instead just a simple light breeze that signified another summer day. Everything, was back to the way it was meant to be.

"Look! The castle!" Zelda grinned, spinning in place. "All the people who had been turned to stone! They're all back to normal!"

"Hmm-hmm!" Ezlo chuckled. "The hat is falling apart. It's overflowing with the power of life! The hat has the power to turn the thoughts of it's wearer into reality. Vaati's heart was filled with evil, and that was reflected in what he became. But it seems that Zelda's pure heart, coupled with the hat's power... has created a miracle!"

Suddenly they felt another rumbling coming from the castle. This time however, it wasn't an ominous rumbling like something falling apart, but instead it came from the sanctuary door.

"Hmm... It looks like the time for us to part has come," Ezlo sighed. "The Minish door opens but once every century, and soon, it must close. I must leave you both now, and return to my homeland. I know I've caused you much suffering, but the evil one's power has withered. The power of Princess Zelda herself has restored the light to Hyrule."

Link stepped forward. "Is it really time to go?" he asked. "We just got this over with! Now isn't the time to leave, is it?"

"Well, Link," Ezlo chuckled. "My journey with you has been exciting, to say the least. In fact, I'm... more than a just a little sad that we must part ways now." He waved his staff, and suddenly a green hat appeared above Link's head, setting down on top of him. "Please, accept this..."

Link fit the cap on his head, and looked back to Ezlo.

"Heh... You know, I've never actually seen you wearing a cap until now!" Ezlo laughed.

"Hey!" Link grinned.

"It suits you," Ezlo bowed. "Little hero. Take care..."

Before Link could stop him, Ezlo used his magic to shrink back down to the size of a Minish. He stepped back towards the Sanctuary door, looking up at Link. He knew the boy wouldn't be able to hear him, but he had to say it. "Farewell, my friend..."

And then he stepped through the doorway, and it disappeared. As Link watched, it became nothing more than a simple wall, not a trace left

that there had ever been a door there.

"Goodbye, Ezlo," Link said. He turned to face the exit. "I guess... that's it, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Zelda nodded. "Thank you."

"Come on," Link waved, walking back through the courtyard. "I think we can convince everyone to finish the festival."

Zelda laughed, shaking her head as she followed.

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Thus did Link's quest come to an end.

But surely, this is not the end of Zelda and Link's adventures in Hyrule.

The legend will continue...

... as long as the power of the Light Force echoes throughout the ages



Chapter 18: Showdown

Thanks for reading!